

**“They are not of our race”:  
Northern Republican Senators, Anti-Cuban Prejudices, and the  
American Opposition to Cuban Acquisition in 1859**

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On October 15, 1854, American statesmen James Buchanan, J.Y. Mason, and Pierre Soulé convened in Ostend, Belgium to discuss the American acquisition of Cuba. The conference resulted in a document known as the Ostend Manifesto, which the *New York Herald* leaked to the American public the following year. Among its most controversial statements, the manifesto asserted that “[if] Cuba, in the possession of Spain, seriously endanger[s] [...] the existence of our cherished Union [...] we shall be justified in wresting it from Spain.” The manifesto encountered backlash from multiple sectors. Opposers worried about the high price of the acquisition and the toll it would have on relations with Spain. The matter resurfaced in 1859, when President Buchanan presented Senate Bill 497 to Congress, asking for a sum of \$30’000’000 to acquire Cuba from Spain. As demonstrated by the heated debates among U.S. Senators, the bill raised divisions regarding the American economy, the relations between the U.S. and European powers, and the expansion of slavery into foreign territories. In an attempt to interpret opposition to the annexation of Cuba in the 1850s, Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge argued that the proposition heightened tensions<sup>1</sup> among slaveholding and non-slaveholding states in the Union and that for these reasons opposers saw it as “impracticable.”<sup>2</sup> However, a closer examination of the Senate speeches regarding the 1859 bill reveals that the reasons behind the opposition went beyond the institution of slavery. Northern Republican Senators in 1859 also opposed the annexation of Cuba because they deemed the island’s population to be incompatible with the Union due to their cultural, religious, and racial difference. The opposers of the bill

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<sup>1</sup> This argument rests on the idea that, if added to the Union, Cuba would be a slaveholding state. Many senators for Southern states pointed at the potential acquisition of Canada as a non-slave state as the event that would restore the balance (Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848-1855* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 57).

<sup>2</sup> Albert J. Beveridge, “Cuba and Congress,” *The North American Review* 172, no. 533 (1901), 538.

argued that Cuba's largely Spanish, Catholic, multi-racial population was unable to uphold American standards of self-government.

Existing analyses of the American acquisition of Cuba scarcely mention this prejudiced view of the Cuban people. Rather, historians such as Rauch and Ferrer ascribe opposition to the domestic tensions around slavery. The argument of anti-Cuban prejudice illuminates Northern Republican views on the exclusivity of American institutions. For Northern Republicans, the incorporation of new territories rested on the possibility of "Americanization." Cuba's Catholic, Spanish, and multiracial characteristics made it incompatible with the idea of America. Often, Northern Republican senators were more adamant in their prejudiced views than in their opposition to the expansion of slavery in Cuba. This argument illuminates how anti-slavery Northerners were also motivated by the preservation of the American ideal, in addition to the elimination of slavery. Their anti-slavery views often extended only as far as the white, protestant, American man could reach.

### **Antecedents and Literature Review**

U.S. policymakers had long pondered the acquisition of Cuba for economic, geopolitical, and ideological reasons. Cuba's place as one of the largest slaveholding societies in the world made its markets extremely desirable, especially the sugar market. Its placement on the Gulf of Mexico and next to the mouth of the Mississippi River made it key for commercial and trade strategies with the Caribbean. After the acquisition of Florida in 1819, many U.S. statesmen viewed Cuba as the next logical step, being under a hundred miles away. Many wondered about the possibility of a European power with a strong navy eventually acquiring Cuba, such as France or England. This shift in the control of Cuba would place a significant threat to U.S. sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, in a paternalistic impulse that survived until the Spanish-American War (1898), U.S. statesmen hoped to liberate Cuba from the allegedly tyrannical power of Spain, whose prowess was in a state of decline by the loss of its colonies.

Therefore, when American senators encountered the question of Cuban acquisition in 1859, they were aware that it was nothing new. Like Louisiana Democratic Senator John Slidell stated in his report of the Bill 497, "the ultimate acquisition of Cuba has long been regarded as the fixed policy of the United States [...] The only difference of opinion is as to the time, mode, and conditions of obtaining it."<sup>3</sup> In his book *American Interest in Cuba 1848-1855*, Rauch analyzes the multiple Early American statesmen that at some point showed interest in the acquisition of Cuba. Men such as Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams considered Cuba a crucial commercial and strategic addition to the Union. In a letter to James Monroe in 1823, Thomas Jefferson stated, "I have ever looked upon Cuba as the most interesting addition which

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<sup>3</sup> John Slidell, "Making Appropriations to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Island of Cuba," (Washington, DC: 1859), 9.

could ever be made to our system of states.”<sup>4</sup> Jefferson and Adams considered it an American duty to free the Cuban people of the ostensibly tyrannical Spanish government. According to Adams, the geographic placement of Cuba would provide the United States with full commercial access to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, as well as the network of the West Indies.<sup>5</sup> Yet another major motivation in the acquisition of Cuba, later cited in the Ostend Manifesto, is its provision of security to the American states from potential slave revolutions which could pour into the newly acquired, neighboring territories of Louisiana and New Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

For decades after, U.S. administrations engaged in unsuccessful negotiations with Spanish powers for the acquisition of Cuba. During the administrations of Van Buren, Taylor, and Fillmore, these negotiations took a more relaxed stance. These presidents were content with the government of Spain over Cuba as long as it prevented other European powers such as Britain and France from controlling the territory.<sup>7</sup> Ada Ferrer identifies the Pierce administration as a point of the reignition of American interest in Cuba. In his inaugural speech in 1853, Franklin Pierce declared that “[his] Administration will not be controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion [...] our attitude as a nation and our position on the globe render the acquisition of certain possessions [...] eminently important for our protection.”<sup>8</sup> This anti-abolitionist, expansionist administration was further foreshadowed by Vice President William Rufus King’s recitation of the oath of office from an American-owned sugar plantation in Cuba, where he sought relief from tuberculosis.<sup>9</sup> The next year, in 1854, soon-to-be president James Buchanan signed the Ostend Manifesto in Belgium. The Ostend Manifesto signified a shift from negotiation to forceful “wresting” in American policy regarding the acquisition of Cuba. The writers of the Manifesto made it clear that they were willing to go to great lengths in order to count Cuba among the U.S.’s possessions.

## **The Ostend Manifesto**

The Ostend Manifesto represented the compilation of all considerations in favor of the acquisition of Cuba in one document. It emerged after a meeting among James Buchanan, John Mason, and Pierre Soulé, American ambassadors to England, France, and Spain respectively, met in Ostend, Belgium in October 1854 to discuss the acquisition of Cuba. The meeting emerged under the instruction of secretary of state William Marcy, in the face of Southern pressure to add more slave states to the country. Once the document was leaked, as far as we know, by the New York Herald and through Pierre Soulé’s indiscreetness, it encountered backlash from domestic and foreign sectors of opinion. Domestically, members of the Republican party feared that the pro-slavery democrats held too much power in the Union’s

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<sup>4</sup> Slidell, “Making Appropriations to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Island of Cuba,” 2.

<sup>5</sup> Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848-1855*, 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Slidell, “Making Appropriations to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Island of Cuba,” 4.

<sup>7</sup> James R. Doolittle, “The Acquisition of Cuba—Colonization of Central America” (1859), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: an American History*, (New York: Scribner, 2021), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Ferrer, *Cuba: an American History*, 111.

decisions. Abroad, the manifesto's suggestion that the United States could take Cuba by force aroused suspicion of the U.S.' expansionist efforts.



**Figure 1.** The Ostend Doctrine. Lithograph. From Library of Congress.

The above lithograph, created by Nathaniel Currier, exemplifies the backlash against the Ostend Manifesto. It shows James Buchanan, surrounded by a group of men attempting to take his hat, coat, watch, and money. In their requests, the men use quotes from the Ostend Manifesto. This lithograph brings into question the validity of the Manifesto's claims on Cuba, including the "danger" of the situation, and the U.S.' entitlement to "wrest [Cuba]" Additionally, it exemplifies concerns regarding the corruptibility of the Democratic doctrine present in the Manifesto, if put into practice. These concerns of corruption carried on to the debates of Senate Bill 497, and according to historians, signified a motivating factor for the Civil War.

The actual text of the Ostend Manifesto is careful to not explicitly mention the addition of Cuba as a slaveholding state. Instead, it provides extensive attention to other factors in favor of the acquisition, such as the geographical proximity of the island. The document places significant emphasis on the security that the island will provide to the Union. It states that is numerous streams of commerce would be dangerous to U.S. security in foreign hands. Additionally, it presents the idea that Cuba's "system of immigration and labor" threatens an insurrection that could hurt U.S. interests. This idea certainly stems from the fear of recent slave insurrections in the Caribbean, such as those of Haiti and Jamaica, and their potential influence on U.S. shores. The authors state that, unless annexed to the Union, Cuba will become

“Africanized” and become “a second St. Domingo.” Such a possibility is reason enough for the United States to be justified in “wresting” Cuba from Spain, by means of war.

The only mention of slavery present in the document complicates historians’ common view of Cuba as a potential slaveholding state. The authors state that “as long as [Spanish rule] shall endure, humanity may in vain demand the suppression of the African slave trade in the island.” They characterize the Spanish rulers on the island as “needy” and “avaricious” for the immense profit that slavery produces for the island. Therefore, under Spanish rule, the slave trade would never cease to be in Cuba. This statement implies that were Cuba to be annexed to the United States, the goal would be to eventually suppress the African slave trade. Evidently, this sentence aims to please anti-slavery sectors of opinion in the U.S. This is undoubtedly a stealthy way of addressing the slavery question in the document. However, as discussed in the 1859 debates, this prospect does not necessarily signify that Democrat annexationists aimed to abolish the slave trade in Cuba. Instead, they hoped to supplant enslaved Africans with American Southerners as a source for human labor. The plausibility of this suggestion was a subject of heated discussion during the 1859 Congress.

### **Senate Bill 497**

When James Buchanan presented a bill to the Senate in 1859 asking for a sum of 30’000’00 in order to “facilitate” the acquisition of Cuba, the senators engaged in a heated debate. This debate was in constant conversation with the desires of Early American statesmen, as well as the authors of the Ostend Manifesto. However, the involvement of a large sum of money that would necessitate significant federal funds heightened the tensions between the Senators. The speeches are filled with personal attacks, accusations of corruption, and the discrediting of public officials (including President Buchanan). The debates took place between January and February of 1859 and involved a number of Northern Republican and Southern Democrat Senators. Although their arguments varied, generally, the Northern Republican Senators opposed the acquisition, while the Southern Democrats supported it. Louisiana Democrat Senator John Slidell, who succeeded Pierre Soulé in said office, wrote a report to accompany Bill 497. The report outlined the arguments supporting the acquisition of Cuba and includes counterarguments to some of the common claims of the opposition.

Slidell argues that were the U.S. not to acquire Cuba, the two possible alternatives would include the possession of Cuba by some other European power, such as Britain or France, or the independence of the island. Slidell states the former alternative would endanger American security and sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere, while the latter would result in a “Black Republic” similar to Haiti in its lack of prosperity.<sup>10</sup> The Louisiana senator also addresses a variety of the counterarguments presented at the debate, such as the possibility of offending Spain through the suggestion to sell Cuba. This consideration hearkens back to the Ostend Manifesto, which also argues against the idea that Spain will feel offended at the offer to

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<sup>10</sup> Slidell, “Making Appropriations to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Island of Cuba,” 10.

purchase. Slidell states that due to the U.S.' willingness to pay a large sum of money for the island, Spain should present no objections. Furthermore, Slidell also argues against the idea that the population of Cuba is unfit for the Union. Slidell states, "the white creole is as free from all taint of African blood as the descendant of the Goth from the plains of Castile."<sup>11</sup> This statement immediately caught my attention. Why did a pro-slavery Southern statesman feel the need to argue for Cuban whiteness in these debates on annexation? Was the existence of a predominantly white population a precondition for the annexation of territory to the United States? Which sectors of opinion was Slidell trying to appeal to in this statement? These are the questions that motivated this paper.

In order to answer these questions, this analysis looked at a number of speeches by Northern Republican Senators delivered at the 1859 debates on Bill 497. These include Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, James Dixon of Connecticut, James Rood Doolittle of Wisconsin, and Jacob Collamer of Vermont. All of these senators opposed the acquisition of Cuba. Likewise, every single one of these senators claimed to hold anti-slavery views, and eventually supported the Lincoln administration during the Civil War. For contrast, this essay also looked at the speeches of a few Southern Democrats, including John Slidell of Louisiana, Tristen W. Polk of Missouri, and Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana. The rhetoric of these debates allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural, religious, and racial considerations that went into the acquisition of Cuba. The Northern Republican Senator's speeches provide insight into the specific prejudices that convinced them Cubans were incapable of self-government, and thus incompatible with the Union. This analysis puts the Senator's anti-slavery views in question. Did their convictions come from a place of humanity and respect of other races, or rather social convenience?

This argument is also in conversation with Michel Gobat's *Empire by Invitation* by suggesting that contradictory dynamics were at play in American Northerners' interest in Cuba and Nicaragua in the 1850s. Gobat's book focuses on William Walker's filibuster expedition to Nicaragua in the 1850s. Gobat views Walker's filibuster regime in Nicaragua, composed largely of American Northerners, not as an effort to extend slavery Southward but as an attempt to spread American democratic ideals in Central America. Therefore, Walker's expansionist ambitions served the larger Manifest Destiny project of the mid-19th century. This essay finds different dynamics at play in the Northern opinion of Cuban acquisition. Are Northern statesmen similarly interested in expanding Democratic ideals into Cuba? The sources suggest quite the opposite—Northern statesmen dismissed Cuba as unfit for the proliferation of American democratic ideals. This disparity in the Northern perspective of Nicaragua and Cuba in the 1850s can perhaps be attributed to the perceived willingness of Nicaraguan people to accept Walker's regime. By contrast, Northern Republicans in 1859 considered that Cubans would be reluctant to assimilate to American institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Slidell, "Making Appropriations to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Island of Cuba," 13.

## Discussion: The Debates

In February of 1859, a number of American Senators engaged in a heated debate regarding an island off the coast of Florida. In front of them stood a request from Democrat President James Buchanan asking for \$30'000'000 to “facilitate” the acquisition of Cuba. Many interpreted this wording as a potential bribe of the Spanish crown. Ever since the divulgence of the Ostend Manifesto, and the diplomatic backlash that it produced, the Cuban question had been relatively silent. Yet these representatives faced the question of whether they should grant the President access to this large sum of money. Louisiana Democratic Senator John Slidell introduced the bill with strong argumentation in favor of the acquisition. His report, printed on January 24, 1859, includes an in-depth financial analysis of the profits of Cuba’s sugar industry. Slidell played an important role in the declaration of the Mexican-American War in 1846. He was elected to Senate in 1853, where he advocated against the Missouri Compromise and for the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1859, he was one of seven members of the Committee of Foreign Relations, along with Polk and Crittenden, also present at the Bill 497 debate. Later in life, he allied with the pro-slavery, secessionist “Fire-Eaters” and became a pro-Confederacy diplomat in France.

One of the first responses to Slidell’s report was that of Wisconsin Republican Senator James Rood Doolittle, delivered on February 11. Originally, Doolittle belonged to the anti-slavery Barnburner section of the Democratic Party, and in 1857 switched over to the Republican Party. In spite of his anti-slavery views, Doolittle was a staunch opposer of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment during the Reconstruction era. At the 1859 debates, although he opposed Cuban acquisition, his stance was rather moderate, much like the rest of his political endeavors. Doolittle agreed with Slidell that Cuban acquisition was the eventual destiny of the Union. However, he believed that then was not the right time for the acquisition to happen. His oppositions were rather logistical: he wanted Spain to voluntarily renounce Cuba, and he wanted a majority of the white male population of Cuba to vote in favor of the transfer. Pushing back against the Ostend Manifesto, Doolittle stated, “unless Spain offers to sell Cuba, we should not take it by force.”<sup>12</sup>

Doolittle’s speech took a turn when he revealed that he hoped to acquire not only Cuba but also parts of Central and South America, in order to provide for the emigration of all people of color in the Union. This prospect of emigration seems to be one of his key convictions, considering that he delivered an entire speech to Congress on April 11, 1862, advocating for “homesteads for black men in the tropics—white immigration to and black emigration from the United States.” In 1859, he proposed the eventual “colonization of Central America” through acquisition or negotiation with the “tropical states” Doolittle considered slavery to be a declining institution and wondered what white American statesmen would “do with” all the people of color in the Union once there was no more use for them.<sup>13</sup> This statesman holds an interesting definition of abolition as the gradual dissolution of slavery into the regions of Mexico and

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<sup>12</sup> Doolittle, “The Acquisition of Cuba—Colonization of Central America,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> Doolittle, “The Acquisition of Cuba—Colonization of Central America,” 5.

Central and South America.<sup>14</sup> Doolittle's arguments suggest that he did not oppose the institution of slavery itself, but rather its proximity to the predominantly white states of the Union. As long as slavery was outside of his view, Doolittle was satisfied. His arguments also point at the assumption that there was a fundamental separation between the Union as it stood and the areas of Central and South America. Even if included in the Union, Doolittle would never regard Cuba as an equal to the other American states, but rather as a dumping ground for the evils of slavery.

Although Doolittle's views were not popular among the debaters—his name was seldom brought except in the spirit of ridicule—, his opinions were symptomatic of a larger issue in American opinion of Cuba. For these senators, regardless of their party or geographical affiliation, the value of Cuba was inherently tied to the institution of slavery. This is why not even anti-slavery Senators considered abolition in Cuba a plausible prospect.<sup>15</sup> If slavery were to cease to exist on the island, it would descend into the state of Haiti or Jamaica. This condemnation was not only due to the dependence of the island's economy on slavery-related commodities but also on the inability of the population for self-government. Therefore, it was an underlying assumption that, were the U.S. to acquire Cuba, it would also acquire the 400'000 enslaved people who worked on the island.<sup>16</sup> Southern Democrat Senator Judah P. Benjamin was one of the strongest proponents of the decay of Cuba upon the abolition of slavery. He stated in his speech, "the population, wealth, and the prosperity of Cuba, are dependent solely on a system of compulsory labor, without which she must inevitably relapse into the condition of Hayti."<sup>17</sup> Benjamin utilized this fear of "Africanization," which he predicted would happen were Cuba to remain in Spanish hands, as an argument in favor of the acquisition.

The point where Republican and Democrat senators diverge is on the capacity of Cuba to practice self-government in equality to the existing states. In his speech, also delivered on February 11<sup>th</sup>, Benjamin proposed that the U.S. acquisition of Cuba would signify an "admission to self-government."<sup>18</sup> He opposed this mode of government to the subjugation and imposition of the Spanish. He stated that "she [Cuba] shall unite with us freely, an equal associate of the free States."<sup>19</sup> Quite explicitly in his speech, Benjamin stated that Cuba was capable of practicing two key American values: freedom and equality. After February 11, the increase in assertions of Cuban incompatibility with American institutions signals a retaliation against Benjamin's suggestions. Consequent Northern Republican speakers Chandler, Collamer, and Dixon found Benjamin's granting of self-government to Cubans a scandalous proposition.

Next in the line of the debate was Republican Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, who delivered an anti-acquisition speech on February 17, 1859. Zachariah T. Chandler, first a member of the Whig Party, then one of the founders of the Republican party in 1854 was a

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<sup>14</sup> Doolittle, "The Acquisition of Cuba—Colonization of Central America," 7.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Collamer, "Speech of Hon. Jacob Collamer, of Vermont, on the Acquisition of Cuba," (Washington, DC, 1859), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Collamer, "Speech of Hon. Jacob Collamer, of Vermont, on the Acquisition of Cuba," 7.

<sup>17</sup> James Benjamin, "Speech of Hon. J.P. Benjamin, of La: On the Acquisition of Cuba," (Washington, DC, 1859), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, "Speech of Hon. J.P. Benjamin, of La: On the Acquisition of Cuba," 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

strong anti-slavery activist and, during the Civil War, an advocate for the incorporation of African Americans into the Union army. Chandler identified with the Radical Republicans, who opposed the Fugitive Slave Act and supported the abolition of slavery. However, Chandler's views seem much less radical upon the examination of his speech. In his speech, Chandler first argued against the acquisition of Cuba for economic reasons. He pointed at the bankruptcy of the American treasury, and the possibility of President Buchanan utilizing the requested funds for the restoration of the deteriorated Democratic Party.<sup>20</sup> For Chandler, Buchanan's request of such a large sum of money to the American Congress was a sign of corruption.

Later in his speech, Chandler went on a tirade against the idea that Cuba merited joining the Union, which was most likely addressing Benjamin's claims. By referencing his recent trips to the island, Chandler established that the Cuban population and environment were not fit for their incorporation into the United States. Of white Cubans, he wrote, "they are an ignorant, vicious, priest-ridden set."<sup>21</sup> Chandler said that Cubans were enamored with Catholicism and that there was no "such thing as a love of liberty here."<sup>22</sup> Additionally, he stated that Cuba was an improper place for Northern men to emigrate to, given the number of tropical diseases and animals that would assail them at all times.<sup>23</sup> In line with the association of Cuba's value to slavery, Chandler seemed uninterested in promoting the abolition of slavery in Cuba. His chief concern was the unfitness of the white population, which due to its religious and cultural differences from white Americans, would be unable to practice liberty and self-government, which he considered key American values. Chandler does not deny that Cuban creoles were white but instead argued that they carried a corrupted kind of whiteness, one associated with criminality and bondage. Chandler's condemnation of the Catholic and Spanish influence on the Cuban population seems to be in line with the heightened anti-Catholic and nativist ideologies in the 1850s, as evidenced by Know-Nothingism.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Chandler's argumentation came with an idealization of the West as a territory more fitting for expansion than Cuba. He stated that, even though Cuban land is considered fertile for its facility with tropical commodities such as sugar, "it is in no way comparable to the prairies and bottom-lands of the Great West."<sup>25</sup> While Chandler saw the population of Cuba as an obstacle to expansion, he considered the Western territories to be largely unpeopled. Addressing Senator Benjamin, Chandler said, "You have hundreds of acres of land to which you can extinguish the Indian title for a song and obtain better lands and create better states than you will ever make out of Cuba."<sup>26</sup> Not only is this a direct dismissal of Indian sovereignty, but it also illustrates that in order for a territory to be fit for the Union, American

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<sup>20</sup> This suggestion here hearkens back to the debates surrounding the Ostend Manifesto, which denounced the possible corruption of pro-slavery Democrat officials.

<sup>21</sup> Zachariah Chandler, "Acquisition of Cuba," (Washington, DC, 1859), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Chandler, "Acquisition of Cuba," 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860; a Study of the Origins of American Nativism*, (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

<sup>25</sup> Chandler, "Acquisition of Cuba," 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

whiteness must be able to predominate. Chandler regarded the West as “unpeopled,” therefore the obstacles that the Cuban population signified for American institutions were not present.

Perhaps one of the most elaborate opposition speeches was that of Vermont Republican Senator Jacob Collamer on February 21<sup>st</sup>, where he built on Chandler’s views. His speech was very much aware of the antecedents in Cuban acquisition, even going as far as calling the debate a “second edition of the Ostend Conference.”<sup>27</sup> Collamer argued that Slidell’s report and the Ostend Manifesto share a key commonality: the belief that it is the destiny of the Union to expand. By contrast, he believed that the Union has already expanded enough, considering its recent acquisitions of Florida and Texas. Therefore, the acquisition of Cuba would be unnecessary for the Union. He states, “we could shovel up the whole of [Cuba] into ships and dump it off into the Atlantic Ocean [...] The idea that the possession of Cuba is necessary [...] is an actual figment of the imagination.”<sup>28</sup> Collamer’s assertions built on Chandler’s idea that Cuba is of very little value for the United States without the institution of slavery. He called the prospect of abolishing the slave trade in Cuba a “delusion.”<sup>29</sup>

Similar to his fellow so-called anti-slavery senators, Collamer seemed unexcited about the prospect of abolishing the slave trade in Cuba. In fact, Collamer’s views on slavery appear very moderate in his words, “my opinion is that any people who desire to have slaves and will pay enough for them can have them in any country.”<sup>30</sup> This view seems rather inconsistent for an anti-slavery senator who later provided legal aid to Abraham Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation<sup>31</sup>. However, if we consider the postulate that Collamer held different standards on anti-slavery for territories inside and outside the Union, his views suddenly seem perfectly consistent. Collamer’s advocacy for anti-slavery extended only as far as the American white man’s reach.

Collamer is by far the most vocal senator about the racial tensions that the acquisition of Cuba aroused. In response to the possibility of ending the African slave trade in Cuba and, instead, supplying the island with enslaved workers from the American South, Collamer stated that Southern slaveholders would be unwilling. He said that Southern slaveholders would be fearful of “the border slave states being shaved off into what they call, if you please, abolition.”<sup>32</sup> Collamer’s way of bringing the word “abolition” into the conversation suggests that there is great tension around it. When questioned by Slidell on his opinions on Southerners, Collamer stated that he doesn’t wish to have any written record of him supporting the slave trade.<sup>33</sup> His response signals a greater preoccupation with his public image rather than his ideological convictions.

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<sup>27</sup> Collamer, “Speech of Hon. Jacob Collamer, of Vermont, on the Acquisition of Cuba,” 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The correspondence between Collamer and Lincoln is evidenced by a small letter where Lincoln asks Collamer to meet him at Church. Collamer, a prominent lawyer, most likely provided legal aid to Lincoln on the public’s response to the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln, Abraham. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 6.*, 2001. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/lincoln6>.

<sup>32</sup> Collamer, “Speech of Hon. Jacob Collamer, of Vermont, on the Acquisition of Cuba,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 12.

Additionally, Collamer goes as far as to assert that Southern secessionists may have been wanting to incorporate Cuba in order to have access to the mouth of the Mississippi River after their separation from the Union.<sup>34</sup> His arguments evidence that Collamer was aware of the stark factional divide between pro-slavery and anti-slavery Senators on the topic of acquisition. Therefore, we can also understand his anti-slavery views as a factional commitment, rather than an ideological proposition. In other words, anti-slavery was a part of Collamer's discourse against the Southern Senators and the looming threat of secession.

In his speech, Collamer builds on the incompatibility of the Cuban population with American institutions due to its cultural habits and Catholicism. Collamer refers to the Union as a "family," its members able to harmoniously coexist with others.<sup>35</sup> Because Cuba was so densely populated, it would be hard to Americanize it. Territories such as Florida, by contrast, had a "scattered" Spanish population, which made it easy to assimilate.<sup>36</sup> In reference to Cubans, Collamer questioned, "Are they a people adapted to our institutions? Are they a people who, if they understood those institutions, would desire them?" Reminiscent of Chandler's speech, Collamer stated that the half a million Spanish creoles on the island were "entirely unintelligent" and unacquainted with the English language.<sup>37</sup> He emphasized freedom of religion as a crucial value of the Union and considered that the intrusion of the Catholic Church on Cuban affairs would be detrimental to potential Protestant settlers.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Collamer rejected the Cuban people on racial grounds, which he established by comparison to Mexico. Previously, in the House of Representatives, Collamer had opposed Texan annexation and the Mexican-American War (1848). In the speech, he referred to the failed attempts to annex Mexico as a slaveholding state. He referred to Mexicans as a people of "mixed race and blood" who have so far erased the line between Black and White as to be incapable of self-government.<sup>39</sup> In this context, Collamer frames "self-government" as the ability to sustain the institution of slavery, predicated upon racial discrimination. By comparing Mexico's racial composition to Cuba, Collamer asserts that Cuba's population too would be incapable of sustaining a self-governing body, being used to Spanish governance. Additionally, Collamer generalizes the people of the tropics as "idle" due to the large availability of fruit in their surroundings.<sup>40</sup> Because the racial difference was not as marked in Mexico and Cuba as it was in the United States, Collamer thought they would be incapable of sustaining themselves as a slaveholding state. And as established before, Cuba held no value without the institution of slavery. Therefore, Cuba would be of no benefit to the Union.

Lastly, on February 25<sup>th</sup> of 1859, Connecticut Republican Senator James Dixon culminated anti-Cuban discourse by asserting that their white population belonged to a different

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<sup>34</sup> Collamer, "Speech of Hon. Jacob Collamer, of Vermont, on the Acquisition of Cuba," 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

race altogether. James Dixon, like his peers, was an anti-slavery senator. However, he was also an Episcopalian and sympathized with anti-Catholic sentiments. In his speech, Dixon discussed,

“are [Cubans] fit to come into our government as equals? (...) All Southern senators claim that the Black portion of that population are unfit for self-government (...) How is it with the whites? They are not of our race. They are of a race that has never yet succeeded in self-government.”<sup>41</sup>

His definition of “race” in this passage combined the considerations of other senators. What constitutes the “difference” of white Cubans is their affiliations to Catholicism, their history of Spanish governance, and their cultural and environmental upbringing.

In “othering” white Cubans, Dixon also marked a difference between American institutions and Cuban institutions. He compared Cuba to a number of other American territories and argued that territories such as Massachusetts and Connecticut had been practicing self-government long before the Revolution. He engaged in a sort of “the chicken or the egg” discourse by wondering whether the institutions make the people, or the people make the institutions. He concluded that the American longstanding tradition of self-governance, even under British rule, was what created the institutions of liberty and equality. Therefore, these institutions could not apply to those who have not practiced self-governance before (i.e., Cuba). With regards to the newly acquired territories of Louisiana and Florida, Dixon stated that they were largely unpeopled and that their Spaniard populations did not get seats in the Senate.<sup>42</sup> These considerations drove Dixon to deem the Cuban population incapable of practicing American institutions.

Although this study is not an exhaustive analysis of all the anti-acquisition speeches delivered in the Senate between January and February of 1859, the speeches of Doolittle, Chandler, Collamer, and Dixon, provide powerful insight into the Northern Republican view of Cuba’s population. Although Senators such as Chandler and Dixon mentioned the environmental factors of the island and their supposed inhospitality to American settlers, their concerns largely centered on the island’s population and their inability to assimilate into the Union. All the Senators arrived at the conclusion that Cubans are incompatible with American institutions. Although sometimes defined as equality, liberty, or self-government, the apparent ambiguity of these “institutions” is perhaps a tool to obscure the prejudiced views of these Senators. Their prejudice stems from multiple grounds, including the anti-Catholic sentiments that were common among Protestant Americans at the time, the characterization of the Spanish population as lazy or uninterested in liberty, and the lack of a white population by Northern standards. These factors compounded in a near racialization of not only the Black population in Cuba but also the white population, by the assertion of their difference from American whiteness. This idea reinforced

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<sup>41</sup> James Dixon, “Speech of Hon. James Dixon, of Connecticut, on the Thirty Million Bill, for the Acquisition of Cuba,” (Washington, DC, 1859), 24.

<sup>42</sup> Dixon, “Speech of Hon. James Dixon, of Connecticut, on the Thirty Million Bill, for the Acquisition of Cuba,” 24.

the exclusivity of American institutions and values, which was a common discourse among Nativist sectors of opinion.

Going back to the conversation with Gobat's argument, this analysis provides insight into the comparison between Cuba and Nicaragua. Since Northern American statesmen saw in the Walker regime a solid opportunity to promulgate American democratic ideals to Nicaragua, they were more willing to support his expedition. In Cuba, by contrast, Northerners had little proof of the population's willingness to cooperate with the Union. Therefore, they held little interest in spreading American institutions into Cuba.

This analysis also ultimately showed how Northern Republican senators considered anti-slavery itself to be an exclusively white, Protestant, American value. The Senators suggest that the only territories that have value without slavery are those that are dominated by a white and Protestant American population. Therefore, they are quick to betray their anti-slavery views when considering the American annexation of Cuba. For these senators, the need to preserve American exclusive values was more important than the elimination of slavery. A variety of questions remain from this study, including the role of the antebellum tensions in these debates, and how the Cuban question ultimately motivated the Civil War.

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