

The Ostend Manifesto

by James Buchanan, John Y. Mason & Pierre Soule

October 18, 1854

Introduction

. . . James K. Polk had offered Spain \$100 million for Cuba in 1848, a proposal proffered by Secretary of State James Buchanan but rejected by Spain. The effort was renewed again by President Franklin Pierce, a New Hampshire Democrat whom some described as “a northern man with southern principles.” Pierce was elected president in 1852 and stocked his cabinet with pro-slavery southerners, including Jefferson Davis as secretary of war; his ambassadorial selections were equally pro-slavery. Many key figures in Pierce’s foreign policy establishment were dedicated to expanding the empire of slavery, with Cuba seen as the jewel in the crown. Pierce’s three major appointees to Europe included former secretary of state James Buchanan, who was appointed the minister to Great Britain; John Y. Mason, ambassador to France; and Pierre Soule, envoy to Spain. Mason and Soule were proponents of extending slavery.

In his inaugural address President Pierce hinted that the acquisition of Cuba was a top priority for his administration. Pierce claimed that America’s “attitude as a nation and our position on the globe render the acquisition of certain possessions not within our jurisdiction eminently important for our protection.” Rumors that Spain would abolish slavery in Cuba concerned the administration. From Pierce’s perspective, the emancipation of the slaves in Cuba would generate troubling ripple effects in the United States.

This was the context that led to the release of the Ostend Manifesto in 1854. The startling statement, drafted by Buchanan, Mason, and Soule in Ostend, Belgium, recommended that the United States pay any price, monetary or otherwise, to “wrest” Cuba from Spain. Pierre Soule, showing a distinct lack of discretion, leaked the document to the press, and the ensuing outcry from Americans opposed to the spread of slavery crippled any chance that its proposals would be implemented. Following the adverse reaction and the State Department’s rejection of the proposal, Soule, the document’s chief sponsor, resigned in protest. But had it been handled more

discreetly—and perhaps had domestic American politics not taken a such a divisive turn over the Kansas-Nebraska Act—Soule’s proposal might well have come to pass.

—*Stephen F. Knott*

The undersigned, in compliance with the wish expressed by the president in the several confidential dispatches you have addressed to us, respectively, to that effect, have met in conference, first at Ostend, in Belgium, on the 9th, 10th, and 11th instants,¹ and then at Aix-la-Chapelle, in Prussia, on the days next following, up to the date hereof.

There has been a full and unreserved interchange of views and sentiments between us, which we are most happy to inform you has resulted in a cordial coincidence of opinion on the grave and important subjects submitted to our consideration.

We have arrived at the conclusion, and are thoroughly convinced, that an immediate and earnest effort ought to be made by the government of the United States to purchase Cuba from Spain at any price for which it can be obtained, not exceeding the sum of \$ _____ [this item was left blank].

The proposal should, in our opinion, be made in such a manner as to be presented through the necessary diplomatic forms to the Supreme Constituent Cortes about to assemble. On this momentous question, in which the people both of Spain and the United States are so deeply interested, all our proceedings ought to be open, frank, and public. They should be of such a character as to challenge the approbation of the world.

We firmly believe that, in the progress of human events, the time has arrived when the vital interests of Spain are as seriously involved in the sale, as those of the United States in the purchase of the island, and that the transaction will prove equally honorable to both nations.

Under these circumstances we cannot anticipate a failure, unless possibly through the malign influence of foreign powers who possess no right whatever to interfere in the matter.

We proceed to state some of the reasons which have brought us to this conclusion, and, for the sake of clearness, we shall specify them under two distinct heads:

1. The United States ought, if practicable, to purchase Cuba with as little delay as possible.
2. The probability is great that the government and Cortes of Spain will prove willing to sell it, because this would essentially promote the highest and best interests of the Spanish people.

Then 1. It must be clear to every reflecting mind that, from the peculiarity of its geographical position, and the considerations attendant on it, Cuba is as necessary to the North American republic as any of its present members, and that it belongs naturally to that great family of states of which the Union is the providential nursery.

From its locality it commands the mouth of the Mississippi and the immense and annually increasing trade which must seek this avenue to the ocean.

On the numerous navigable streams, measuring an aggregate course of some thirty thousand miles, which disembogue themselves through this river into the Gulf of Mexico, the increase of the population within the last ten years amounts to more than that of the entire Union at the time Louisiana was annexed to it.

The natural and main outlet to the products of this entire population, the highway of their direct intercourse with the Atlantic and Pacific states, can never be secure, but must ever be endangered whilst Cuba is a dependency of a distant power in whose possession it had proved to be a source of constant annoyance and embarrassment to their interests.

Indeed, the Union can never enjoy repose, nor possess reliable security, as long as Cuba is not embraced within its boundaries.

Its immediate acquisition by our government is of paramount importance, and we cannot doubt but that it is a consummation devoutly wished for by its inhabitants.

The intercourse which its proximity to our coasts begets and encourages between them and the citizens of the United States has, in the progress of time, so united their interests and blended their fortunes that they now look upon each other as if they were one people and had but one destiny.

Considerations exist which render delay in the acquisition of the island exceedingly dangerous to the United States.

The system of immigration and labor, lately organized within its limits, and the tyranny and oppression which characterize its immediate rulers, threaten an insurrection at every moment which may result in direful consequences to the American people.

Cuba has thus become to us an unceasing danger, and a permanent cause of anxiety and alarm.

But we need not enlarge on these topics. It can scarcely be apprehended that foreign powers, in violation of international law, would interpose their influence with Spain to prevent our acquisition of the island. Its inhabitants are now suffering under the worst of all possible governments, that of absolute despotism delegated by a distant power to irresponsible agents, who are changed at short intervals, and who are tempted to improve the brief opportunity thus afforded to accumulate fortunes by the basest means.

As long as this system shall endure, humanity may in vain demand the suppression of the African slave-trade in the island. This is rendered impossible whilst that infamous traffic remains an irresistible temptation and a source of immense profit to needy and

avaricious officials, who, to attain their ends, scruple not to trample the most sacred principles underfoot. The Spanish government, at home, may be well disposed, but experience has proved that it cannot control these remote depositaries of its power.

Besides, the commercial nations of the world cannot fail to perceive and appreciate the great advantages which would result to their people from a dissolution of the forced and unnatural connection between Spain and Cuba, and the annexation of the latter to the United States. The trade of England and France with Cuba would, in that event, assume at once an important and profitable character, and rapidly extend with the increasing population and prosperity of the island.

2. But if the United States and every commercial nation would be benefited by this transfer, the interests of Spain would also be greatly and essentially promoted. She cannot but see what such a sum of moneys we are willing to pay for the island would effect in the development of her vast natural resources. . . .

Should Spain reject the present golden opportunity for developing her resources, and removing her financial embarrassments, it may never again return.

Cuba, in its palmist days, never yielded her exchequer, after deducting the expenses of its government, a clear annual income of more than a million and a half of dollars. These expenses have increased to such a degree as to leave a deficit chargeable on the treasury of Spain to the amount of six hundred thousand dollars.

In a pecuniary point of view, therefore, the island is an encumbrance instead of a source of profit to the mother country. Under no probable circumstances can Cuba ever yield to Spain one percent on the large amount which the United States are willing to pay for its acquisition. But Spain is in danger of losing Cuba without remuneration.

Extreme oppression, it is now admitted, justifies any people in endeavoring to relieve themselves from the yoke of their oppressors. The sufferings which the corrupt,

arbitrary, and unrelenting local administration necessarily entails upon the inhabitants of Cuba, cannot fail to stimulate and keep alive that spirit of resistance and revolution against Spain which has, of late years, been so often manifested. In this condition of affairs, it is in vain to expect that the sympathies of the people of the United States will not be warmly enlisted in favor of their oppressed neighbors.

We know that the president is justly inflexible in his determination to execute the neutrality laws; but should the Cubans themselves rise in revolt against the oppression which they suffer, no human power could prevent the citizens of the United States and liberal-minded men of other countries from rushing to their assistance. Besides, the present is an age of adventure, in which restless and daring spirits abound in every portion of the world.

It is not improbable, therefore, that Cuba may be wrested from Spain by a successful revolution; and, in that event, she will lose both the island and the price we are willing now to pay for it—a price far beyond what was ever paid by one people to another for any province.

It may also be remarked that the settlement of this vexed question, by the cession of Cuba to the United States, would forever prevent the dangerous complications between nations, to which it may otherwise give birth.

It is certain that, should the Cubans themselves organize an insurrection against the Spanish government, and should other independent nations come to the aid of Spain in the contest, no human power could, in our opinion, prevent the people and the government of the United States from taking part in such a civil war, in support of their neighbors and friends.

But if Spain, deaf to the voice of her own interests, and actuated by stubborn pride and a false sense of honor, should refuse to sell Cuba to the United States, then the question will arise: What ought to be the course of the American government under such

circumstances? Self-preservation is the law of states as well as with individuals. All nations have, at different periods, acted upon this maxim. . . .

After we shall have offered Spain a price for Cuba far beyond its present value, and this shall have been refused, it will then be time to consider the question; does Cuba, in the possession of Spain, seriously endanger our internal peace and the existence of our cherished Union?

Should this question be answered in the affirmative, then, by every law, human and divine, we shall be justified in wresting it from Spain, if we possess the power; and this upon the very same principle that would justify an individual in tearing down the burning house of his neighbor if there were no other means of preventing the flames from destroying his own home.

Under such circumstances we ought neither to count the cost, nor regard the odds which Spain might enlist against us. We forbear to enter into the question whether the present condition of the island would justify such a measure. We should, however, be recreant to our duty, be unworthy of our gallant forefathers, and commit base treason against our posterity, should we permit Cuba to be Africanized and become a second St. Domingo, with all its attendant horrors to the white race, and suffer the flames to extend to our own neighboring shores, seriously to endanger or actually to consume the fair fabric of our Union.

We fear that the course and current of events are rapidly tending toward such a catastrophe. We, however, hope for the best, though we ought certainly to be prepared for the worst.

We also forbear to investigate the present condition of the questions at issue between the United States and Spain. A long series of injuries to our people have been committed in Cuba by Spanish officials, and are unredressed. But recently a most flagrant outrage on the rights of American citizens and on the flag of the United States

was perpetrated in the harbor of Havana under circumstances which, without immediate redress, would have justified a resort to measures of war in vindication of national honor. That outrage is not only unatoned, but the Spanish government has deliberately sanctioned the acts of its subordinates and assumed the responsibility attaching to them.

Nothing could more impressively teach us the danger to which the peaceful relations it has ever been the policy of the United States to cherish with foreign nations are constantly exposed, than the circumstances of that case. Situated as Spain and the United States are, the latter have forborne to resort to extreme measures. But this course cannot, with due regard to their own dignity as an independent nation, continue; and our recommendations, now submitted, are dictated by the firm belief that the cession of Cuba to the United States, with stipulations as beneficial to Spain as those suggested, is the only effective mode of settling all past differences, and of the securing the two countries against future collisions. . . .