Slavery and the Slave Trade in Atlantic Diplomacy, 1850-1861

By Harral E. Landry

When Abraham Lincoln’s administration was four weeks old and apparently without a firm policy to meet the desperate crisis facing the nation, Secretary of State William H. Seward appointed himself to propound such a policy. The result was his famous April 1 memorandum to the President, which has been called “startling,” “reckless,” “incomprehensible,” “insane,” and “mad.” In proposing it Seward has been accused of advocating a scheme that “would have been wild at any time” and even of suffering from “temporary aberration.”

Among the suggestions offered in this hasty note were the following:

Change the question before the public from one upon slavery, or about slavery, for a question upon union or disunion;

In other words, from what would be regarded as a party question to one of patriotism or union.

I would demand explanations from Spain and France, categorically, at once.

I would seek explanations from Great Britain and Russia, and send agents into Canada, Mexico, and Central America to rouse a vigorous continental spirit of independence on this continent against European intervention.

And, if satisfactory explanations are not received from Spain and France.
Would convene Congress and declare war against them.²

A careful scrutiny of the topic of slavery in the diplomatic relations of the Atlantic nations during the 1850’s, when Seward was in the United States Senate and aware of such matters, may throw some light on his reasons for proposing what he may have considered neither “reckless” nor “incomprehensible” but a viable plan directly suggested by the course of recent history.

Pressure from Great Britain for the suppression of the African slave trade and the abandonment of slavery in certain areas of the American hemisphere had, prior to 1858, been applied in forms which emphasized the issue of United States national rights and prestige. In certain respects slavery itself was not in the role of principal issue but was cast as the villain of the piece—a vehicle by which the British might perhaps violate United States national rights. That a change occurred in 1858-1859 and that this change had serious and direct influences on the domestic scene within the United States is the suggestion of this paper. If this contention is true, Seward may only have been recommending the restoration of an earlier condition in which the sections could quarrel with foreigners instead of each other.

Before 1850 slavery was a significant factor in the diplomacy of the Western Hemisphere. The influence of the institution on relations with Great Britain, Spain, and Mexico has been described as a “constant orienting factor in the diplomatic history of the United States.” Where the Negro was absorbed into Latin-American society, the United Provinces of Central America, Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador either abolished slavery or failed to recognize the institution when framing constitutions. In Brazil fluidity within an institutionalized society helped to achieve social toleration more readily. A short time after the independence of the former Spanish colonies, Great Britain assumed leadership in the anti-slavery appeal. In a movement characterized by arguments on basic principles she abolished slavery in her Caribbean posses-

²Bancroft, Life of Seward, II, 132-33. This remains one of the best explanations of the Santo Domingo episode and the threat to Haiti which Seward apparently planned to use as an excuse for action.
sions, although the results, economic and social, were not shining examples to unenthusiastic fellow nations. Similarly emancipation in the Dutch and French islands of the West Indies in 1848 marked the beginning of labor and social problems comparable to those in the former French island of Haiti, where revolution and emancipation had begun earlier. These problems were not unnoticed by apprehensive slaveowners in Spanish Cuba, the United States, and Brazil. Consequently, the previous results of emancipation played a powerful role in the formulation of opinion in the areas where slavery yet remained.

To end the trade in African slaves Great Britain, as the leading maritime nation, had tried arbitration, persuasion, and, finally, force. It is true that she had negotiated antislave-trade treaties with such nations as Haiti, Venezuela, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Denmark, Mexico, Portugal (for north of the equator only), and even the Hanse towns. But none of these countries was actually in a position either to engage extensively in the trade or to contest the British position. Major challenges to the British policy came from greater nations refusing co-operation. France, under Francois Guizot, wished to abrogate those portions of her treaty with Great Britain which called for the right of search, refused to be a party to any additional treaties, and even drastically reduced the French squadron off Sierra Leone. The Paris press vowed that the few remaining ships were in West African waters only “to protect her commerce from the inquisition and annoyance of the British cruisers.” Furthermore, there was a crippling lack of co-operation on the part of the United States, where the right of visit or search was too reminiscent of impressment and curtailment of freedom of the seas. For this reason, the Anglo-American agreement in the Treaty

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of Washington of 1842, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, was the sterile Article 8 providing for separate British and American squadrons in African waters. Lord Ashburton, the English minister at Washington, signed it in an effort to present some common front with his “Brethren in America” as an exhibition of “undisturbable amity” against the “Disturbers at Paris.” Secretary of State Daniel Webster, relying on his nation’s flag as protection against interference, signed the treaty under the conviction that the dangers to legitimate commerce on the African coast made essential some supervisory force in the area.¹

The first African squadron from the United States was not sent until almost a year later, and its first action was not against the slavers. When it reached the waters off Sierra Leone, Commodore Matthew C. Perry led a punitive expedition against some of the African tribes for attacks on commerce. After burning village after village and demonstrating his “powder and ball” policy, Perry concluded his diplomatic mission by signing agreements of friendship and protection, after which he departed from the area. Subsequently as British policy tightened in an effort to end the slave trade, the interest of the United States in respecting Article 8 of the treaty declined. The growing fear of British naval strength and the Southern resentment of British abolition efforts combined to produce a positive antagonism against any right of search or visit in international efforts to quash the trade in African slaves. On the other hand, Englishmen were aware of the necessity of abolishing the trade in order to retain the economic competitiveness of the British tropical colonies, as well as to preserve Britain’s position of respect,

power, and influence.\(^6\) By 1850, the efforts to end the slave trade did not have an assured prospect of brilliant success.

A series of events in the summer of 1850 helped to crystallize the policies which Brazil, Great Britain, Portugal, and the United States followed during the ensuing decade. In order to secure British recognition of her independence, Brazil had agreed to abolish the slave trade and to grant the right of mutual search. When the treaty was due for renewal Brazil refused, and Great Britain declared it renewed on a unilateral basis as the Aberdeen Law. British courts of admiralty and vice-admiralty at Rio de Janeiro and Sierra Leone, rather than the previous mixed commission courts, were given jurisdiction to try cases.\(^6\)

Brazil was indignant at this domineering position, but at the same time sentiment had been growing in the country against the trade. There was little money in it for Brazilians, as Portuguese merchants usually gathered the slaves in Africa, and ships of foreign registry—Spanish, French, British, and mostly United States—transported them. In Brazil the profits of the local sale were all too often pocketed by Portuguese merchants.\(^7\)

In March of 1850 antislave-trade programs were in disrepute on the floor of Parliament because of the expense and danger involved in suppression, recognition that the efforts often aggravated the worst evils, and the apparent failure of the policies. Despite this disrepute, Prime Minister Lord John Russell and Foreign Minister Lord Palmerston remained, for the time being, leaders in the opposition against the trade. Yet they were forced to recognize changing British interests. Exports of machinery, especially mining equipment, to Brazil had more than doubled in a two-year period, and the London Mining Journal published a description of the use of slave labor in valuable British mining enterprises in Brazil. Also some disconcerting criticisms were


\(^{7}\)Alfred T. Thomas, Latin America, a History (New York, 1956), 343; Edward Hopkins to James Buchanan, November 30, 1845, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, X, 71.

\(^{7}\)Thomas, Latin America, 352; Lawrence R. Hill, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade to Brazil," Hispanic American Historical Review, XI (May 1931), 179-80.
made in comparing Brazilian slavery with conditions in English manufacturing areas. Consequently although James Hudson, the British chargé d’affaires at Rio, had sent further information on the participation of United States citizens in the Brazilian slave trade, Palmerston waited for a more propitious moment to broach the subject.  

He waited four months, until Congress was plunged into a domestic crisis on slavery, to bring pressure on the Washington government. On March 24, 1850, in the midst of the great debates on Henry Clay’s compromise resolutions, Henry Lytton Bulwer, the British minister at Washington, sent to the Secretary of State a list of ships of United States registry allegedly in the Brazilian slave trade and registered an official complaint. British interference was already a subject in the compromise debates; John C. Calhoun had interrupted Daniel Webster’s speech on March 7 to define clearly the role of Great Britain in applying pressure in the Texas slave issue.  Bulwer’s communication was delivered, probably not by coincidence, on the eve of negotiations looking to a settlement of British-American interests in Central America. A month later, on April 22, after the controversial domestic measures had been referred to a Senate committee and after the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty had relieved Anglo-American tension over Central America and the future isthmian canal, Great Britain highly insulted Brazil by declaring that British cruisers would enter Brazilian waters and arrest suspected vessels.

The situation grew tense in Brazil, particularly when Captain Schomberg sailed the cruiser Cormorant up the Rio Paranagua after four suspicious ships and sank two of them. He was forced to leave when Brazilians began firing on him. Apparently the zeal of the captain had carried him too far; and, after bitter protest from the Brazilian government, Britain was forced, on July 13, to suspend the capture of slave ships in the vicinity of forts and garrisons. While the slave trade might not have been the

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most popular occupation in Brazil, invasion of territorial waters was even less palatable. When British pressure had been relieved, in the autumn of 1850 Brazil passed and enforced the necessary legislation for the final suppression of the trade on her shores.\textsuperscript{10}

The situation was reversed in the United States. Secretary of State Webster had a copy of the documents which Hudson had sent to Palmerston as well as the correspondence from David Tod, United States minister at Rio de Janeiro, stating that the American flag was being used to protect vessels employed in the slave trade. “Citizens of the United States are constantly in this capital,” Tod had written, “whose only occupation is the buying of American vessels with which to supply the slave importers.” But the State Department ordered Tod not to prohibit the granting of sea letters to vessels even though their destination was obviously Africa.

Lord Bulwer and Webster said nothing about the pending issue, apparently waiting for a break in national and international tension during the summer. Meanwhile, thoroughly antagonized by the British position, Congress began moves to abrogate Article 8 of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. By the autumn of 1850 the North-South crisis appeared to have passed with the adoption of the compromise measures. Brazil had not yet made her decision against the trade and thus the situation did not appear hopeful for Great Britain. Webster chose this time to return the British documents to Bulwer with the notation that the Foreign Office must have made an error in accusing United States citizens of participation in the slave trade. Bulwer simply agreed that the accusation was probably an error and asked to be excused.\textsuperscript{11}

During the next few years problems of slavery continued to complicate affairs among the Atlantic nations. France and Great Britain made efforts to solve the acute labor situation in their Caribbean holdings. In Brazil the slave trade revived briefly,


\textsuperscript{11}Hill, “The Abolition of the Slave Trade to Brazil,” 186-89; W. E. Burghardt DuBois, The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870 (New York, 1954), 146-48; Webster to Bulwer, October 2, 1850, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, VII, 66; Bulwer to Webster, October 9, 1850, ibid., 418.
though Brazilian emancipationists were gaining strength, especially in the southern coffee-producing areas around Sao Paulo. The escape of American slaves across the Rio Grande into Mexico added another factor in the conflict of the two nations bordering the river. Slavery as an institution became stronger in Cuba and Puerto Rico, and Spain remained firmly determined to maintain a Creole society and a slave economy; she therefore allowed the slave trade to the islands to continue.\textsuperscript{12}

With the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, Great Britain was relieved of some pressure in the west and thus was able to turn her attention to possible danger, from Napoleon III or Russia, to her growing interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet the Court of St. James continued to intervene wherever possible in abolishing the slave trade and emancipating the slaves. Reports to William L. Marcy, the new secretary of state, indicated that the British consul at Havana was active in trying to suppress the traffic in slaves, and so involved himself in internal Cuban affairs. Pierre Soulé, United States minister at Madrid, advised that England was forcing Spain to observe her agreements, to liberate all slaves imported into Cuba since 1821, and to consider them enfranchised as libertados, policies which would virtually eliminate slavery in the island.

The conflicting reports on British and Spanish activities, even after Marcy had sent a special agent to Cuba to investigate, suggest some of the difficulties of a consistent policy of anti-slave trade pressure after 1850.\textsuperscript{13} The delicate nature of a British policy arose in part from nationalistic opposition to her diplomatic policies and the tremendous economic and social problems in the British West Indies after emancipation, problems unsolved by the importation of large numbers of Chinese and East Indian laborers into Guiana and Trinidad. Also after the 1850 compromise Eng-


\textsuperscript{13}Robertson to Marcy, February 14, 1854, \textit{ibid.}, XI, 737; Daniel M. Barringer to Marcy, August 11, 1853, \textit{ibid.}, 727-28; Pierre Soulé to Marcy, December 23, 1853, \textit{ibid.}, 729-35; Robertson to Marcy, March 20, 1854, \textit{ibid.}, 748-49.
lishmen no doubt had to recognize the apparent unity of the United States on the institution of slavery as well as the need to avoid armed conflict with the growing power in the western hemisphere. Her Majesty’s navy could still browbeat the weak powers, but it had to give deference to the strong nations, although the London government did manage, in conjunction with Canada, to refuse to come to an understanding on returning escaped slaves and deserters who fled across the Canadian border.\(^{14}\)

In a conciliatory mood, Great Britain in 1853 agreed to pay the United States the claims arising from the controversial Creole case. To the important office of British consul in New York the London government appointed a native of the city and a slave owner, Anthony Barclay. Finally, in 1853 Lord Clarendon, secretary of foreign affairs, talked with James Buchanan, then minister at the Court of St. James, in an attempt to clear up any misapprehensions. Clarendon asserted that his government wanted only to eliminate the slave trade of Spain and Cuba according to existing agreements. He was anxious that official British policy be known and affirmed that Britain “had never had any negotiations of any kind with Spain or attempted to exercise any influence over her respecting the condition of the slaves in Cuba.”\(^{15}\)

United States policies on slavery remained more stable and rational, although the literature of the period and the efforts to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act tended to foster a schism. The question of slavery was as yet inextricably intertwined with the questions of international rivalry and the right of search. Partly for this reason the United States was not anxious to lend her full cooperation to any program designed for the abolition of either slavery or the slave trade, since this might at the same time enhance the power and prestige of her greatest rival in the western hemisphere—Great Britain. Legal commercial rivalry on the African coast between the two countries made interference in United States maritime enterprises and the stopping of ships


more irritating and caused accusations against British motives. Consequently while Marcy and dilatory Washington officials were affirming a national distaste for the slave trade itself, Congress was again threatening to abrogate the treaty article which pledged the country to maintain an African squadron to stop the trade.\textsuperscript{10}

Several reasons accounted for the continuation of the traffic in human cargo. One was that most of the slaves brought across the Atlantic Ocean were males, as they sold for higher prices. The small number of slave women and resulting low birth rate encouraged a continuous flow of new slaves into areas where the market was open. In addition, the devastating wave of cholera in Cuba in 1853, the increased demand for and production of sugar, and the withdrawal of Britain’s fleets to protect her territorial and commercial interests elsewhere, all stimulated the trade after 1854. Slave merchants with fast ships, built in the East River yards of New York, increased their trade, using United States capital for investment, American ports for fitting out slavers, and the American flag for protection. These facts were known on the floor of Parliament, but the lack of criticism reflected either apathy or a reluctant acceptance of a situation which could perhaps be alleviated but not eliminated.\textsuperscript{17}

Officially, Great Britain, France, and the United States maintained squadrons off the coast of Africa to halt the slave trade, but no squadron possessed a treaty right to search vessels flying the colors of either of the other two nations. The British squadron, except in time of war, was usually larger than treaty standards. But the French squadron was small, and the United States unit was composed only of from three to four great frigates, long, large, slow-sailing, deep-draft men-of-war, unable to


\textsuperscript{17} Memorandum of a conversation between Augustus C. Dodge and Juan de Zavala, August 25, 1855, \textit{ibid.}, XI, 889-90; Soulsby, \textit{Right of Search}, 125-26, 138; Albion, \textit{Rise of New York Port}, 211-12; Matheson, \textit{Great Britain and the Slave Trade}, 186.
compete with the sleek, fast, light, shallow-draft slave ships. The squadron was kept in the northern latitudes, but the trade continued in the southern. According to officers on board, in a fifteen months tour of duty off Sierra Leone they were in the proper cruising grounds only twenty-two days, thirteen of which were spent at anchor. They spent eleven months at Madeira and the Cape Verde islands, where they secured supplies, 300 miles from the coast and 3,000 miles from the slave market. Trips back and forth consumed the remainder of the time. A few naval officers recommended a change and Commander Andrew H. Foote, later of Fort Donelson fame, fruitlessly revealed the basic problem in his *Africa and the American Flag*, published in New York in 1854. Thus, while the squadrons were a depressant on the trade, the full co-operation of the United States was the *sine qua non* of complete eradication, and it was lacking.

As the mid-point of the decade neared, the inherent rivalry between British and United States commercial and territorial interests became particularly keen in areas bordering the Atlantic. Great Britain was in the midst of tremendous commercial and industrial growth. American expansionism was motivated by a complex mixture of ideals and interests, but it appeared to the British to be associated excessively with slavery expansion. This appearance was reinforced when President Franklin Pierce, a New Hampshire Democrat, incurred only slight opposition in 1853 in speaking of the constitutional and legal rights of slavery, rights uncolored “by abstract opinions as to their propriety in a different state of society . . . .” Close commercial ties of New York merchants with the South seemed to be securing certain Northern support, however reluctant, for such expansion. And certainly the Kansas-Nebraska Act gave at least the appearance of removing the barrier against slavery extension into the territories of the United States.

Englishmen felt at times that they might be forced to acqui-

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esce in this foreshadowed slavery expansion; and although they were far from enthusiastic about it they pointed out the need for caution in coping with the danger. As labor problems in her own West Indies increased, Great Britain sought more drastic means to solve them. She finally established an apprenticeship system, not altogether unlike slavery, in the islands and Guiana for the ostensible purpose of allowing Africans to pay the expense of their rescue. Also, her treaties with the African chiefs were largely commercial in nature, and she refused to destroy the factories along the coast where slavers might purchase English made supplies for their traffic. Consequently she was accused of trying to secure a monopoly in the African market. Conversely, the failure of British efforts to establish major cotton-producing areas in the West Indies, Egypt, and India helped relations with the South; and since the South fought industrial tariff policies and sought to build a direct trade with Europe, England was bound even closer, despite slavery. Thus common mercantile goals plus the fear of a growing France made Britain willing to overlook the slavery issue and anxious to ease the strain of relations.  

Anglo-American rivalry in Africa and Latin America became increasingly commercial in nature, the one nation using the slavery issue only to pose as the champion of abolition, the other acting as defender of freedom of the seas. Agents swept through South America signing treaties, Britishers and Americans often traveling together. By 1853 the United States chargé d'affaires in Buenos Aires reported to Marcy that the trade was "in all these countries chiefly in the hands of Englishmen and Americans." He also pointed out that the English minister, with no practical purpose beyond commercial competition, introduced the slave trade issue "in a spirit of rather vain glorious manifestation of

zeal and philanthropy, on the part of her Majesty's Government."  

Slavery played a more startling role in Anglo-American conflict in Cuba and Central America. After the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty was signed the desire to annex Cuba to the United States increased with the realization of the strategic value of the island. To this was added a very real fear of Africanization of the island. Marcy capitalized on the fact that as long as Cuba remained a possession of Spain the island would be a market for slave merchants. Consequently, the British minister in Madrid had been urging Spain to emancipate slaves in Cuba for humanitarian reasons and as a means of making the island unpalatable for annexation to the United States. Reversing this policy, Lord Clarendon in the autumn of 1853 told Buchanan in London that his nation would extend only sympathy should Spain, through her own negligence, lose Cuba. Lord John Russell advised the ambassador in Madrid that the abolition of the slave trade would at least be a compensation in the event the island was transferred to another power, adding, “for such an exhibition of public feeling the government of Spain should be prepared.” The problem was aggravated by Spain’s actions, for these resulted only in creating an international state of nervous anxiety. Spain was in conflict with Great Britain for not stopping the trade, in conflict with the Cuban Creoles for not opening it completely, and in conflict with the United States when Spanish cruisers, patrolling in Cuban waters, attempted to halt the trade in slaves. The trade to Cuba continued, and by Christmas of 1853 the situation had reached a disconcerting impasse.

The acute labor shortage in Cuba resulted in the involvement of more United States ships in the increased slave trade. By February 1854, in line with Britain’s policy, her cruisers were no longer chasing slavers. In the same month Spanish officials confiscated the *Black Warrior* in the port of Havana on a technical

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21 John S. Pendleton to Marcy, March 4, April 22, 1853, in Manning (ed.), *Diplomatic Correspondence*, X, 105-106, 109-10.

charge, giving the United States an excuse for action. The beginning of the Crimean War in the following month eliminated the probability of French and British intervention and freed the United States to denounce this incident as dishonor to the flag and interference in commerce. Thus during the spring Soulé used the Black Warrior affair in his discussions with Calderón de la Barca, the Spanish minister, in an unsuccessful effort to comply with Marcy’s instructions either to purchase Cuba or “detach” the island. In the autumn Soulé discussed the situation with Buchanan and John T. Mason, American minister to France. The keynote of their recommendation was that if Spain would not sell Cuba, then the United States would be justified in taking the island from her. The immediate publicity, the reaction against it, and the public opinion stirred by this “naked exhibition of the union of slavery and diplomacy” led to the rejection of the so-called Ostend Manifesto. Marcy then refused to do more than try peacefully to purchase the island. Purchase was, of course, impossible, and Spain’s reaction to the affair was not only to strengthen her grip on the island but also to guarantee the institution of slavery in the conservative Cuban society and economy.28

A swiftly moving series of diplomatic crises involving slavery began to erupt in 1856. The first of these was in Central America. Great Britain had established for the Mosquito Indians the kingdom of Mosquitia as a protectorate on the Caribbean coast. Later this kingdom had expanded to include the town of San Juan, or Greytown, at the mouth of the San Juan River, then a part of a proposed canal route. The situation was complicated, after the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, by the British announcement in 1852 that Roatan and several of the small neighboring islands in the Bay of Honduras were to be organized by Englishmen as the Bay Islands Colony. The United States protested, officially using the term Monroe Doctrine for the first time, and in 1854 dramatically using a warship to level the city

28Charles W. Davis to Marcy, May 22, 1854, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, XI, 789-95; Marcy to Soulé, April 13, 1854, ibid., 175-78; Gaceta de Madrid, March 12, 1855, enclosed in Claudio A. de Luzuriaga to Horatio J. Perry, March 12, 1855, ibid., XI, 854-56; Hale, William H. Seward, 275.
of San Juan. But Great Britain refused to surrender her protectorate over the Mosquito Indians, to cease pushing her Belize boundary claims against Guatemala, or to return the Bay Islands to Honduras. Furthermore, when William Walker invaded Nicaragua, the nation claiming the Mosquito coast, he helped to create the fear of American slavery expansion into Central America.

The possible expansion of the slaveholding nation seemed even more apparent with the hasty Washington recognition of Walker's government. Perhaps in the belief that slavery was essential to the development of Nicaragua's rich soil, Walker's regime repealed the abolition act passed in 1824 by the Confederated Congress of Central America. The other countries of the area, Guatemala, San Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras, protested against what they considered the policy of the United States in supporting filibustering, annexation, and extension of slavery. Costa Rica, lying between the two proposed canal routes, appealed to Lord Clarendon for arms through her consul general in London. He reported from the English capital that British arms were immediately available but that the United States and England would not go to war. Nevertheless the Central American states declared their intention to oust both Walker and American influence; consequently even with the exigencies of the Crimean War both France and Great Britain rapidly strengthened their naval contingents in the vicinity of the Isthmus. These events, on the eve of the 1856 Democratic national convention, were not without influence; and Walker received vague support when the convention expressed the hope of a "regeneration" of Nicaragua. Each nation in the crisis, Great Britain, the United States, France, and the Central American countries, firmly held their positions of poised readiness, with the inherent threat of war, through the summer of 1856.

In October, George M. Dallas, an avowedly moderate Philadelphian who had replaced Buchanan in London, signed a convention with Lord Clarendon, and the same day Lord Clarendon

Pratt, History of United States Foreign Policy, 189-90.
Antonio José de Irisarri to Marcy, May 19, 1856, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, IV, 529-33; Wallerstein to Juan Rafael Mora, February 18, 1856, ibid., 511; John H. Wheeler to Marcy, March 31, 1856, ibid., 509-11.
signed another convention with President Juan Victor Herran of Honduras. According to these conventions the Bay Islands were to be under the "sovereignty" of Honduras, yet they were to comprise an independent state. Slavery, which had never been introduced into the islands, was forever prohibited. Southerners in the United States Senate felt that the slavery provision was "highly offensive," and the respective conventions were unacceptable both to the Senate and to the Republic of Honduras. When the Senate approved amendments to the convention, including a positive provision that slavery could be extended to the Bay Islands, the London government refused in the early months of 1857 to accept the amendments. At the same time, public opinion in England appeared rather dismayed at the sequence of events. The London Morning Post wrote:

It may be admitted that slavery is a curse, an involuntary legacy, a damnosa hereditas, which the Southern States cannot readily remove or easily get rid of; but that they should endeavor to extend the system into the free North, and endeavor to introduce it into a few islands on the coast of Central America, must afford matter of deep and lasting regret to every one who wishes well to the United States themselves.

The affair remained pending for more than a year, although the situation lost some of its relative seriousness with the rise of a problem threatening the peace to an even greater extent.

The new and more serious crisis in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico in 1858 returned the spotlight to Cuba and crystallized a major change in international policy on slavery. After the Crimean War ended in 1856, British cruisers patrolled the African waters. When a slaver was captured the slave ship and the cargo were forfeited, and the proceeds were divided among the officers and crew of the capturing vessel. But in 1857 Lord Napier, the British minister who was the target of official irritation in Washington, indicated that his government's policy was weakening. With reference to the raising of the United States

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flag aboard even a slave ship, Napier reluctantly offered his opinion to Secretary of State Lewis Cass that “this precaution does not prevent the slaver from visit, but it exonerates him from search.” Contrary to this, however, the number of seizures increased by the end of the year.  

In ships registered and owned by citizens of the United States and Spain, and a smaller number of Portuguese, British, and French vessels, the slave trade increased. Cass pointed out to Lord Napier that this traffic in Africans used Cuba as the major market and suggested that Great Britain chastise Spain for not fulfilling her treaty obligations. The secretary of state adamantly refused the right either to search or to visit vessels flying the United States flag. Although the United States navy was growing steadily during the decade, partly as a protection of American commerce from British interference, improved ships were not sent to serve in the African squadron, despite several recommendations made by naval officers. Consequently, the squadron remained below the standard specified in the Webster-Ashburton Treaty.

In the early days of 1858 the Emperor of France turned from saber-rattling across the English Channel to interests in Mediterranean Europe. By the end of January Napoleon III was deeply interested in Italian nationalism and in the acquisition of French “natural frontiers.” This freed many British vessels from service in the Channel. The following month Lord Palmerston was forced from office on a wave of anti-French sentiment. Lord Derby became the head of the Conservative ministry, and Lord Malmesbury became foreign secretary. If Great Britain had been using the slave trade as only an excuse to strengthen her commercial and naval position by offensive measures “taken in the name of virtue,” the spring of 1858 offered a most propitious opportunity. France, the greatest power on the Continent, was involved along the shores of the Mediterranean, and in the Atlantic the slave trade was increasing.

28Schuyler, American Diplomacy, 260.
Whatever the motive, Britain prepared her most vigorous campaign against the trade. With cruisers already in service, she dispatched smaller ships under zealous but inexperienced naval officers to Cuban and Gulf waters. By April and May they were firing at and searching even American coastal vessels and seizing a number of ships off Cuba in addition to the usual seizures off Africa. British naval officers sent men in rowboats around American ships in the harbor at Havana, carefully watching the unloading of cargo.  

The reaction within the United States was immediate and virulent. The press spoke of outrages; diplomats spoke of the sanctity of the flag. President Buchanan and Secretary Lewis Cass were more willing to tolerate abuses of the flag by slavers than by British men-of-war. Buchanan, in his annual message, said, “The occasional abuse of the flag of any nation is an evil less to be deprecated than would be the establishment of any regulations which might be incompatible with the freedom of the seas.” Cass instructed Dallas in London to notify the British government that the United States could not tolerate commercial interference and to request the British Admiralty issue orders to naval commanders to prevent a recurrence of the complaints. Dallas discussed the threatening situation with the foreign office. He replied to Cass that Great Britain, anxious not to provoke trouble, paid compensation on “an unexceptionably candid and fair basis.”

The payment of compensation did not alleviate the crisis, for the seizures continued; also, the Central American conflict had not been settled. Therefore with public opinion supporting him, Buchanan ordered every United States warship to the Gulf of Mexico for the purpose of protecting American merchant vessels. In June the Senate, including such stalwart Republican senators as William H. Seward, John Hale, and Henry Wilson, unanimously adopted resolutions protesting British actions and approving the President’s decision. Senators Seward, Robert

32 Buchanan, Second Annual Message, in Richardson (comp.), Messages and Papers of the Presidents, IV, 3039; Einstein, “Lewis Cass,” 316-17.
Toombs, and Stephen A. Douglas "raved against England, and shrieked for war . . . ." In London, Dallas sent strong protests to Lord Malmesbury, pointing out "the excited condition of the public mind in the United States." The situation reached a point so critical and explosive that in Washington, Lord Napier on his own authority advised the admiral on the West Indian station to suspend further action until definite instructions were received from the Admiralty. The immediate decision was thus placed in the hands of the London government.

The decision was made in London with a weather eye to several significant factors. With the recognition of the United States as a world power, enthusiasm in England for the suppression of the slave trade had waned. Opposition to the slave trade had cost British taxpayers some five million dollars, and the Negro yet remained in "economic and moral degradation," particularly in Haiti, where emancipation had been both first and complete. In view of the apparently unrewarded expense, the London Times advocated a policy of transporting across the Atlantic liberated slaves taken as prisoners in internal wars in Africa, despite recognition that this act would promote wars among the native chiefs. The Anti-Coercionists in Parliament, who abhorred abolition by force, claimed added support because of "a considerable change in public opinion." The mercantile class in England supported American protests against the right of visit and search, and the press on the whole was sympathetic. In the middle of June, the most critical month, the London Times seemed to epitomize the British position in speaking of the United States: "It is no business of ours to drill them into virtue. It may be a duty to try persuasion and remonstrance; but if they smile at our persuasion and reject our remonstrances, we must needs stop short."

The British government quickly reacted to the pressures from abroad and at home. In the debates in Parliament on June 17 and

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34Adams, Great Britain and the American Civil War, 1, 10; London Times, November 24, 1857, cited in Mathisson, Great Britain and the Slave Trade, 152-53; ibid., 159; Soulsby, Right of Search, 164-65; London Times, June 1858, cited in Soulsby, Right of Search, 165.
18 the ministry completely capitulated on rights of visit and search. Even Lord Lyndhurst, aging and intensely nationalistic, who had been born in Boston before the American Revolution, said in the House of Lords,

We have abandoned no right for in point of fact no right such as that which is contended has ever existed. We have, my Lords, abandoned the assumption of a right and in doing so we have, I think, acted justly, prudently and wisely.

Lord Malmesbury immediately sent orders to the Cuban squadron to discontinue searching American vessels until some arrangement could be made for mutual patrols. Celebrating Independence Day in London, Dallas announced to a group of his fellow countrymen that the United States had achieved "the termination of that for which we have struggled for nearly half a century."

Great Britain made her withdrawal from the Caribbean a slow one, trying to make a graceful exit and to salvage any possible prestige from the diplomatic shambles. She attempted a policy of visitation only—and that merely to affirm the nationality of a vessel that would not show her colors. Detention and visitation of vessels therefore continued for several months and heightened Anglo-American tension. Lord Malmesbury then made several attempts to arrange a system of joint cruising, but Cass and Dallas again refused. Although complaining of the expense of returning Africans rescued from captured slave ships, Buchanan would not even accept Great Britain's offer to receive them into the British West Indies.

Rebuffed on each proposal, and critical of both France and Spain for their lack of support, Malmesbury threatened to abandon the policy of protecting Cuba if Spain continued to allow the slave trade into the island. A short time later the Admiralty withdrew its cruisers and smaller ships from Cuban waters and permitted the anti-slave-trade squadron to patrol

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86 Soulsby, Right of Search, 162-63; Einstein, "Lewis Cass," 320-23; Mathieson, Great Britain and the Slave Trade, 158.
88 Augustus C. Dodge to Lewis Cass, July 2, 1858, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, XI, 948-49.
only the African coast. British interests turned eastward. During 1858 she focused her attention on the war with China and moved in India, where she ended the political powers of the British East India Company and assumed crown control of the government of India. In addition, London vigorously protested French organization of the Suez Canal Company, with its plan for a superior highway to the East and to India.

Lord Derby and Lord Malmesbury then abandoned the former British position in Central America. They sent Sir William Gore Ousley to the area to negotiate treaties agreeable to the American attitude under the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty. In 1859 Britain recognized Honduras as the owner of the Bay Islands, with no restrictions on slavery. She settled the Guatemala boundary question, turned over the Mosquito coast to Nicaragua in 1860, and established the city of San Juan as a free port. Thus, she practically withdrew from Central America, with the exception of her old settlement at Belize.

Meanwhile, with the end of the threat of interference by the British navy there was no longer an acceptable reason for American inaction in halting the slave trade. Therefore in 1859 the United States began complying with the terms of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty by stationing four ships off the Guinea coast and two off each side of Cuba. Their instructions, however, differed from those given to French and British cruisers in stressing the protection of American merchant vessels against foreign interference rather than the suppression of the slave trade. Buchanan proudly boasted that the fathers of the Republic in advance of all other nations had condemned the trade in African slaves. In Congress greater appropriations were made for light swift steamers. Nathaniel Gordon of Maine, captain of the slave ship *Erie* that operated out of New York between Havana and the Congo, was one of those arrested in 1860. He achieved in 1862 the unique, although dubious, distinction of being the only United States citizen hanged under American laws against the slave trade.\footnote{Einstein, “Lewis Cass,” 303; Burns, *History of the British West Indies*, 692. \footnote{Van Alstyne, “The British Right of Search and the African Slave Trade,” 45; Buchanan, Third Annual Message, December 19, 1859, in Richardson (comp.),}}
This newly strengthened attitude met difficulties and, without the pressure of Great Britain, threatened to fall apart. Buchanan, one of the promoters of the Ostend Manifesto, continued in his attempt to purchase Cuba, but the Senate declined to appropriate funds for the purpose. He pointed out that Cuba as a market for the slave trade was the basic factor underlying the tremendous cost of returning Africans rescued from the captured slavers to their homeland. Dissension grew also within the program itself. Although the effectiveness of the squadrons increased, it did so, as one commander wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, “in the face of positive discouragement from the Department.” Consequentially Buchanan devised a naval policy that could appeal to all elements who wished to acquire Cuba and also to abolitionists who wished to eliminate the slave trade. Aroused Spanish antagonism might well substitute for the former British interference as a cohesive force in the United States.

Without any “right-of-search” clause in either Spanish-American or Franco-American treaties, additional cruisers of the United States moved into Cuban waters during the spring of 1860. They began stopping Spanish and French vessels, searching suspected ships, and capturing slavers. Buchanan explained the violation of the recently acknowledged principles of freedom of the seas by a moral justification. On May 19, in his message to Congress, he said, “It is truly lamentable that Great Britain and the United States should be obliged to expend such a vast amount of money and treasure for the suppression of the African slave trade, and this when the only portions of the civilized world where it is tolerated and encouraged are the Spanish islands of Cuba and Porto Rico.” Spain reacted quickly to the seizures. Gabriel Garcia Tassara, the Spanish minister in Washington, vigorously protested to Cass about the “irregularities” committed by United States cruisers off the Cuban coast. He demanded a cessation of the interference in Cuban shipping, since the two nations had no right-of-search treaties. By autumn the Madrid
government prepared plans to send new personnel to Cuba with the zeal to stop the slave trade, which was the ostensible point of conflict with the United States.\textsuperscript{41}

Consequently at the time of Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, policies with reference to slavery were without their former significance. The antagonism of Spain was not sufficient to create a cementing force within the United States. Affairs with Great Britain were at their most peaceful level in several years. Buchanan reported to Congress in his annual message in December 1860 that the conflicts with Britain were concluded "in a final settlement entirely satisfactory to this government." Meanwhile, the end of the pressure, especially from Great Britain, reduced one of the forces for nationalism and union within the United States. As disunion loomed larger some writers warned of the possible consequences to the international position of the nation. The Philadelphia Public Ledger cautioned that without union

the proud title of "a citizen of the United States" could be claimed no longer, and having no nationality commanding the respect of the world, our persons and property would be secure in no part of the globe . . . . Our property would be exposed to robbery upon the sea, our flag to insult without redress . . . .\textsuperscript{42}

These, in essence, were disastrous consequences which union alone had prevented during the decade.

In the United States during the 1850's, British efforts to intervene acted as a nationalizing force, binding the sections together. Thus the navy was improved, in a period of peace and with the support of all sections, for the protection of commerce, the flag, and the principle of freedom of the seas. While Britain interfered and threatened, humanitarian sentiment could not com-

\textsuperscript{41}Gabriel Garcia Tassara to Cass, January 20, April 5, May 17, June 7, July 18, 1860, in Manning (ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence, XI, 975-87; Buchanan, Message to Congress, May 19, 1860, in Richardson (comp.), Messages and Papers of the Presidents, V, 3125-26; Sadie Daniel St. Clair, "Slavery As a Diplomatic Factor in Anglo-American Relations During the Civil War," Journal of Negro History, XXX (July 1945), 284.

pete with patriotism. For the sanctity of private property and the grandeur of national power and prestige were more tangible and of firmer fiber than the national conscience. After the diplomatic victory of 1858-1859 the foreign pressure which had been a cementing factor in the United States was gone. The withdrawal of this foreign threat removed another common bond of North and South. After the departure of this aggressive force, its role was assumed by a slaveholding region which had been attempting to develop its own national consciousness.

Meanwhile the South was more deeply committed to the preservation of slavery. The barren diplomatic victories it had won, often by default, helped to make it aggressive in defending the institution. Viewing the results of emancipation elsewhere, particularly in the West Indies, confirmed Southerners' fears. They realized perhaps that the institution of slavery was like a tumorous growth within society, but as each year passed the remedy appeared more bitter, the operation of cutting it out more ghastly, and the postsurgical results more disastrous. Thus, the South's intransigence grew.

So it may well be that the change which occurred in 1858-1859 in relaxation of British pressure had a serious and direct relation to the outbreak of the Civil War. Nationalistic sentiment had been counterpoised against antislavery sentiment in the Atlantic community. The crisis of 1861 was manifestly threatening to shift the whole weight of nationalism against the South and against slavery—thus uniting antislavery and nationalism in one movement instead of keeping the two offsetting each other. If this be true, the restoration of an earlier condition when slavery was not the all-dominating question on the scene but subordinate to nationalism could perhaps have lessened the danger of domestic strife, as Seward evidently believed when he penned his April Fools' Day memorandum.