

1

Expanding the Continental Republic, 1811–1897

Growing and spreading out into unoccupied regions, assimilating all we incorporate.

U.S. Secretary of State John Calhoun,
describing his country's goal¹

Throughout the nineteenth century, U.S. citizens grabbed land from those beginning to call themselves “Latin Americans,” whether they lived in present-day Texas, California, or Florida. The nineteenth was the century of continental expansion – of taking and settling in what would later form the 48 contiguous states of the Union. What distinguished the nineteenth century's expansion from the twentieth's was the idea of settlement. U.S. settlers were intent on building their homes and plantations on these new lands. They were also determined to form a majority that would dominate the political system and render original inhabitants second-class citizens. The leading *cause* examined in this chapter, therefore, was land hunger.

The leading *consequence*, logically enough, was the more than doubling of the size of the United States between 1811 and 1897 and the corresponding loss of land for the Spanish or Latin Americans.

Peoples in Mexico, the Caribbean, and the still-Spanish empire paid a permanent price for U.S. land hunger.

Spaniards, Latin Americans, and Native Americans mostly *contested* this naked expansionism. It usually began with significant violence against their persons and property, and the U.S. intention to keep the land also drew resistance. The war that Mexico fought against the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the greatest instance of contestation.

Given the brashness of continental expansion, *collaboration* was rare. Certainly, some Floridians or Mexicans acquiesced to U.S. power since they were powerless to resist it. More active collaboration marked filibusterism, since some filibusterism had Latin Americans seeking to annex their lands to the United States.

Contexts for land expansion were many and crucial. Accelerating the westward movement of U.S. settlers was the struggle between slave states and nonslave states in the Union, which would lead to the U.S. Civil War of 1861–1865. U.S. policymakers also saw themselves competing – and winning – against other empires in North America, including the French, Spanish, and Russian, but especially the British. Also buttressing westward expansion was an ideology that combined racism, religious fervor, and nationalism. These trends reinforced the U.S. sense that military interventions were *defensive*: if the United States failed to take territory to its south, such failure would somehow endanger the growth – even the survival – of U.S. democracy.

The First Ever Landing: *Sally* and the *Sandwich*, 1800

The first ever landing of U.S. marines outside of war anywhere came in Latin America as early as 1800. The U.S. Navy looked to weaken French forces in what was known as the “Quasi-War” with France from 1798 to 1800. On May 12, the U.S. sloop *Sally*, a small, square-sailed ship, reinforced by men from the larger USS *Constitution*, landed outside Puerto Plata, in the Dominican Republic, at the time still a colony of the supposedly neutral Spanish. The *Sally*’s target

was the *Sandwich*, a speedy British packet or mail ship recently commandeered by the French. While men from the *Sally* boarded the *Sandwich*, marines and sailors drove metal spikes into the touch-holes of not so neutral Spanish cannons so that their charges could not ignite. The takeover lasted five minutes.

The “audacious, but clearly illegal” capture of the *Sandwich* signaled the growing assertiveness of U.S. forces against European powers in the Americas.² There were several more such landings in the nineteenth century. But this first landing did not qualify as a full-blown intervention, nor was it meant to help spread U.S. power through the North American continent.

The No Transfer Resolution, 1811

What was arguably the first true U.S. intervention in Latin America can be traced to a few words from the U.S. Congress.

The sparks were the revolutions against Spanish rule, begun in 1810–1811. France had taken over Spain, and creoles, or Spanish elites born in the colonies, revolted against Spanish officials. The second-strongest power in the Americas after Spain was not the United States but Great Britain, which had by far the most powerful navy in the world and in 1808 shipped 40 percent of its exports to Latin America. So if U.S. politicians feared any people taking advantage of Spanish-American weakness, it was the British.

Since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Founding Fathers also had wanted Florida. Spain still owned the colony, divided at the time between West Florida and East Florida, because ports such as St Augustine helped protect Spanish ships against pirates. The British had ceded both to Spain after it lost the American Revolution, but the value of West Florida, which today makes up the coasts of Mississippi, Alabama, and parts of Louisiana, remained high.

President Thomas Jefferson resisted calls to occupy Florida and negotiate later. But when the British attacked a U.S. ship, he reconsidered, especially since he figured he could also wrest Cuba away from Spain.

U.S. officials encouraged U.S. citizens in Florida to revolt against Spanish authority and then to ask for U.S. intervention. Jefferson wished “to exclude all European influence from this hemisphere.”³ Here, then, was imperial competition laid bare.

On September 23, 1810, U.S. settlers in West Florida between the Mississippi and Pearl rivers overtook the small Spanish garrison at Baton Rouge and soon applied to become part of the United States. The president was now James Madison, who feared that an intervention could be seen as an act of war, something only Congress could declare, and only in a crisis. So he thought up the *potential* takeover of West Florida by the British as such a crisis. On October 27, not waiting for Congress, Madison proclaimed West Florida to be annexed.

But the president still longed for a congressional stamp of approval, and he feared British designs on East Florida, which, he wrote, “is also of great importance to the United States.”⁴ So in early 1811, congressional leaders secretly debated what to do about Florida. Secretary of State James Monroe asked for a joint resolution by the House and Senate and, on January 15, 1811, they delivered, proclaiming

that the United States, under the peculiar circumstances of the existing crisis, cannot without serious inquietude see any part of the said territory [West Florida] pass into the hands of any foreign Power; and that a due regard to their own safety compels them to provide under certain contingencies, for the temporary occupation of the said territory ...

Embracing those few words, Madison sent U.S. troops to take over West Florida. Occupation was swift and painless.

The public justification for this No Transfer Resolution was not land hunger. It was that troops were there to safeguard the “security, tranquillity [*sic*], and commerce” of the United States. General Andrew Jackson and his troops had invaded Spanish Florida to strike back against bands of Seminole Indians and free blacks who attacked a U.S. ship and killed about 30 people. Such raids went both ways, with U.S. settlers assaulting Seminoles, but Jackson was

not interested in balance. Incursions into foreign territory such as Jackson's were, to Senator Henry Clay, a matter of "self-preservation" for the United States and totally justified if Spain let chaos reign in its colonies.⁵

Spaniards, among others, contested this deluded U.S. interpretation. "While [U.S. leaders] give to the Spanish government the most positive assurances, that they will never permit any American citizen to commit an act of hostility against the territory of Florida," wrote a Spanish diplomat in 1812, pointing out U.S. hypocrisy, "[they] give orders not only for the invasion of that province, but ... to join the insurgents, and to bring the torches of revolution, plunder, carnage, and desolation [desolation?]." ⁶

The consequence of the No Transfer Resolution was momentous. It evolved quickly into the No Transfer Principle, which held that the passing of any Western Hemisphere territory – not just Florida, and not just land adjacent to the continental United States – from the hands of one European power into those of another would be seen as a threat to U.S. security.

The First Seminole War, 1814–1819

The year after the No Transfer Resolution, the United States and Great Britain went to war. After that conflict ended in 1814, the British failed to protect Native American tribes of the Northwest and the South as they had promised, so thousands fled from Georgia and Alabama into Florida, where they hoped they could live undisturbed by U.S. covert agents, settlers, and other unsavory characters. Florida towns of "several hundred fugative [*sic*] slaves from the Carolinas & Georgia" irritated slave owners.⁷

For these reasons, Andrew Jackson was at it again in the Southeast, dispossessing Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokees of their land. In early 1817, claiming "self-defense," President Madison sent a military expedition to Florida's Amelia Island, just south of Georgia, where pirates, privateers, free blacks, and Native Americans tended to

hide. Meanwhile, Jackson's forces attacked Georgia Seminoles, one of whose chiefs complained that "the white people have carried all the red people's cattle off."⁸ The Seminoles fought back. The First Seminole War was already on, and within it, the second U.S. intervention into Latin America began in March 1818 when James Monroe, now president, allowed Jackson to pursue the Seminoles into Florida. Jackson's 3500 men burned Seminole villages, took animals, destroyed crops, and chased fleeing survivors.

Told not to attack Spanish forts or settlements, Jackson still took all of Florida. He occupied Pensacola, declared martial law, and applied U.S. revenue laws and customs duties. He even took over posts from Spanish soldiers, who, instead of resisting or collaborating openly, bought time by asking for instructions from their superiors in Cuba, another Spanish colony at the time.

The No Transfer Resolution had declared that West Florida would "remain subject to a future negotiation." But a common pattern in U.S. expansionism set in: concessions of land only whetted U.S. appetites for more land. Throughout the 1810s, U.S. citizens moved into not only West Florida but also East Florida, bringing along military incursions and diplomatic pressure.

The pressure to annex all of Florida finally grew too intense. Though Congress investigated Jackson for his unconstitutional war there, public opinion was with him. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote that Jackson acted out of the "purest patriotism" and, not incidentally, Adams appreciated how conquering Florida gave him leverage in talks with Spanish minister Luis de Onís.⁹ The resulting 1819 Adams–Onís Treaty gave the United States the ownership of all Florida and firmed up the border with Spanish Texas. The U.S. government assumed \$5 million in claims against Spain and agreed not to recognize – for the moment – the independence of rebellious South Americans. The Spanish caved in because they were weak and because Adams promised to demand no additional territory. Many wanted to take Texas too, but Jackson himself wrote to Monroe that "for the present, we ought to be content with the Floridas."¹⁰

With obvious satisfaction, Adams wrote in his diary that these were victories not over Spain but rather over the most powerful European power:

Great Britain, after vilifying us twenty years as a mean, low-minded, peddling nation, having no generous ambitions and no God but gold, had now changed her tone, and was endeavoring to alarm the world at the gigantic grasp of our ambition.¹¹

There would be Second (1835–1842) and Third Seminole Wars (1855–1858), but by then Florida was U.S. territory – no longer “Latin America.”

The Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny

The Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny were not U.S. interventions; they were ideological constructions that justified them, and therefore important contexts. Together, they expressed much of the geopolitical, economic, and cultural motivations of taking continental territory from Latin Americans.

The Monroe Doctrine began as a simple statement by President Monroe in his annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823. The context for the message was that the South American revolts against Spain had run their course, and most of South America and the Spanish Caribbean and all of Mexico and Central America were free of Spanish control.

What will happen to these lands?, U.S. observers wondered. Lasting independence was not a sure thing. Spain could reclaim Venezuela, for instance. France could invade any of these new republics, as it would Mexico in the 1860s. Even the Russians could move in, as they did in Alaska and California (not yet U.S. territories).

The British, who might also have been a threat to U.S. land hunger, were more worried about other Europeans moving in on their trade. Also, they were mending fences with the United States after the war

of 1812. In September 1822, their Foreign Secretary suggested to the U.S. minister in London that both countries issue a joint declaration against European intervention in the New World.

Secretary Adams decided instead to go it alone, another pattern in U.S. expansion. He wrote the Monroe Doctrine for his president. Adams wanted to encourage anti-monarchical rule but without appearing to intervene in Europe's affairs. The statement thus included the idea that "the political system of the allied powers [Europe] is essentially different in this respect from that of America," meaning all of the Americas. It also had a warning: "We should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

The message contained three smaller "doctrines." *Mutual nonintervention* meant that the United States would stay neutral in European wars and that Europe should equally refrain from intervening in wars between hemispheric peoples or otherwise "oppressing them." *No new colonization* meant that no European power could retake a colony it or any other power had lost. *No transfer*, finally, came directly from the 1811 resolution. In sum, Adams and Monroe were saying, if Latin Americans gained independence, they should keep it.

By and large, Latin Americans collaborated with a statement that seemed to engage the most powerful country in the Americas in protecting them against Europe. In 1826 Colombia called the Monroe Doctrine the "gospel of the new continent."¹²

Europeans did not publicly reject Monroe's speech, but neither did they take it too seriously. Not only did France take Mexico a generation later, but also Spain returned as master of the Dominican Republic. And republicanism did not exactly reign in South America since Pedro I and II ruled the independent Empire of Brazil from 1822 to 1889.

But, as they say, it was the thought that counted. The United States had made a sweeping statement of its defense of independence (from Europe) and of republicanism in the hemisphere. In time, the Monroe Doctrine would grow from a defensive to an offensive statement.

A much more offensive doctrine from the get-go was Manifest Destiny, an ideological cluster validating westward continental expansion throughout the nineteenth century. For decades, U.S. citizens had argued that expansion beyond the original 13 states was necessary to preserve democracy. Jefferson himself called the United States an “empire for liberty” in which only tillers of small farms enjoyed the resources and the independence to hold their elected leaders accountable. It was a nice theory, one that increased the moral righteousness of U.S. settlers. In reality, farmers needed land more than liberty, and the more U.S. citizens there were, the more land they would need. The cause of westward expansion was often economic in nature but cloaked in political rhetoric.

In 1845, newspaperman John O’Sullivan coined the term “Manifest Destiny” to argue for the annexation of Oregon, California, and Texas in order to add more of that land. The word “destiny” meant that the westward movement of Anglo-Saxon peoples was inevitable; “manifest” signified that it was already happening. He praised the United States as the “great nation of futurity” because its main political principle of “equality” was “universal.”¹³

Yet in practice as well as in theory, Manifest Destiny excluded and oppressed many. All the Native Americans who lived in the West were not to partake in this civilizing mission. On the contrary, they were to get out of the way. Manifest Destiny did not argue for the annihilation of Native Americans, but rather for their exclusion from citizenship – expressed in the reservations that later sprang up in the West. African Americans and Mexican Americans were essentially in a similar second-class category, though not in reservations. Such racial exclusion made up the first component of Manifest Destiny. It helped O’Sullivan and other Irish Americans, often shunned by British Americans and others, to feel a part of the dominant white majority.

The second component of Manifest Destiny was religious predestination. White settlers’ “destiny,” after all, was determined by God. O’Sullivan spoke of a “continent allotted by Providence” to whites, and many spoke of westward migrants as the “chosen” people, headed

to the “promised land.”¹⁴ Many of the first U.S. citizens in Mexican territories were missionaries.

The third component of Manifest Destiny was a relatively new but potent nationalism. Although the United States had been a nation for a half-century, only in the 1840s did its continental territory stretch “from sea to shining sea.” It possessed the Louisiana Purchase territory, Florida, and Oregon, and its borders were every year more secure from European powers. Newly arrived immigrants increasingly sought prosperity out west, and railroad promoters happily encouraged national pride.

The takeovers of Latin American territory that followed from these ideological statements helped U.S. citizens believe that they were doing so out of the goodness of their hearts, and if fighting broke out, it was defensive, democratic, and unstoppable.

The Mexican War, 1846–1848

O’Sullivan coming up with “Manifest Destiny” in 1845 was no coincidence. That year, the United States annexed Texas, whose white settlers in 1836 declared its independence from Mexico and stopped being inhabitants of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas, formed in 1824 after Mexico’s own war of independence against Spain.

The October 1835 to April 1836 Texas War against Mexico had all the trappings of a U.S. intervention, except that private armies of white settlers against the Mexican government waged it. Its tensions were slow to build, as settlers moved in, many with their slaves, over a matter of years, and declared independence only when they grew into the dominant social group and bristled at how the Mexican government increased taxes and banned slavery from Tejas.

In 1845, too, President James K. Polk invoked Monroe’s message of 1823, beginning its transformation into a doctrine. Mexico would not recognize Texas independence, and Polk was reminding Europeans not to mess with Texas. He added that, while Europeans could

not transfer territories between one another, the United States was free to transfer Texas from Mexico to itself.

Intertwined with the story of Texas was the devastation and depopulation of northern Mexico following decades of raids by the Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches, Navajos, and others. Town after town was emptied and terror reigned in the 1830s and 1840s. Mexico had in fact allowed white U.S. citizens to move to Tejas in the hope that they would control Indian raids. U.S. expansionists, meanwhile, pointed to raids to further justify going to war with a Mexico that was too weak or too neglectful to police its north.

The fracas with Texas and Indian raids led to war with Mexico, the most important U.S. intervention in Latin America before 1898 and the one that, to this day, drew the most resistance and caused the most deaths on both sides.

A dispute over a strip of land barely 150 miles wide at its eastern end started the war. Mexico said that its border with Texas ran along the Nueces River, while U.S. citizens countered that it was at the Rio Grande, further south. In the background was the annexation of Texas, which many in Congress warned might lead to war with Mexico.

Fearing British incursions into the shakily administered northern areas of Mexico, Polk sent negotiator John Slidell to Mexico City with instructions to buy some of those areas – California for \$25 million and New Mexico for \$5 million – and to settle the Texas border. Moderate Mexican president José Joaquín de Herrera might have taken the money, but conservatives refused, and General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga overthrew Herrera in December 1845. The new government said “no deal” to Slidell, who wrote to Polk that “a war would probably be the best mode of settling our affairs with Mexico.”¹⁵

The Mexican army reflected the country’s disunity: it was decentralized and poorly trained, equipped, and paid. In contrast, the U.S. army had a well-educated, professional officer corps, plenty of horses, and a modern artillery that moved more quickly, shot farther, and killed more people. By war’s end, 26,922 regular U.S. soldiers and 73,260 temporary volunteers would serve in the Mexican War.

The immediate cause of the Mexican War was a U.S. military incursion over what Mexicans considered the border. In spring 1846, Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor, nicknamed “Old Rough and Ready,” to take a small force across the Nueces toward the Rio Grande.¹⁶ Mexican Major General Pedro Ampudia told Taylor to move back, otherwise “it will clearly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question.”¹⁷ Taylor refused to leave. On April 25, a Mexican cavalry killed 16 U.S. dragoons or cavalymen and captured the rest. On May 11, Polk asked Congress for a declaration of war because Mexico had “invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.”¹⁸ Two days later, Congress obliged him.

On June 14, led by frontiersman John Frémont, settlers in California revolted against Mexican authorities there and proclaimed the “Republic of California.” The Pacific Squadron seized Monterey, California – still Mexican territory – and raised the U.S. flag.

Some spoke against the war, mostly Whig Party members who opposed the expansion of slavery into the West joined by those who wished to abolish all slavery. Philosopher Henry David Thoreau was jailed after refusing to pay a tax for a war that would surely expand slavery, leading to his classic essay *Civil Disobedience*. Decades after the conflict, then-former president Ulysses S. Grant called it “the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”¹⁹

But most U.S. citizens caught war fever. Twenty thousand assembled in New York City to hear the following song:

The Mexicans are on our soil,
In war they wish us to embroil;
They’ve tried their best and worst to vex us,
By murdering our brave men in Texas.

The song went on to swear vengeance against “those half-savage scamps.”²⁰ Even poet Walt Whitman, usually known for his compassion, wrote “Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised!”²¹

After Polk expanded the war beyond northern Mexico, most of the fighting took place in Mexico's Gulf coast and interior. López de Santa Anna and other Mexican officers faced powerful onslaughts from Taylor, Colonel Alexander Doniphan, and General Stephen Kearny. With orders from Polk to take Mexico City, General Winfield Scott laid siege to the coastal city of Veracruz throughout March 1847. After half a million pounds of artillery rained on them, the citizens of Veracruz surrendered. In spring and summer, U.S. forces occupied half a dozen cities.

On September 13, Scott ended his march toward the capital by storming Chapultepec Castle. Contestation came from Mexican teenage military cadets, who resisted bravely, and six of them perished and became *los Niños Héroes*, commemorated by a national holiday. But, the next day, U.S. marines entered the "Halls of Montezuma," meaning inside the castle, a feat that would make its way into the first line of their hymn.



Figure 1.1 The Battle of Chapultepec, September 13, 1847. Painting by Sarony & Major, 1848. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The peace agreement expressed the map-shifting consequences of the Mexican War. Signed on February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave the United States almost half of Mexico, including Texas – all told, 530,000 square miles. Washington paid Mexico City \$15 million and assumed \$3.25 million in U.S. citizens' claims. The "All Mexico Movement" to annex the entire country failed, among other reasons because Senator John C. Calhoun advanced that "more than half of Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes. I protest against such a union as that! Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race."²² Still, the United States now added to its population some 80,000 Mexicans and Spaniards, nearly three-fourths of them in what became New Mexico. Guadalupe Hidalgo also stipulated that the United States was to "restrain" the "savage tribes" – or *indios bárbaros* to the Mexicans – from attacking remaining Mexican territory or capturing and selling Mexicans.

About 15,000 Mexican fighters were killed along with 1000 civilians, versus 1773 U.S. soldiers killed and 13,271 dead from diseases – the highest death rate in U.S. history. Many fought after endless, excruciating walks through deserts. Most of the dead on both sides, however, perished from disease – including the *vómito*, as Mexicans called yellow fever. Fighting the war also cost Washington \$100 million.

The war provided several opportunities for mutual hatred to fester. Before it began, Texas volunteers and their followers – many of them gamblers, liquor sellers, and prostitutes – occupied Matamoros. An officer described them as "cursing, swearing[,] fighting, gambling and presenting a most barbarous sight ... Murder[,] rapine and vice of all manner of form prevails and predominates here ... It is a disgrace to our country; for our own citizens are much worse than the Mexicans who are mixed up with them."²³ U.S. propaganda explicitly promised plunder to volunteers.

Mexicans were horrified at this behavior and wounded in the violation of their sovereignty and Catholic values. "The American nation makes a most unjust war to the Mexicans," wrote Juan Soto, governor of Veracruz. "Liberty is not on the part of those who desire to be the lords of the world, robbing properties and territories which

do not belong to them and shedding so much blood in order to accomplish their views, views in open war with the principles of our holy religion.”²⁴ Poor and middling Mexicans held off the U.S. army for two days when Santa Anna abandoned Mexico City. Guerrilla warfare by rural, mixed-race Mexicans lasted long after the war and helped convince U.S. forces not to occupy all of Mexico.

The consequences of the Mexican War even went beyond redrawing the map of North America. In late 1848, U.S. voters chose Taylor for president, while López de Santa Anna went into exile. The year after Guadalupe Hidalgo, California, now with 100,000 inhabitants – of whom only 8000 were Mexicans – enjoyed a gold rush unprecedented in world history. Over the following decade, U.S. politicians would brawl, and Kansas would descend into warfare over whether the former Mexican territories were to join the Union as free or slave states, leading to the Civil War. In Mexico, the humiliating defeat led to decades of political fighting and widespread anti-U.S. sentiment. President Porfirio Díaz was surely inspired by the Mexican War when he apparently quipped, “Alas, poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States!”²⁵

Filibusters, 1850s

The Mexican War helped spark several other U.S. interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean, known as the filibuster expeditions. None of these involved U.S. armed forces, nor did Washington pay for them or explicitly back them. But almost all expressed the U.S. desire, widespread especially in the South, to add slave states to the Union so as to tilt the balance of power away from free states. As the *New Orleans Delta* linked the issues, “The fate of Cuba depends upon the fate of Nicaragua, and the fate of the South depends upon that of Cuba ... We must do or die.”²⁶

The term “filibuster” came from the Spanish *filibustero*, derived in turn from the Dutch *vrijbuiter*, itself a corruption of “freebooter” – someone who takes booty or loot. At mid-century, it denoted

members of private military expeditions that invaded countries at peace with the United States, in violation of the Neutrality Acts of 1794 and 1817.

As early as 1812, private U.S. citizens helped Spaniards try to liberate Mexican territory from Spain. The 1819 Adams–Onís treaty’s “surrender” of the Texas border inspired James Long, who briefly took the small settlement of Nacogdoches. In 1820 he tried again, on Galveston Island. Long was arrested, and then shot by a Spanish prison guard.

Filibusters multiplied after the Mexican War, fueled by the racist triumphalism of Manifest Destiny and by the Texas model. “The fever of Fillibusterism [*sic*] is on our country,” observed the *New York Daily Times*. “Her pulse beats like a hammer at the wrist, and there’s a very high color on her face.”²⁷ The *Daily Times* and other papers filled their pages with filibustering exploits. U.S. citizens, in the North as well as the South, held rallies, bond drives, lectures, and parades in celebration.

Cuba was a prominent target, with many causes leading filibusters to choose it. It was close to the United States and Jefferson and others had identified it early on as desirable. Also, by seizing the Spanish-controlled island, U.S. citizens would deal a blow to monarchy in the Americas. Mostly, Cuba’s slave-based sugar economy was attractive to Southerners. Up to 1898, there were over 70 filibusters to Cuba. The most important was that of Venezuela-born Narciso López, who fled Cuba for the United States in 1848 and recruited U.S. supporters, among them John O’Sullivan. Because López broke the law, in 1849 the U.S. Navy put an end to his 2000-man expedition at Round Island, Mississippi. In 1850, López and 600 men tried again and made it to Cuba. But Spanish resistance forced them to Key West, Florida. The following year, López attempted a final time with 400 men, but he and many under his command were captured and executed.

Many in the United States were outraged at the executions and called on the government of Millard Fillmore to exact vengeance from Spain. In 1854, European newspapers published the Ostend Manifesto, an attempt by Franklin Pierce’s administration to buy – and, failing

that, to seize – Cuba. The manifesto outlined why Cuba belonged “naturally” to the United States: “From its locality it commands the mouth of the Mississippi,” where much U.S. commerce flowed. Adding politics to its justifications, it also denounced “the tyranny and oppression which characterized its immediate rulers.” If Spain rejected the eventual U.S. offer of \$120 million, Cubans would probably rise up in revolt, it added, and “no human power could prevent the citizens of the United States and liberal-minded men of other countries from rushing to their assistance.” The Ostend Manifesto stopped just short of supporting filibusters. It concluded that the United States would not take Cuba without Spain’s consent ... “unless justified by the great law of self-preservation.”

The most infamous filibuster of all was William Walker, who called himself “the Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny.” In 1849, the diminutive Tennessean joined the California Gold Rush, imbibing its heady brew of expansionism. In October 1853, he led 45 disappointed gold diggers into northwestern Mexico. After taking La Paz, in Baja California, he declared himself president of the “Republic of Lower California” and imposed on Baja the Civil Code of Louisiana, which legalized slavery. California papers celebrated Walker’s adventures as “another advance toward that manifest destiny of the Anglo Saxon race.”²⁸ Growing his army but without setting foot in neighboring Sonora, in early 1854 he founded “the Republic of Sonora.”

Mexicans saw in this pattern echoes of the Mexican War’s beginnings. To avoid losing even more land, on December 30, 1853, they agreed to the Gadsden Purchase, the sale of almost 30,000 square miles of northern Sonora for \$10 million, negotiated by U.S. Minister to Mexico James Gadsden. But Mexican troops also attacked Walker, who retreated to California. Walker’s “presidency” of Baja-Sonora had lasted six months. As a measure of the divisions among U.S. citizens, Walker was tried for violating the Neutrality Act but acquitted by a jury.

Walker was as persistent as Narciso López. In May 1855, with 58 men this time, Walker took advantage of fighting between Nicaragua’s Liberals and Conservatives, whose partisanship caused the small

Central American nation to have few professional soldiers and thus little defense against invasion. Walker accepted an invitation from Francisco Castellón to fight alongside the Liberals, who foolishly thought Walker only brought mercenaries uninterested in politics. In the town of Rivas, Walker's defeat was only prevented by his men carrying rifles and Colt revolvers against the Central Americans' flintlock muskets. On October 13, 1855, Walker took the Conservative town of Granada.

Enjoying military control, Walker had a few top Nicaraguan politicians killed and named himself "general-in-chief" of the army. The Pierce administration, though it had not backed his adventure, recognized his puppet government. Many U.S. cities held rallies in celebration of Walker.

But Walker's luck ran out. He was caught in a corporate tussle. When he first took Nicaragua, the Accessory Transit Company, which had a charter to run its ships through Nicaragua, paid Walker a \$20,000 "loan" in gold. But Transit's directors, Charles Morgan and Cornelius Garrison, were battling for control of it against another Cornelius – Vanderbilt this time. Vanderbilt wrested the company from Morgan and Garrison. Meanwhile, Morgan secretly revoked its charter while his associate, Walker, approved a new one for Morgan's new company.

This all meant that Walker now had as an enemy Cornelius Vanderbilt, maybe the richest man in the Americas.

Walker had other enemies. When he took over Nicaragua, President José María Estrada and Colonel Tomás Martínez exiled themselves to Honduras and denounced those who allied with Walker. Two months later, Liberal José Trinidad Cabañas of Honduras proposed an anti-Walker alliance with the Conservatives of Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica, who feared that "all the [offices] and emoluments of office would be absorbed by North Americans."²⁹ In other words, powerful Latin Americans contested Walker in part because they feared losing government jobs and the access to the treasury that went with those jobs. London also saw in Walker an obstacle to British commerce.

On March 1, 1856, Costa Rica declared war on Walker, who ordered 350 men to ride southward. Costa Rican forces pursued them back into Nicaragua, taking the towns of La Virgen and then Rivas on April 11. In June, Walker had himself elected president. Few Nicaraguans outside of Walker's base of Granada voted; U.S. citizens voted again and again.

In September, Walker decreed that anyone not actively looking for work could be sentenced to forced labor for up to six months. Such legislation took its cue from the 1850s United States, where slave owners looked to enslave free blacks by labeling them as vagrants. The following day Walker decreed unlimited labor contracts, or indentured servitude. He made English an official language of Nicaragua. He also forced all lands to be registered, and all those owned by Walker's enemies were sold at auction. "These several decrees," wrote Walker, "were intended to place a large portion of the land in the hands of the white race."

If anyone had any doubt about Walker's ultimate purpose, he annulled the abolition of slavery. Funds from the South started flowing to him.

In Central America, Walker's radical decrees mobilized day laborers, artisans, and indigenous tribes to join multinational armies against the Tennessean. Politicians set aside old feuds. On September 14, an all-Nicaraguan force led by Colonel José Dolores Estrada defeated 300 of Walker's men at San Jacinto. Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran troops also closed in from the north. Walker retreated to Granada, to which cholera spread, causing 2–3 percent of Walkerites to die *every day*. Losing his authority, Walker found his officers, as he wrote, in "languor and exhaustion" and imbibing "a great deal of liquor."³⁰ He ordered them to destroy Granada after he fled. On Christmas Eve 1856, Vanderbilt's envoy assisted Costa Rican troops in cutting off Walker's port of escape. Vanderbilt and the British also helped fund a consolidated Central American army, but on May 1, 1857, Walker surrendered to U.S. Commander Charles E. Davis of the *St Mary*, who would not hand him to the furious Central Americans. It was more a rescue than an arrest. U.S. citizens "surrendering" to

Davis numbered 463; the U.S. dead from battle or disease, 566. Some claimed that thousands of U.S. filibusterers were killed in the Walker affair.

Amazingly, once over the border, Walker remained free to tour the South, declaring he could still spread slavery in Central America. Now U.S. Northerners were clearly opposed to his expeditions. A U.S. navy ship caught Walker in Nicaragua in December 1857. The Tennessean tried yet again in 1860, but his ship sank en route, and the British escorted him back to the United States. His final attempt came in 1860 in Honduras with 70 men. There, the British Navy captured Walker and his men, and this time he would not hitch a ride home. The British handed him to the Hondurans, who promptly tried and executed him by firing squad on September 12, 1860.

It is not clear what the consequences of these unofficial adventurers were. They probably helped to hasten the Civil War by whipping up sectional tensions. Filibusters also caused great anxiety among Spaniards and Cubans loyal to the crown, but may have in fact delayed the liberation of Cuba by reinforcing Spain's desire to hold on to it. And Walker's outings in Central America may have caused enough anti-U.S. sentiment to hurt U.S. commerce. It certainly left a lasting impression in Nicaragua, where children still learn about the infamy of the William Walker invasion.

The Bombing of San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua, 1854

Nicaragua was also the target of the U.S. government. Before Walker's adventures there, the U.S. Secretary of State named Solon Borland, a U.S. senator from the slave state of Arkansas, as minister to Nicaragua. Told to obtain from Nicaragua the right for U.S. citizens "to purchase and hold real estate for any purpose whatsoever," Borland began his year in Central America praising the Monroe Doctrine and the Mexican War. He also denounced the Clayton–Bulwer Treaty of 1850, in which Washington and London had agreed that neither could build a canal in Central America without the other's consent. Borland

called Nicaraguans “a people ignorant, indiscriminating, conscious of their feebleness, jealous of their rights, and proverbially suspicious and excitable.”³¹

On May 16, 1854, Borland was traveling down the San Juan River on board the steamer *Routh*, led by a Captain T.T. Smith, when it rammed a large canoe called a bongo. When the bongo’s owner, Antonio Paladino, chewed out Smith in Spanish, the captain grabbed a rifle and shot Paladino dead. Soon after, the Afro-Nicaraguan marshal of San Juan del Norte, a small Caribbean coastal town of about 60 huts, tried to arrest Smith. Gun in hand, Borland warned the marshal to turn around. Town officials tried to reason with the U.S. minister, but someone in their party threw a bottle that grazed Borland’s face, causing a minor cut.

Revenge followed. Borland headed back to the United States, but the Pierce administration sent the warship *Cyane* to demand reparations or obtain satisfaction otherwise. On July 13, the *Cyane* fired over 200 rounds at point-blank range at the hamlet. Forty or 50 sailors went ashore, looted what was left—especially liquor—in what was still standing, and torched the remains to the ground. No one died, but inhabitants of San Juan lost \$2 million, which the U.S. government never reimbursed.

Why bomb such an insignificant town so mercilessly? Imbued with his era’s racism, President Pierce himself described the mixed-race San Juan as “a pretended community, a heterogeneous assemblage gathered from various countries, and composed for the most part of blacks and persons of mixed blood.” For this reason, San Juan was “incapable of being treated in any other way than as a piratical resort of outlaws or a camp of savages.”³² Pierce also wanted to show the British his disdain for Clayton–Bulwer, especially since the British claimed a protectorate over San Juan, which they called Greytown. Also on board was the Transit Company, which owned Smith’s ship. One of its directors instructed “that the people of the town should be taught to fear us. Punishment will teach them.”³³

The bombardment of San Juan del Norte spoke to the arrogant spirit of U.S. expansion during the nineteenth century. Along with

other U.S. interventions, it also indicated a shift away from British and toward U.S. hegemony over the Western Hemisphere. There were no other interventions on the scale of the Mexican War or even the First Seminole War until the War of 1898. Between 1869 and 1897, however, Washington sent warships into Latin American ports 5980 times. Some of these were friendly enough visits, but most of the time U.S. forces landed to oversee a change in political regimes, to quell riots or a civil war, or to enforce a commercial treaty. In all instances, the intent was to serve the interests of the United States, not those of Latin America, regardless of the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine. “Gunboat diplomacy,” as this practice came to be called, became standard in relations between the United States and Latin America. It created resentment in the latter, while in the former it became evidence of the growing hegemony – and to most, superiority – of the United States.

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