

# 2016

## H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

No. 580

Published on 8 January 2016

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux  
and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Andrew Priest. "Thinking about Empire: The Administration of Ulysses S. Grant, Spanish Colonialism and the Ten Years' War in Cuba." *Journal of American Studies* 48:2 (2014). DOI: 10.1017/S0021875813001400. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813001400>**

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR580>

Review by **Stephen Tuffnell**, University of Oxford

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**O**n October 10, 1868 on the *ingenio* Demajagua in the Cuban province of Oriente, Carlos Manuel De Céspedes and his fellow conspirators raised the *Grito* (cry) *de Yara*. "The power of Spain is decrepit and worm-eaten," Céspedes told his fellow insurgents, "if it appears strong, it is because for over three centuries we have regarded it from our knees."<sup>1</sup> In the ensuing months, up to fifteen thousand armed rebels took to the field against fifty thousand Spanish and Cuban troops. The Ten Years' War had begun.

Cuba had long exuded an intoxicating aroma of opportunity and fear to American policymakers. In "Thinking about Empire," Andrew Priest, Lecturer in modern U.S. history at the University of Essex, examines the attitudes of Republican policymakers in the Grant Administration towards the opportunities, pitfalls, and duties presented to the United States (U.S.) during Cuba's Ten Years' War (1868-78). Using diplomatic correspondence, Congressional speeches, and the private papers of Republican Party policymakers, Priest concisely lays out the path charted by Ulysses S. Grant's Secretary of State Hamilton Fish as he navigated the scruples of liberals and the fears of racists when formulating a response to the unfolding crisis in Cuba. Joining a rich and long-standing historiography that charts the United States' transition from Continental to overseas expansion, Priest deftly highlights the versatility of empire as a concept for American statesmen and a cognitive aid for grappling with the tangled relationship between race, expansion, and national mission during Reconstruction. In a significant shift of focus away from the analysis of public discourse that has previously dominated this literature, Priest argues persuasively that policymakers in the United States habitually examined the strategies of European empires with the aim not of defining imperial rule, but of expanding the range of available options for projecting American power overseas (544).

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in: Jim Powell, *Greatest Emancipations: How the West Abolished Slavery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 151.

Priest is not making the case for the existence of an ‘official mind’ in Washington, however. As he charts the Grant Administration’s reaction to events in Cuba Priest keeps in view the ambivalence at the heart of the emerging “imperial mindset” (558). Republican, anti-imperial and, increasingly, anti-slavery ideologies were weighed in a calculus against geo-political realities, the allure of informal empire, and the imperatives of the global ‘civilizing’ mission. Fish’s “primary objective was to alter what [he] saw as the autocratic and at times barbaric nature of Spanish control, especially the extension of slavery ... and to challenge the exclusion of the United States from open trade with Cuba” (542). Taking their cue from British informal imperialism, this led many in the Republican Party into the ambivalent position of privately hoping the rebellion signaled an end to Spanish imperialism while publicly supporting Spanish sovereignty “as part of a drive to protect [the United States’] own material interests” with the result that Fish “sought to modify rather than end Spanish colonial practices” (542).

Race was at the forefront of policymakers’ discussions of Cuban policy, which are succinctly sketched by Priest. As was the case with Santo Domingo, intervention and annexation were thought of principally in terms of national expansion and were closely entwined with the project of Reconstruction in the United States (547-8).<sup>2</sup> Fish, a scion of the New York aristocracy and opponent of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the agency charged with overseeing the social welfare of South’s emancipated slaves, was “repelled” by the island’s “racial makeup,” and headed a coalition of Conservative Republicans who recoiled at the prospect of either intervention or annexation (547).<sup>3</sup> They also feared that the multiethnic insurgent army would prove incapable of self-government and consequently viewed its prospects with great circumspection. The historical precedents pacifying interventionist urges had their roots in the political and ideological struggles of the 1840s, which could be given greater consideration by Priest. Memory of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804 was a significant touchstone for American interpretations of racial politics in the Caribbean. As racial segregation and violence spread through the South, and the political gains made during Reconstruction were dismantled, black and mulatto leaders gained increasing power and popularity in Cuba.<sup>4</sup> For some American observers this was a world turned upside down. This disposition of affairs, wrote Minister to Spain Caleb Cushing, threatened “to carry Cuba for generations to come into the same series of military usurpations, sanguinary civil wars, [and] sterile revolutions, with their accompanying barbarism, which have characterized independent Hayti” (549). “Thinking about Empire,” Priest makes clear, required meditation on the possibilities of multi-racial democracy and the intellectual and moral foundations of Reconstruction itself.

Priest gives a convincing account of the fraught process of “thinking like an Empire” in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. In part “because of the constraints that formal European colonial control placed

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, “America’s Conservatory: Race, Reconstruction, and the Santo Domingo Debate,” *Journal of American History* 97:4 (March, 2011), 974-1000.

<sup>3</sup> In an account of a visit to the island in 1855, Fish was enchanted by Cuba’s climate and topography, dubbing it the island “where only man is vile,” see: Eric T. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 1999), 4; Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 108.

on American economic expansion” and in part because of concerns that antagonizing Spain would prolong the rebellion and invite “the intervention of other European powers,” American ambitions were tempered during the period of the Ten Years’ War (544, 552). Ultimately the United States was dependent upon the actions of neighboring empires – a fuller account of this broader context would be helpful and would illuminate the complex imperial context in which the U.S. was embedded. British interests in the hemisphere prospered in the same period through direct investment in Latin American railways, banks, and government bonds creating an economic intimacy that, in some cases, paralleled that of its settler Dominions.<sup>5</sup> The British variant of informal empire was an attractive – and, it transpired, convenient – model for action. “As Fish and his colleagues recognized,” Priest writes, “U.S. interests on the island gave it considerable influence, so that in some cases a *lack* of action ... counted as an imperial maneuver” as the weight of trade and investment would, it was hoped, trap Cuba in the United States’ economic orbit (557).

“Thinking about Empire” is part of a much broader project, including a second article published in 2015, that expands the comparative terms on which American statesmen thought about the United States’ place amongst the world of European empires and ‘civilization’ more broadly.<sup>6</sup> As this project develops it will be intriguing to read how Priest charts a pair of challenges that must be confronted by historians of U.S. imperial and global history in the late nineteenth century.

The first challenge is conceptual. Empire was not the only model available to American liberals keen to define the re-united nation’s place in the vanguard of western democracies, nor was empire the only language of internationalism. The principle liberal alternative was a world governed by international law. By mid-century, a considerable body of doctrinal and historical precedents and international treaties came to be collectively known as ‘international law.’ Eager to capitalize on the new technologies of international communication, influenced by British liberal thought, and eager to change international norms, American statesmen sought to facilitate the advancement of liberal international principles.<sup>7</sup> The settlement of the *Alabama* claims, in itself a major stumbling block to American recognition of Cuban belligerency (551) signified that arbitration meant as much to American views of ‘civilization’ as taking up the ‘white man’s burden’ in Cuba.<sup>8</sup> Priest hints at the centrality of international law to American views of imperial strategy when he writes that they reflexively reduced “the complexities of imperialism to supposed transgressions of what Washington accepted as ‘civilized’ norms in international affairs” (544). He also pinpoints the tension inherent in unilaterally asserting these norms as an act of hemispheric imperialism in its own right since “these Americans were increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Denoon, *Settler Capitalism: The Dynamics of Settler Capitalism in the Southern Hemisphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Priest, “Imperial Exchange: American Views of the British Empire during the Civil War and Reconstruction,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:1 (Spring, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> As Jay Sexton has shown, Fish attempted to end the conflict short of an anti-colonial military intervention through his multilateral initiative of 1869, which invited the interference of European powers in the conflict. See Jay Sexton, “The United States, the Cuban Rebellion, and the Multilateral Initiative of 1875,” *Diplomatic History* 30:3 (2006), 335-365.

‘thinking like an empire’ as they considered their own place in the international system” and judged others against their own definition of international civilized norms (544). How Priest disentangles the relationship between international law and empire will shed an interesting sidelight on the global politics of civilization in the late nineteenth century.

The second challenge is historiographical and methodological. “Thinking about empire” intersects with a growing literature that examines inter-imperial borrowings and adaptations. Historians of European empires have recently begun to probe the various forms of collaboration between empires.<sup>9</sup> From an inter-imperial perspective, viewing European empires as a set of competing state entities disregards a whole range of transfers between colonial settings and metropolitan centers. Inter-imperial connections were determined by geography and rule. First, imperial boundaries overlapped rather than abutted, meaning that empires collaborated on shared projects – even sub-contracting work to one another. Second, metropolises shared common challenges and techniques regarding the administration and exploitation of distant colonies. These tasks ranged from labor recruitment, economic and industrial development to the establishment of colonial bureaucracies and regimes of allegiance. Inter-imperial comparison and the exchange of experiences was a common pattern of imperial rule and impinged heavily on imperial policies.

Historians of American imperialism could make great use of this analytical framework – especially in the midst of repeated summons to re-situate the American nation-state in regional, transnational, and global scales.<sup>10</sup> Priest’s work falls into the second category of inter-imperial lesson-learning outlined above. American statesmen, including Fish and Charles Sumner, studied Spanish rule in Cuba to prevent the provincialism of Spain’s empire prevailing in the strategies of future U.S. rule in the Caribbean. As American policymakers felt “themselves to be an ever more important player in the global system,” he writes, “they increasingly and perhaps subconsciously sought to ape aspects of policies practiced by the major European powers, and they expected other nations to follow them” (557). Priest’s approach in fact suggests something more forthright than the ‘subconscious’ mimicry of European imperial practice. Instead, he is interested in the existence of a coterie of American policymakers habitually studying imperial phenomena in different imperial contexts and their contribution to the “imperial mindset that was crystallizing at this time” (558).

As he traces the development of their ideas of empire and evaluates their eventual applications, Andrew Priest’s work promises to open new transnational dimensions on the exercise of state power and the establishment of imperial governance in the United States.

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<sup>9</sup> Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber (eds.), *Imperial Rule* (Budapest, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Kramer has made a number of important interventions in this area see: “Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and the United States Empires, 1880-1910,” *Journal of American History* 88:4 (2002): 1327-1330; and Paul A. Kramer and John Plotz, “Pairing Empires: Britain and the United States, 1857-1947,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2:1 (2001).

## H-Diplo Article Review

which he examines through the history of the American diaspora in Britain and the British Empire. He is currently preparing a monograph entitled *The American Invaders: Nationhood and Empire in Britain's American Community, c.1783-1914* for publication. His latest article, entitled "Expatriate Foreign Relations: Britain's American Community and Transnational Approaches to the U.S. Civil War," will be published in *Diplomatic History* and is available in advanced access.

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