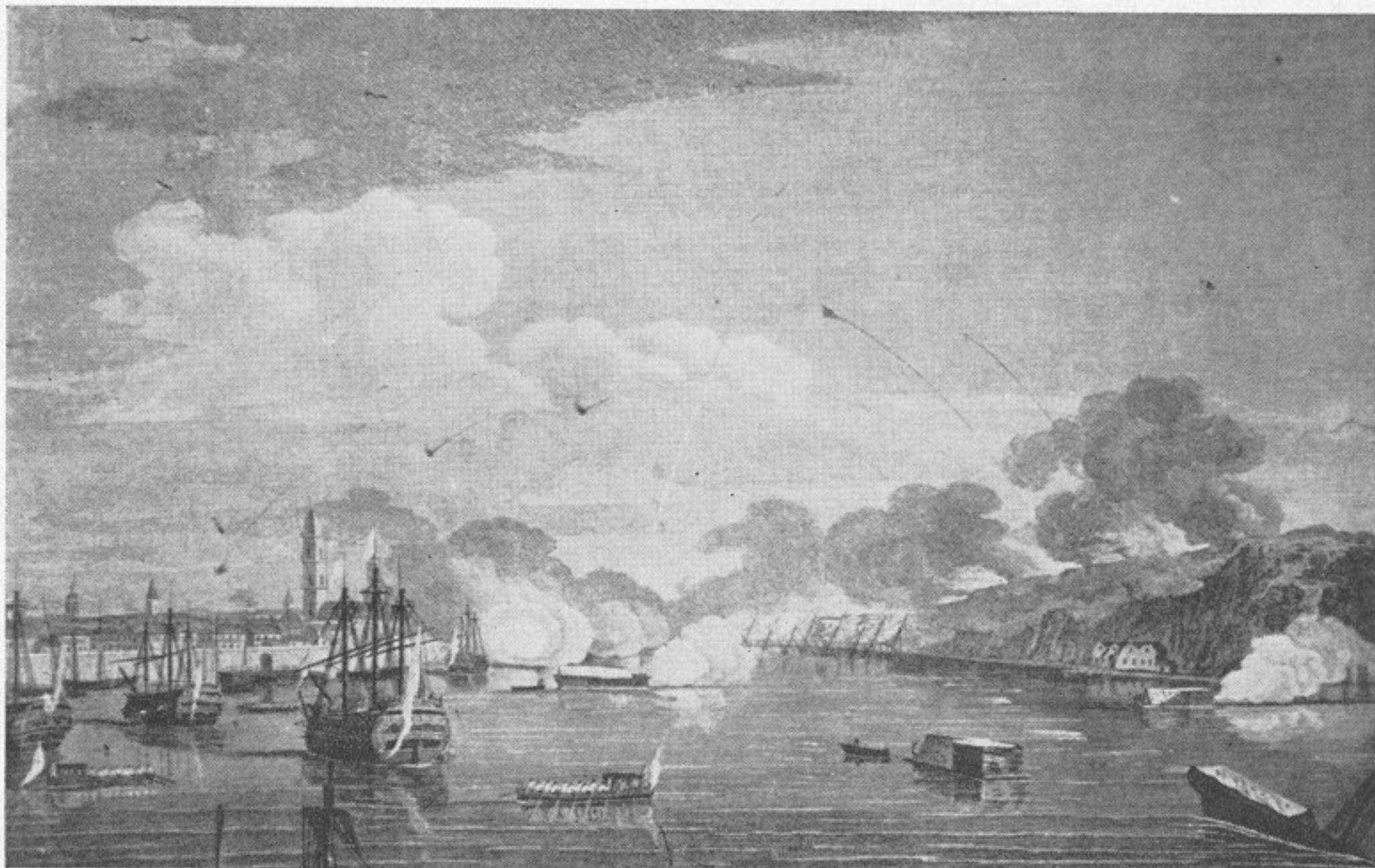


Cuba's Rôle in American History

PART I

By ARNOLD WHITRIDGE



By courtesy of the Parker Gallery

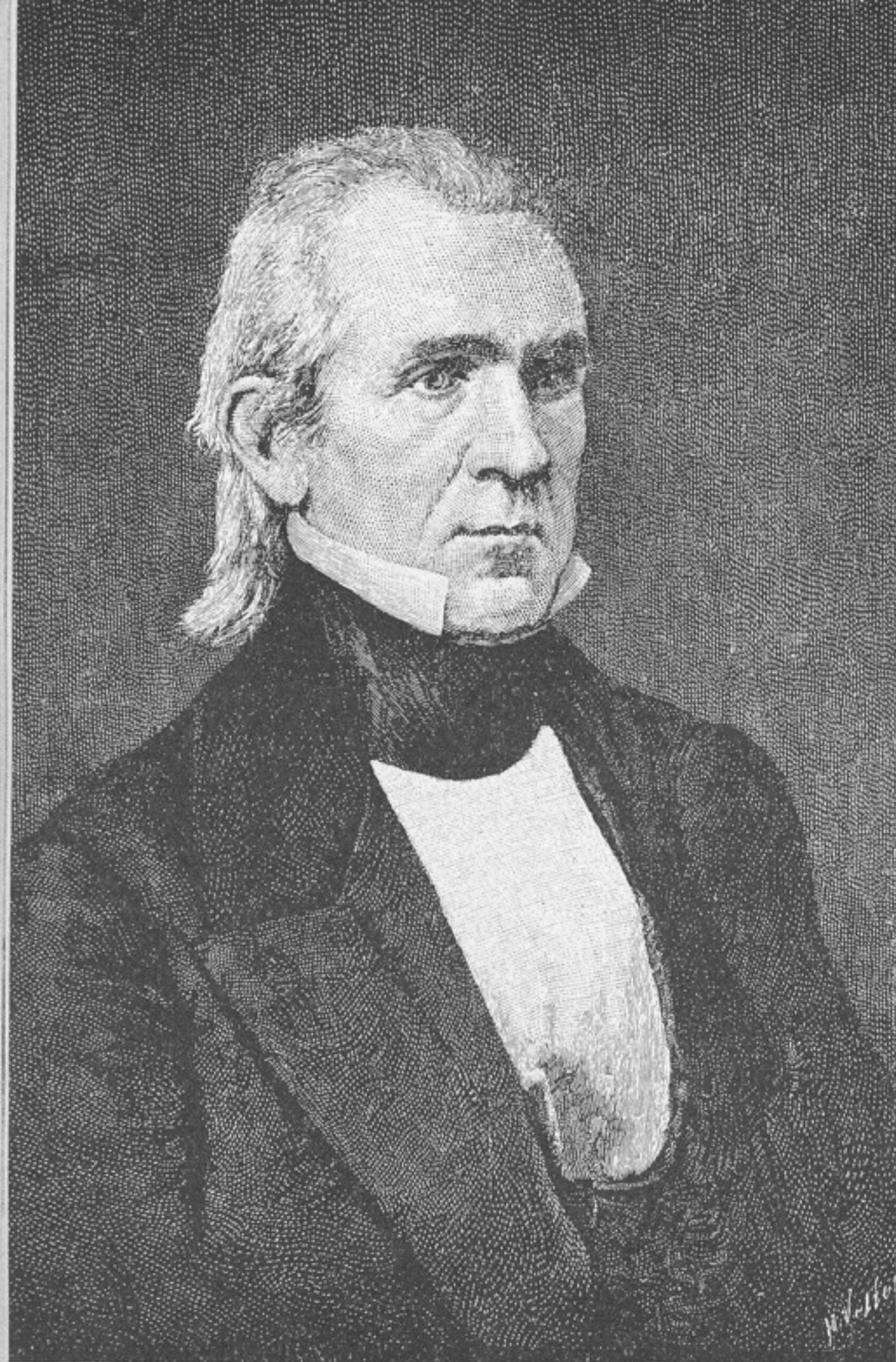
Albemarle's attack on Havana in 1762; his expeditionary force included three thousand Americans; an engraving after D. Serres

From Jefferson onwards, many nineteenth-century United States leaders hoped that Cuba could be induced to "add itself to our confederation."

EVER SINCE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS sighted the New World from the poop of the *Santa Maria*, the island of Cuba, which he hopefully believed to be Japan, has played an important rôle in the unfolding of American history. Columbus brought back glowing tales of gold and spices, none of which he himself had seen but which his lieutenant, Diego de Velasquez, would soon be sending home. For the next four hundred years Cuba belonged to Spain; but long before the United States had come into being, this great island, the Pearl of Antilles, was recognized by the far-sighted

Governor Pownall of Massachusetts as forming part of the North American domain.

During the Seven Years War, Governor Pownall suggested an attack on Cuba and, when in accordance with this suggestion Lord Albemarle captured Havana in 1762, his expeditionary force included three thousand Americans, among them a certain Israel Putnam, who was soon to win a greater name for himself as one of Washington's most trusted lieutenants. Fortunately for the still unborn United States, Britain relinquished Cuba at the end of the war and accepted in exchange the barren lands of



Mansell Collection

JAMES K. POLK, *President of the United States, 1845-49, who wished to round off his expansionist career by the acquisition of Cuba*

Florida. Cuba reverted to Spain and indirectly served the American cause well. In the War of Independence, Havana became an important naval arsenal from which the French and Spanish ships drew their supplies.

Governor Pownall, one of the few Colonial governors to speculate about the future, may have dreamed of incorporating Cuba in his Majesty's American possessions, but Thomas Jefferson was the first American to give serious consideration to the fact that Cuba might be induced to "add itself to our confederation." As the earliest apostle of "Manifest Destiny,"

not an easy doctrine to assimilate with the pure milk of democracy, Jefferson looked forward to the ultimate possession of Cuba, and indeed of the whole North American continent, as being in the natural order of things. During the Napoleonic wars he hoped that Napoleon might be willing to cede Cuba to the United States, in return for a promise not to interfere with French plans elsewhere in Hispanic America. In a letter to Madison on this subject, Jefferson airily overlooked the fact that Cuba did not belong to Napoleon, just as a few years earlier he had jumped at Napoleon's offer to sell the whole Territory of Louisiana, without bothering to inquire into the title. Too sophisticated a diplomat to seize the island outright, Jefferson was always thinking of ways whereby it might be induced to drop into his lap. Madison saw the problem slightly differently. It was not so much that he desired Cuba for itself as that he was afraid some European power "might make a fulcrum of that position against the commerce and security of the United States." So long as it remained in Spanish hands, he was satisfied. Any other nation coming into possession of the island would be a stronger, and to that extent less desirable, neighbour.

For the next fifty years, American statesmen looked at Cuba and wondered how soon the laws of manifest destiny, political gravitation, natural right, or paramount interest, would begin to operate so as to bring Cuba under the American flag. John Quincy Adams was perhaps the chief exponent of the ever popular theory that the aggrandizement of the Union, with particular reference to Cuba, was fore-ordained by Nature. In a despatch to the American Minister in Spain (April 28th, 1823), on the possibility of Cuba's joining in the revolt of the other Spanish-American colonies against the mother country, he explained that "there are laws of political as well as physical gravitation; and if an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom."

The law of gravitation had already been used by Turgot, the French physiocrat, to explain the inevitability of American independence. Colonies were like fruits that held to the tree only until their maturity. On the same theory, American statesmen predicted that not only Cuba, but Texas, Oregon and Canada would also gravitate to the United States. Senator Sumner of Massachusetts varied the metaphor slightly in a letter to his friend Cobden in which he explained, that "there are natural laws at work which no individual and no parliament can control, and it seems to me that by these Canada is destined to be swept into the wide orbit of her neighbor." President Polk, who added more territory to the Union than any other President except Jefferson, would have dearly loved to round out his career with the annexation of Cuba. He was even willing to lend a hand to the law of gravity by offering to buy the island from Spain for a hundred million dollars. Unfortunately, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, knowing nothing of the laws of political gravitation, refused to listen to the proposal. The Spanish people, he asserted, would rather see the island sunk in the ocean than transferred to any other power.

Polk's successor did not pursue the subject after this rebuff, but the pro-slavery expansionists of the Southern states were not so easily put off. Having succeeded in adding Texas to the Union, they were now determined to acquire Cuba as still another slave state. As the demands of the South became more insistent, the enthusiasm of the Northern states began to cool. It was all very well to claim, as one Southern Congressman did, that "it was no more possible for this country to pause in its career than it is for the free and untrammelled eagle to cease to soar"; but the North would have preferred to soar in the direction of Canada, where the question of slavery was not involved. Only in the South were men so nimble-witted that they could leap from the defence of slavery to a grandiose plan for the diffusion of the blessings of freedom over the whole North American continent, without being aware of the slightest inconsistency.

Meanwhile, the Cubans themselves were chafing against Spanish rule. The same short-

sighted policies that led to the revolutions in South America had alienated the colonials in Cuba. All the important posts in the island were reserved for Spaniards. No Cuban-born Spaniard could aspire to any position of authority in the government, even though both his parents came of the purest Castilian stock. By the middle of the nineteenth century, some of the leading Creoles were beginning to favour annexation to the United States as being less objectionable than the tyranny of Spanish rule, or than the abolitionist régime that might be expected in the event of a British protectorate. These prosperous, slave-owning Creoles feared that Spain might emancipate the slaves, just as Lincoln did during the Civil War in the United States, in case of any revolt against Spanish authority. Despite the explicit denial of this rumour by the Spanish Captain General, the belief spread throughout the Southern states that there was a movement on foot to Africanize the island and that, unless the United States intervened, the wholesale massacres of St. Domingo would be repeated in Cuba, within a few hours' sail of American shores. By giving this story the widest possible publicity, slaveholders worked up a sentiment in favour of the designs of filibusters bent on wresting the island from Spanish hands.

General Narciso Lopez, a Venezuelan adventurer, found no difficulty in enlisting followers for a hare-brained assault upon Cuba. A force of four hundred and fifty men, mostly Americans, but including a few Cuban idealists who felt they had no other recourse than to throw themselves into the arms of the United States, set sail from New Orleans in the summer of 1851 to launch a revolution in Havana, topple over the Spanish government and annex Cuba to the United States. The landing of General Lopez would be the signal for a general uprising. An easy victory was assured. The Spanish army would fraternize with the invaders. Officers of the expeditionary force were to receive confiscated sugar plantations, and each one of the men the sum of five thousand dollars.

The wild dreams of magnificence and wealth vanished as soon as Lopez stepped ashore. The pilot lost his way, the ship went aground, and the invaders were landed at the wrong

point. Lopez had miscalculated the willingness of the people to risk their lives in open revolt; and the Spanish forces, far from fraternizing with the invaders, attacked their forces and methodically exterminated them. Those who were not killed were captured and sent to Spain to work in the salt mines. Lopez himself was taken to Havana, where he was garrotted in front of the prison in a great public ceremony. Daniel Webster, the American Secretary of State at the time, excoriated the expedition in the strongest terms and made a handsome apology to the Spanish government. The Whig party, which he represented, wanted no part in the shady schemes of slave-holders for the forcible annexation of foreign lands. If Spain, or any other European power, were willing to sell her colonies, well and good; otherwise America would wait for the apple to drop, as it surely would, in the not too distant future.

The Democrats, who came back into power in 1853, adopted a more vigorous policy. President Pierce hinted strongly that during his term of office it might fall to his lot to in-



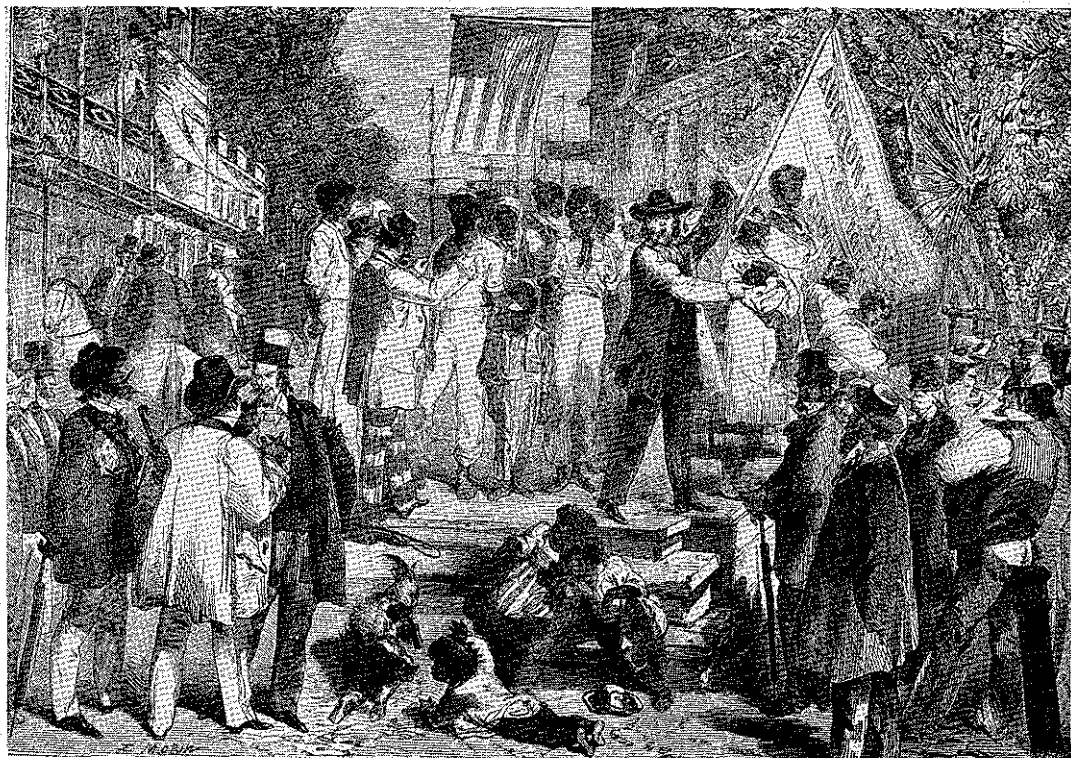
From: A. A. Ettinger, "The Mission to Spain of Pierre Soulé,"
Yale University Press, 1932

The principal author of the offer to buy Cuba from Spain in 1854, PIERRE SOULÉ, American Minister in Madrid

corporate the island of Cuba into the Union. In any case, he would not be controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion. Cuba was destined by "territorial propinquity" to belong to the United States. Every rock and every grain of sand in that island had drifted and been washed out from American soil by the floods of the Mississippi. It never seems to have occurred to the expansionists that this geological origin might just as well have been interpreted to mean that nature had designed the separation of Cuba from the United States.

To further his policies, Pierce selected determined expansionists to fill the three most important diplomatic posts. James Buchanan, a Pennsylvanian whose presidential aspirations led him to curry favour with the South by defending Southern "rights," went to England. John Mason, a faithful Democratic war-horse from Virginia, took over the legation in France; and Pierre Soulé, a hot-headed French émigré who had fallen foul of the Bourbon police and had fled first to Haiti and then to Louisiana, where he made a name for himself as an intriguing politician, became Minister to Spain. These three diplomats, on instructions from the State Department, met together in Ostend for an interchange of views about Cuba. Washington had intended the meeting to be informal; but Soulé took care that it should be well publicized.

The result of this conference was an extraordinary document known as the "Ostend Manifesto." It began with an offer to Spain to buy the island of Cuba for 120 million dollars. Then followed an argument showing that since the island must eventually gravitate to the United States, it was very much to Spain's advantage to part with it at the excellent price being offered. If Spain, indifferent to its own real interests and blind to the needs of the United States, should decline this generous offer, then it would be necessary to consider whether Cuba in the possession of Spain did not endanger the internal peace and security of the Union. The United States might well be justified in wresting the island from Spain on the principle that a man is justified in tearing down the house of his neighbour, should it catch fire, if there is no other means of preventing the flames from spreading to his own home.



Radio Times Hulton Picture Library

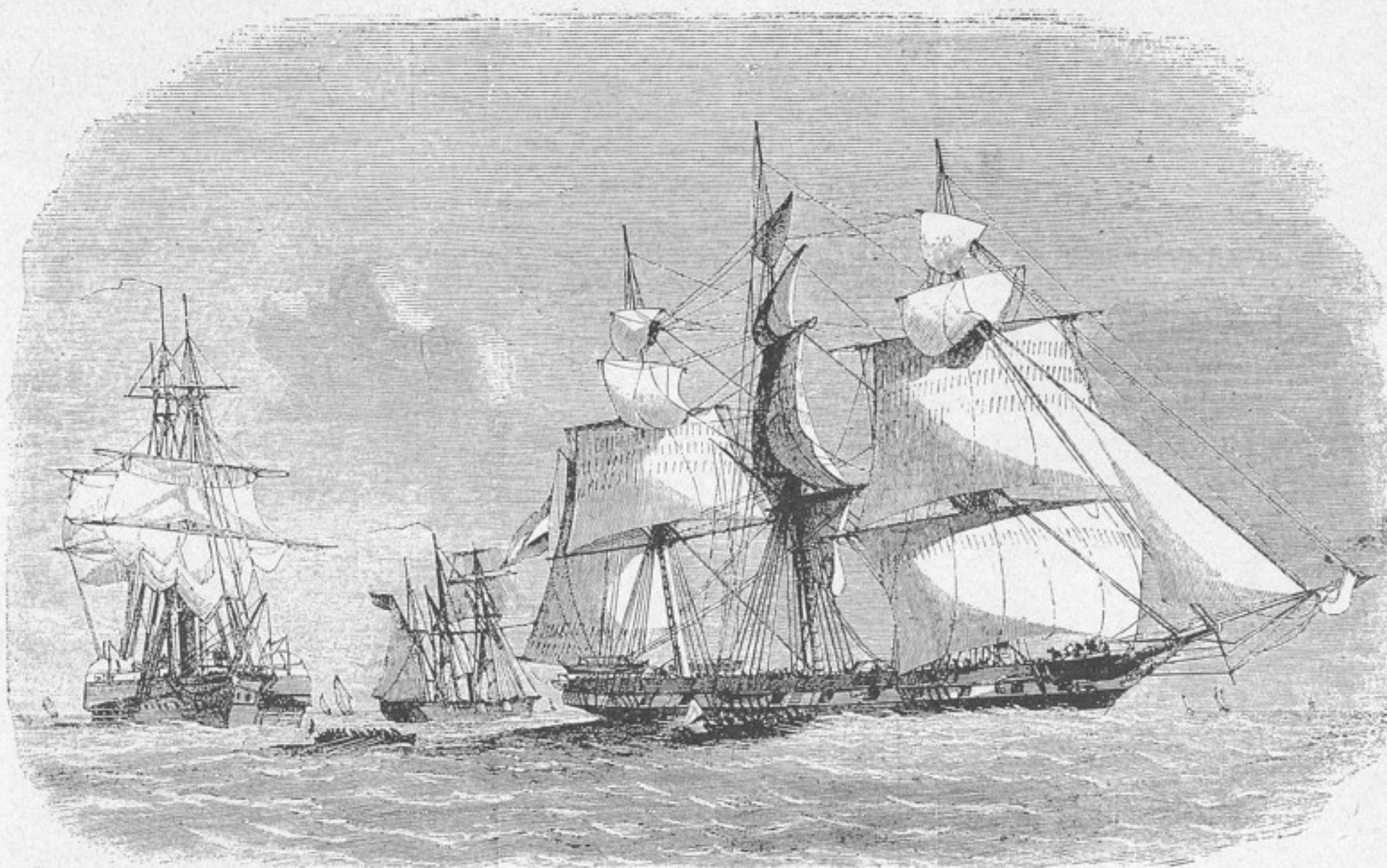
Champions of the peculiar institution in the Southern states became the most fervent advocates for annexing Cuba; a slave auction at Charleston, 1861

Self-preservation was the first law of nature with nations as well as with individuals, and the United States would not hesitate to apply this law to the acquisition of Cuba.

The Ostend Manifesto reflected the temperament and the policies of the reckless Soule rather than those of the cautious Buchanan; but Buchanan was beguiled into approving it in the belief that it would endear him to the slave barons and so open the doors of the White House to him, as indeed it did. Mason, the Minister to Paris, appears to have been the Lepidus of the triumvirate. According to one of the secretaries of the legation, "Judge Mason could hardly be held responsible for the document. It depended very much whether it was before or after dinner that he signed the paper."

Public opinion at home as well as abroad was shocked by the tone of the Manifesto, so

much so that W. L. Marcy, the Secretary of State, lost no time in repudiating it. He had instructed the three diplomats to discuss the question of Cuba informally among themselves; instead of which they had drafted a document—and allowed the substance of it to become known—only too accurately described by a New York critic as "weak in its reasonings and atrocious in its recommendations." In spite of this rebuff, the Democrats won the election again in 1856, with the Southerners more than ever convinced that they must have Cuba so as to keep the balance even with the free states. Mr. Buchanan, now President, announced that if he could settle the slavery question, and then add Cuba to the Union, he would be "willing to give up the ghost," and let the Vice-President succeed him. He failed signally in all his ambitions. The slavery question was not settled; Cuba was not added to the Union; and the



Mansell Collection

*The illegal traffic in slaves from Africa to Cuba was largely carried on under the American flag;
capture of a slaver off the Cuban coast, March 1858*

Vice-President did not step into his shoes, but left Washington to become a general in the Confederate army.

During the Buchanan administration, America's relations with the rest of the world were bedevilled by the increase in the slave trade. No one could escape the fact that the illegal traffic in slaves from Africa to Cuba was largely carried on under the American flag. In the year 1859, eighty-five slave ships were fitted out in New York alone. Many of these vessels may not have been American; but, since the United States had refused to negotiate treaties authorizing the visit and search of suspected slave-traders, it was always possible for other nations to juggle with her flag. Any slaver might hoist the American flag, and no non-American warship could touch it. The unco-operative attitude of the authorities was due, of course, to Southern pressure. So considerable was the immigration from the slave states that some districts on the northern shore of the island looked more like American than Spanish settlements. The last thing these new

settlers wanted was to see the traffic in slaves abolished.

The yearning of the Democratic party to extend the area of freedom (and slavery) was well expressed by a young Brooklyn newspaper editor, named Walt Whitman: "It is impossible to say what the future will bring forth, but 'manifest destiny' certainly points to the speedy annexation of Cuba by the United States." The unconscious paradox in these words was characteristic of the times. Clearly, the lust for dominion was not confined to the slave-holding wing of the Democratic party. The poet laureate of democracy was just as susceptible to the rubbish about manifest destiny and geographical predestination as any Southern filibuster.

During his last year in office, President Buchanan tried once more to wean Cuba from her Spanish allegiance. At his instigation, a bill was introduced in the Senate appropriating thirty million dollars, designed as a first payment, to facilitate the incorporation of Cuba into the Union. Republicans accused the

administration of bribing Spanish officials; but, if that was the intention of the Democrats, they made a mess of it. Before the bill could come to a vote, word was received from Spain that the Cortes had voted unanimously to support the government in preserving the integrity of the Spanish dominions. From then on, the "furor" over Cuba subsided. Eventually the fruit would ripen and drop to the ground; but the processes of nature could not be hurried. Spanish sovereignty was an unconscionable time a'dying.

With the election of Lincoln and the secession of the Southern states, Cuba dropped out of the news. Even so, Mr. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State who thought himself more qualified than Lincoln even to direct the destinies of the nation, planned at one moment to precipitate a war with Spain in a last desperate attempt to weld North and South together. Faced by a common enemy, the two sections of the country would forget their differences, and incidentally settle the Cuban question to their mutual advantage. Fortunately, Lincoln was not prepared to embark upon a war with a friendly nation in the hope of solving a domestic crisis. The war between the States dragged on for four years; and, by the time the last Confederate flag was furled, Cuba had been forgotten. Assured of the permanence of the Union, the North was far more absorbed in building transcontinental railroads, and in exploiting the resources of the vast continental domain, than in worrying over the islands of the Caribbean.

To the generation that grew up after the war the notion that the possession of Cuba had once been considered a matter of paramount importance to the United States must have seemed strange indeed. Of what possible value to the United States was the backward, fever-

stricken, slave-holding island of Cuba? Gone were the days of the Ostend Manifesto when the Pearl of the Antilles was regarded as one of the most valuable pieces on the international chess-board. The fact was, as young Henry Cabot Lodge put it, that "our relations with foreign nations today (1889) fill but a slight place in American politics, and excite generally only a languid interest. We have separated ourselves so completely from the affairs of other people that it is difficult to realize how large a place they occupied when the nation was founded."

The languid interest in the affairs of foreign nations applied particularly to the Caribbean. Cuba, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, had degenerated in American eyes into a chronic nuisance. A strong pro-Spanish element in the island wanted to keep conditions as they were, with slavery as the cornerstone of the economy; but the Cubans themselves, waging a desultory yet ferocious war of independence, leaned towards abolition. The United States wished them well, and a few idealists may have wanted to occupy the island temporarily in order to stamp out slavery; but there was no general demand for annexation. When Spain, after persistent prodding by the United States, finally abolished slavery in Cuba, and at the same time agreed to establish

a liberal government, the last possible source of friction with the United States might well seem to have been eliminated. On the contrary, just when conditions in Cuba had begun to improve, the long smouldering war for independence broke out again. Why should it have flared up when it did, and why should the United States suddenly have decided that the moment had come to intervene? These are questions to be considered in the sequel.



JAMES BUCHANAN, Minister to Great Britain, 1853-56,
President of the United States, 1857-61

Radio Times Hulton
Picture Library

(to be concluded)