

A Tale of Two Ships: A Microhistory of Empire, Trade, and U.S.-Spanish Relations in the  
Nineteenth Century

By

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## Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, several events brought the United States into conflict with the nation of Spain. Cuba stood at the center. The dubious fate of a ship in a Cuban port sparked a wave of belligerent rhetoric in the United States, amplified by a sensationalist press, and American policymakers were forced to seriously consider the results of an international war against the Spanish empire. Revolutionaries in the southern Cuban hinterlands clamored for American support, desperate to overthrow the Spanish. The ship, however, was not the *U.S.S. Maine* and the war never came about. The year was 1873, not 1898, and the vessel that served as the center of potential conflict was a private trading vessel named the *Virginus*.

Hired by Cuban émigrés in New York to run arms and ammunition to Cuban insurrectionists rebelling against the imperial control of Spain, the *Virginus* ran from New York, to Mobile, Alabama, to Cuba to drop off men and munitions to the rebels in Eastern Cuba. In 1873, however, a Spanish ship named the *Tornado* captured the *Virginus* in the Caribbean. Many of the *Virginus*'s crew were executed. When news of the killings came to the United States, many clamored for war. Newspaper headlines called for a belligerent response to Spain's brutality, protesters organized across the nation in support of war, and many politicians agitated for an immediate hostile reaction. War, of course, never came about. The newly in power Republican government of Spain, headed by President Emilio Castelar, instead resolved the affair in tandem with the U.S. State Department, working in Washington to decide on an adequate repayment for the executions and the "slight on American honor."<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years later, when the *U.S.S. Maine* exploded in Havana, soldiers on their way to Cuba often cried out "remember the *Virginus*" as often as they called for the *Maine*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States: Spain, 1874*, 1001-1002.

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Bradford, *The Virginus Affair*, (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1980), 1-2

The history of this event has been obscured by powerful trends in the historiography. Despite the importance of the Virginius Affair in shaping U.S.-Spanish relations in the late nineteenth century, the imbroglio receives little to no mention in the three interlocking fields that one would expect treatment of the event: the history of U.S.-Spanish Relations; American history; and Cuban history.

American relations with Spain in the nineteenth century have long been seen as relatively unimportant. Between 1821 – when Mexico established independence from Spain – and 1898 – when the U.S. finally engaged the peninsula in the War of 1898 – scholars have consistently overlooked American foreign relations with Spain. When rarely examined, books on the subject often see U.S.-Spanish relations through a forward-looking lens: examining the events of the 1880s and 1890s solely as precursors to America’s war with Spain.<sup>3</sup> The political, social, and economic conflicts between Spain and the United States, while necessarily leading to the war near the turn of the century, remained contingent and critical events unto themselves and deserve study divorced from 1898. As one of these, the Virginius Affair marks a unique point in the relations between the two nations, divided and eventually reconciled over the future of Cuba.

By examining the history of the Virginius Affair as a contingent event in a history that is often seen as inevitable, this paper also challenges a long running set of themes in histories of U.S. empire. Coined by historian Richard Hofstadter, scholars often term America’s venture into colonial empire in 1898 as a “psychic crisis,” a temporary and unusual event in American history divorced from past precedent.<sup>4</sup> America, he argued, gained an empire almost by accident. By the

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of one of the few books that examines U.S.-Spanish relations in the nineteenth century, see Rodrigo Botero, *Ambivalent Embrace: America’s Troubled Relations with Spain from the Revolutionary War to the Cold War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001). Botero’s treatment of the subject is heavily politically focused, but he provides one of the few extensive accounts on mid-nineteenth century politics between the two powers. Even so, the Virginius Affair receives only one paragraph in his monograph and only as a reference to the oncoming war.

<sup>4</sup> Hofstadter originally coined this term in “Manifest Destiny and the Philippines,” in Daniel Arron ed., *America in Crisis* (New York: Knopf, 1952): 177-200.

early 1950s, when Hofstadter coined the term, economists had concluded that empires were economically backwards, restrictive in a global market of capital. Hofstadter wrote, “any interpretation of America’s entry upon the paths of imperialism in the nineties in terms of rational economic motives would not fit the facts.”<sup>5</sup> In this conception, empire was simply not economically sound. Therefore the imperialist advocates in the United States who saw the acquisition of colonies as an imperial stepping-stone to the China Market were irrational. Once America actually acquired colonies in the Philippines, Hofstadter concluded, Americans swept away from the malaise of imperialism and economic rationality reasserted itself.

Later New Left historians like Walter LaFeber and William Appleman Williams harshly criticized Hofstadter arguing that America held longstanding imperial attitudes.<sup>6</sup> However these new historians tacitly maintained the exceptionalism of 1898 by instead proffering an “internalization thesis”: arguing that the United States between 1865 and 1898 insulated and internalized its manufacturing and trade before bursting out onto the world stage in 1898. This thesis, which corroborates the exceptionality of the 1890s, remains largely intact to the present day in books on U.S. empire.<sup>7</sup> Occurring twenty years before the “psychic crisis” could purportedly take hold, the Virginius Affair suggests the extreme contingency of American imperial expansion.<sup>8</sup> The 1890s did not necessarily require imperial expansion for the United

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>6</sup> William Appleman Williams fathered the so-called Wisconsin school of diplomatic history as he mentored a slew of high-profile revisionist historians. For examples of their work see William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America’s Present Predicament Along With a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> For example, see two of the most high-profile revisions towards imperial history of the past decades: Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). Hoganson, Kaplan, and Pease all reject the economic determinism of the New Left historians but maintain the “psychic crisis” explanation to justify empire.

<sup>8</sup> This approach has been employed recently in the study of British Empire, most notably by Linda Colley. See Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Press, 2004).

States, and the narration of such opportunities stands as the only way to preclude the teleology of an American rise to power in the twentieth century that remains so dominant in U.S. history.

Similar to the United States historiography, Cuban history also suffers from an enduring teleological focus tethered to 1898. For decades scholarship on Cuban history has seen 1898 as one of a few key missed opportunities in history. Older histories paint the 1895 revolution against Spain as a heroic narrative of multiracial resistance against a patriarchal, racist, and oppressive imperial state. New works in the field have nuanced this account, with a series of works emphasizing the importance of both colony and metropole in shaping the Cuban revolution.<sup>9</sup> These new histories argue that Cuban history can only be understood in relationship with Spain, inverting the postcolonial critique of European history that demanded the consideration of colonies when discussing metropolises. While such works have moved past the valorizing teleology of the 1895 revolution, scholars like Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Ada Ferrer, and David Sartorius still remain wary of including the United States in any narrative on Cuba before 1898. Perhaps seeking to emphasize Spain's primacy in the imperial relationship, these scholars almost entirely obscure the role of American trade and politics in the Caribbean before 1898.

This by no means is an attempt to downplay the importance of Spanish or domestic politics in shaping Cuban history, but the ossified national and imperial categories accepted by historians in both the United States and Cuba have obscured the more fluid and interconnected networks of trade, culture, and politics in the Caribbean. To rectify this oversight, this paper adopts and adapts the argument of Matthew Pratt Guterl's *American Mediterranean* to move

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<sup>9</sup> See Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); David Sartorius, *Ever Faithful: Race, Loyalty, and the Ends of Empire in Spanish Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Lisa Surwillo, *Monsters by Trade: Slave Traffickers in Modern Spanish Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.)

beyond national borders and boundaries in our understanding of the Caribbean during this time. Guterl's work, which focuses on southern American slaveholders' imagined connection with global slaveholding, seeks to "recast the nineteenth-century U.S. South as a messy, complicated borderland of sorts between North America and the Caribbean."<sup>10</sup> This conception of the Caribbean as borderlands can be best demonstrated through the very vessels involved in the *Virginus* Affair. By tracing the complex interwoven connection of two ships, the *Virginus* and the *Tornado*, this paper seeks to reveal the broader interconnectedness of empires, nations, and people in the Caribbean during the nineteenth century, and thus challenge the stringent categories held within nationalist histories.

### **From *Virgin* to *Virginus*: Civil War and Revolution**

Ships were the lifeblood of the Atlantic world. While the nineteenth century brought waves of technological advancements – from the telegraph to the steam powered engine – ships still dominated the daily lives of those on ports or in the Caribbean. Between 1860 and 1873, Spain, the U.S., and Cuba would all find reasons to buy and capture warships to further their national interests, necessitated by the changing politics of the Caribbean. Two of these, traded between each of these powers at one point or another, would become the foci for the *Virginus* Affair.

Following secession, one of the Confederate States of America's first policies called for the construction of a navy in order to solidify control over the Caribbean and repel any blockade attempts from the Union.<sup>11</sup> Although the British Parliament tarried over official recognition of

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, 2013), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 85.

the Confederacy, British shipbuilders responded to the call with gusto. On the river Clyde in Glasgow, Scotland shipbuilder Aitken Mansel began constructing blockade-runners and warships for the new Confederate States. Two ships from his docks, originally named the *Virgin* and the *C.S.S. Texas*, would endure much longer than the war they were intended for.

One of these newly built boats would become the very ship captured in 1873 by the Spanish. Built in 1864 by Mansel's firm, the *Virgin* was a single mast, single deck, round stern steamer sold to Miles T. Steele of Louisiana – duty free it might added as well. Acting on behalf of the Confederacy, Steele instructed the ship to sail for New Orleans, where it was restocked as a blockade-runner. Running the Union blockade from Mobile, Alabama to Havana, Cuba, the *Virgin* brought foreign supplies through the Gulf of Mexico and to Confederate outposts along the Mississippi. As the Confederate war effort waned, however, Union ships finally captured the *Virgin* on April 12, 1865.<sup>12</sup> The ship remained in dry-dock for several years, property of the newly unified United States. Events in the Caribbean would soon necessitate the *Virgin*'s return to action.

In 1868, revolution broke out in Cuba. Meeting at the house of wealthy plantation owner Carlos Manuel Cespedes, several dozen Cuban landowners proclaimed independence for their nation from Spain.<sup>13</sup> Buoyed by economic support from Cuban expatriates in New York, these Cuban revolutionaries castigated Spain for their continuance of slavery, excessive taxes, and the isolationist imperial policy enforced on Cuba.<sup>14</sup> Either unable or unwilling to send troops to the eastern provinces, where Cespedes' troops began to seize Spanish forts, the Spanish government instead created a force of native soldiers named the *Voluntarios* (Volunteers). The *Voluntarios*

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<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States: Spain, 1874*, 1001-1002.

<sup>13</sup> Hermino Portell Vila, *Cespedes: El Padre de la Patria Cubana*, (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1931), 72-78.

<sup>14</sup> *FRUS, Spain, 1874*, 844. See also Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8-46.

tried to stamp out rebellion through increasingly violent means.<sup>15</sup> With swift regime changes back in Madrid undermining imperial authority, the *Voluntarios* began to brutally execute any Cubans who sought to support Cespedes' rebels. *Voluntarios* executed women and children in Havana suspected of housing rebel sympathies, forced citizens in the streets of Havana to sing *Viva Espana* on pain of death, and would frequently commit acts of mass violence simply to discourage further rebel support.<sup>16</sup> Horrified by the atrocities, the government in Madrid appointed a new Captain-General to oversee military action in Cuba. Upon arriving in Havana in June, 1869, the *Voluntarios* forced him to leave. Each successive colonial governor essentially became a puppet for the military authority of the *Voluntarios*, and Madrid had no choice but to accept the arrangement.

After two years of fighting and conflict, the Cuban revolution slowly shifted from insurgent war to a more traditional military conflict. Barricaded in eastern Cuba, the revolutionary forces set up a provisional government and elected Cespedes as their president and Cespedes' brother-in-law, Manuel Quesada, as commander-in-chief of the revolutionary forces. The new government even printed its own money.<sup>17</sup> Settled along regional boundaries, the war became a stalemate, continually drawing off Spanish and Cuban resources. To force the issue, many Cubans sought outside aid to bring the conflict to an end. Manuel Quesada travelled to Washington in April 1870 to obtain aid for his soldiers by any means necessary. Under orders from Cespedes, Quesada contacted the "Central Republican Junta of Cuba and Puerto Rico" in New York, led by Jose Morales Lemus and Francisco Adama. Supplied with money and American contacts by the Junta leaders, Quesada contracted James F. Patterson, an American

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Sickles to Hamilton Fish, August 26, 1871. Consular Dispatches from Spain, National Archives at Waltham. Box 3, roll 4.

<sup>16</sup> For a full, if extremely biased, contemporary account of violence committed by the *Voluntarios*, see, *Book of Blood* (1873) by the Cuban Junta of New York.

<sup>17</sup> Bradford, *The Virginius Affair*, 10.

with Cuban sympathies, to purchase the *Virgin* from the Washington Navy Yard for the sum of \$9,800.<sup>18</sup> Signed and notarized documents, later found by the U.S. Solicitor General to discredit the *Virginus*' claims of American protection, falsely recorded Patterson as the sole purchaser of the ship. Outfitting the ship with a crew of international sailors from New York, the newly renamed *Virginus* began one of many treks down to Cuba to outfit and supply Quesada's rebel troops.

### **From C.S.S. Texas to Tornado: Spanish Upheaval and the Continued Importance of Empire**

While 1868 signaled the start of violent revolutionary conflict in Cuba, a more quiet and sedate revolution began in Spain. In September 1868 a loose coalition of Spanish Liberals, Republicans, and moderates with the effective support of the army under Generals Francisco Serrano and Juan Prim overthrew Queen Isabella II and instituted the first system of government in Spain in over half a century not controlled by the Bourbon dynasty. The revolutionaries dubbed the Spanish Liberal Revolution "La Gloriosa" (The Glorious). While the reasons for revolution are always many, lack of economic reform stood as one of the most consistent complaints of the Liberal and Republican parties that inspired the revolt.

Starting in 1864, the Spanish economy began to decline precipitously. Newspapers and agitators in Spain blamed the high tariff put in place by the government for the economic malaise. By 1868, the wavering Queen Isabella had failed to support either the Liberal or Republican platforms for national tariff reform, and instead increased the policy of protectionism

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<sup>18</sup>FRUS, *Spain, 1874*, 1002.

put in place by her predecessors.<sup>19</sup> Responding to the widespread economic downturn, members of the “escuela economista”, a group of liberal economists based in Madrid, began to advocate the institution of radical free trade measures, as had been put into place in Britain almost half a century earlier which lowered or eradicated the high tariffs domestically and in Britain’s colonies.<sup>20</sup> Following the revolution, General Serrano and the prominent leaders from the Republican and Liberal parties looked to the escuela economista for economic guidance.

As the revolutionary ideology behind “La Gloriosa” faded away, the years of 1869-1875 led to swift regime changes in the Spanish government. The Liberal party, which had been temporarily overwhelmed by revolutionary Republicans, returned to power in 1870, following the coronation of Italian Prince Amadeo of Savoy as the new King Amadeo I of Spain. Backed by industrial interests, the Liberal party sought to reinstate a protective industrial tariff.

Amadeo’s Chief Minister of Finance, Laureano Figuerola, was quickly overwhelmed in trying to implement the radical economic policies advocated by the escuela economista, which still found favor among the Spanish populace, while simultaneously pleasing the dominant Liberal party. Attempting to satisfy both, Figuerola instituted a mildly reformed tariff. One American magazine at the time recounted the response to this event, writing:

Since the Revolution, Figuerola, the Finance Minister, has lowered the tariff, and diminished the differential duties in favor of foreign flags. It is too early, as yet, to know what improvements this may have produced; but Figuerola’s mild free trade innovations have been met by furious opposition; and although well meaning, he cannot be called a successful finance minister. He was obliged to retire in the face of the overwhelming difficulty of making both ends meet.<sup>21</sup>

Figuerola attempted to open up domestic Spanish trade to foreign products and investment, however he garnered little support among the powerful players in Spanish politics.

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<sup>19</sup> Antonio Tena Junguito, “Tariff History Lessons from the European Periphery Protection Intensity and the Infant Industry Argument in Spain and Italy, 1870-1930,” *Historical Social Research* 35 (2010), 357.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Harrison, “The Economic History of Spain since 1800,” *The Economic History Review* 43 (1990), 84.

<sup>21</sup> “Spain, and Her Revolution”, *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*, April 1871, 13.

Although Spain's domestic economy vacillated between free trade and protectionism during the decade, this ambiguity did not extend to the commercial interests which most interested American manufacturers and investors in the nineteenth century: Spain's Caribbean imperial possessions. Cuba in particular remained under an extremely high protective tariff during the 1870s, and many Spanish policymakers sought to actively increase protectionism in the colonies as a means of deterring growing American influence.<sup>22</sup> Following the loss of the Latin American colonies in the 1820s, historians have carefully followed the increasingly important relationship construed by the Spanish towards their Antillean colonies.<sup>23</sup> Although the government of Spain would change four times over the decade, the principal aims of Spanish diplomacy in the western hemisphere would continue to be the maintenance of their colonies. Patrolling the waters of the Caribbean for bootleggers and filibusters became the highest priority of the Spanish navy.

Constructed eight months before the *Virgin* on the same river Clyde in Scotland, the *Tornado* was originally named the *CSS Texas*. As its name would suggest, the Confederacy contracted the *CSS Texas* as a steam cruiser raider. Delays in its production, however, led to a two-year postponement of commission.<sup>24</sup> By the time Mansel had fitted the ship for battle, General Lee had already surrendered at Appomattox.

With the Confederacy dissolved, the British government seized the ship lying in dry-dock and sold it to the nation of Chile, embroiled in the Chincha Islands War with Spain. Its Chilean

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<sup>22</sup> James W. Cortada, "Spain and the American Civil War: Relations at Mid-Century, 1855-1868," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 70 (1980), 102.

<sup>23</sup> See, in particular, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); and David Sartorius, *Ever Faithful: Race, Loyalty, and the Ends of Empire in Spanish Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> *FRUS: Spain 1874*, 997.

purchasers renamed it the *Pampero*.<sup>25</sup> Embarking from Glasgow, the newly dubbed *Pampero* never made it to its destination in Chile. The Spanish government, desperate to maintain a semblance of order among its former colonies, made the capture of all warships destined for Chile the highest priority.<sup>26</sup> In 1870, Spanish warships captured the *Pampero* off the coast of Madeira. Again renamed, the *Pampero* became the *Tornado* and Madrid tasked the ironclad as a screw corvette with a mission to patrol the Caribbean. The *Tornado*'s patrol throughout the Cuban revolution mostly took the form of capturing filibustering ships, like the *Virginus*, and would eventually lead to the affair itself.<sup>27</sup>

### **Tracing the Affair: A Microhistorical Narrative of the *Virginus* and the *Tornado***

By 1873 the *Virginus* had already acquired a treasonous reputation among Spanish naval commanders. For three years, between 1870 and 1873, Quesada continued to sail the *Virginus* around the Caribbean drafting soldiers, picking up supplies, and fleeing from Spanish ships that patrolled the waters around Cuba. During this time, the ship acquired a criminal reputation among Spanish policymakers and the commander of the *Voluntarios* in Cuba.<sup>28</sup> The *Virginus* made dozens of treks between Cuba, New York, and Mobile, Alabama. Supplied by locally hired vessels within American waters, the *Virginus* served as the final link in a military supply line leading back to the Cuban Junta leaders in New York. Whenever the *Virginus* sailed in the Caribbean, however, it flew the American flag, a potent protection against Spanish naval commanders wary of starting a war with the United States. Entreaties by the Spanish government for the United States to disavow the *Virginus* fell on deaf ears in the State Department. Spain

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<sup>25</sup> Jack Greene, *Ironclads at War: The Origin and Development of the Armored Battleship*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998), 276.

<sup>26</sup> *FRUS: Spain 1874*, 999

<sup>27</sup> Richard H. Bradford, *The Virginus Affair*, (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1980), 28.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Sickles to Hamilton Fish, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

also made several pleas to the national governments of Colombia and Venezuela, where the *Virginus* often made port, to detain the vessel. International legal precedent was ambiguous. In a time of war, any ship carrying war materiel could be captured as contraband. As Venezuela and Colombia had both recognized Cuban belligerency, the voyages of the *Virginus* would seem to be wartime supplying missions. The American ministers in Venezuela and Colombia defended against these claims by defending the *Virginus* as an American ship, and all such ships had a right to ply their wares anywhere within the Caribbean.<sup>29</sup> In late July, this type of free trade protection offered by the American flag came into hostile conflict with the Spanish empire.

Fleeing from another Spanish warship, the *Virginus* docked in Kingston in early July of 1873 to effect repairs to its overheating boiler. The ship stayed at the port for repairs until mid-October. Before the crew had fully repaired the ship, another Junta supported ship, the *Atlas*, docked in Kingston carrying more munitions and prospective soldiers to be shipped to Cuba immediately.

While the military cargo of the *Atlas* was unremarkable, its passengers destined for Cuba were a curious collection of soldiers. Led by Cuban General Bernabe Varona, nicknamed Bembetta, the soldiers were mostly Cuban expatriates who had joined in the expedition out of loyalty to their revolutionary comrades. Among the Cubans, however, was a lanky white man who styled himself as General William Ryan, a Canadian filibusterer. Ryan was actually Lieutenant George Washington Ryan, an Irish immigrant to Canada who fought in the U.S. Civil War with a New York infantry regiment. Ryan had joined the expedition in New York, dreaming of the potential economic gains made possible by Cuban independence. Another passenger on the *Atlas*, Joseph Fry, had had a different experience in the U.S. Civil War. Fry had sailed blockade-runners for the Confederacy. Replacing another American captain who had fled in

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<sup>29</sup> *FRUS, Spain, 1872*, 140, 156-158.

Jamaica, the New York Junta had hired Fry, who had military experience with ships like the *Virginus*. Outfitted with new repairs, soldiers, and an experienced captain, the *Virginus* began its final trek towards Cuba where it would be finally captured by the *Tornado*.

On the morning of October 30<sup>th</sup>, the *Virginus* departed from the harbor at Kingston and steamed towards Cuba carrying its new complement of men and munitions. While Ryan, who had self-brevetted himself a General in the Cuban army, trained some of the soldiers on the deck, the newly appointed Captain Fry sought to keep the leaking ship in one piece until they could reach the relative safety of Bocco de Cabello and effect more repairs. Six miles from the Cuban coast, within sight of Guantanamo, the patrolling *Tornado* sighted the leaking steamboat.

Captained by Dionisio Costilla, the *Tornado*'s patrols were always on the lookout for blockade-runners in the area, and the *Virginus* was one of the most notorious. The details of the ship had been relayed to Costilla when he first took his post, and his watchmen spotted the ship off the coast, identifying its twin masts and matching twin steamers.<sup>30</sup> As soon as his watchmen informed Costilla of the *Virginus*'s presence, he gave chase. The *Virginus*, battered and overused, had only one realistic option: flee. For several miles, the *Virginus* crept away from the shoreline, trying to lose the onrushing *Tornado* in the open sea. Once within range, the *Tornado* fired four cannon shots across the *Virginus* scoring two hits on the cable lines holding up the ship's sails. With the ship's boilers stoked to near bursting, and the sails losing slack, Captain Fry recognized the impossible circumstances they were put in. He ordered the ship's engines turned off. Ryan, Bembetta, Quesada, and Fry gathered the men under the only realistic protection they had left, the safety offered by the American flag which still flew over the topsail.

Eager to capture the ship, Costilla ordered a boarding party to take the *Virginus*. As Spanish troops swarmed aboard the *Virginus*, Bembetta ordered his troops to stand aside. The

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<sup>30</sup> *FRUS, Spain, 1874*, 1018.

crew and passengers were searched, stripped, and tied down on the deck while several more enthusiastic Spanish soldiers climbed the mast and tore down the American flag which had protected the *Virginus* from capture for years. Raising the Spanish colors on the ship, the boarders stomped on the flag, tearing it, and spitting on the image that had protected those who armed their enemies in Cuba. Seeing this, Ryan remarked to the remaining Cubans, “That means war, boys, if we ever get out of this.”<sup>31</sup>

The following day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, the *Tornado* towed the *Virginus* into the harbor of Santiago, Cuba where, twenty-five years later, the Spanish fleet would surrender to the victorious Americans ending the War of 1898. All of the crew and passengers aboard the *Virginus*, except Ryan, Bembetta, and Quesada, were marched into the city and placed under guard in prison. Bembetta and Quesada were well known to the Voluntarios, they had led Cuban forces for years against Spain. Ryan, however, was a curious case. He titled himself a general, however he had yet to see combat in Cuba. The leader of the Voluntarios, General Burriel, decided that Ryan would suffer the same punishment as Quesada and Bembetta. The only possible American protection for the captured men came in the form of Emil G. Schmitt, the U.S. vice-consul in Santiago. Schmitt’s superior, consul Arthur Young, was vacationing back in the United States, and the young vice-consul had only been working in Cuba for a little over a year.<sup>32</sup> Once he heard of the *Virginus*’s capture, he attempted to meet with the prisoners and devise some strategy to free them. The Voluntarios who guarded the prisoners rebuffed his attempts. For two days, Schmitt tried unsuccessfully to contact the prisoners, and he desperately wired Washington

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<sup>31</sup> *FRUS, Spain, 1874*, 1077.

<sup>32</sup> *FRUS, Spain, 1874*, 1082.

for aid or advice. By the time his first wires got through to the State Department, Bembetta, Quesada, and Ryan had all been tried in a hasty military tribunal as traitors and pirates.<sup>33</sup>

Early on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the three men were led out into the streets of Santiago and executed by firing squad. Unsurprisingly, the execution of Ryan, a naturalized citizen of Canada one of the few white men aboard the *Virginus*, enraged Schmitt and brought new allies in the form of the British consul in Santiago as well as several private British citizens who resided in the city. One of these citizens, a man named Theodore Brooks, received guidance from his own nearby national authority, the colonial governor in Jamaica. The colonial governor ordered Brooks to stop any more killings at once, and gave Brooks the authority of the British crown in any requests made to Burriel.<sup>34</sup> The general, however, refused any entreaties from Britain or America, denying Schmitt and Brooks access to the remaining prisoners.

Only a few days later, the remaining prisoners, still languishing in prison, were informed that every potential soldier who had arrived with the *Virginus*, as well as Captain Fry, would be tried in a court martial to convene the very same day. Three-dozen men were brought to the naval barracks and tried before a court of Spanish commanders. Little evidence remains as to the events at the court, but the tribunal sentenced every man to death for their crimes against Spain. Jose Autran, the colonel presiding over the tribunal, cited a military code passed at the beginning of Cuba's revolution that stated that, "all vessels captured on the high seas near Cuba with men and munitions should be treated as pirates and their crews immediately executed."<sup>35</sup> Not allowed any legal defense, Fry and the would-be soldiers were sentenced to death by firing squad.

Early the next morning, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, Fry and the Cubans were marched to the same wall where Bembetta, Quesada, and Ryan had met their ends. Under Burriel's orders, they

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<sup>33</sup> J.C.B. Davis to Hamilton Fish, November 3, 1873. Hamilton Fish Papers, Library of Congress. Box 314, folder 4.

<sup>34</sup> Consul general in Havana to Hamilton fish, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

<sup>35</sup> Consul general in Havana to Hamilton fish, November 13<sup>th</sup> 1873.

suffered the same fate. Increasingly frantic, vice-consul Schmitt contacted other national consuls in the city, local activists, and waited for any definitive response from Washington.<sup>36</sup> The following day, ten more of the crew were executed. Finally, as a British cruiser alerted by Theodore Brooks pulled into the harbor on November 12<sup>th</sup>, Burriel guaranteed Brooks and Schmitt that no more prisoners would be shot. The damage, however, had been done and the events of the affair played out. In less than two weeks, Burriel had ordered the execution of roughly fifty men, some of them American and British citizens. The ramifications of Burriel's actions would reverberate throughout the globe.

### **Resolving the Affair: International Diplomacy and the Contingency of Personal Politics**

Although the laying of telegraph lines throughout the Caribbean and across the Atlantic in the 1860s sped the process of communication exponentially, information still took days to travel from Santiago to the United States and Spain. Cut cables and the delayed relaying of messages stopped all news of the events in Santiago from reaching Washington until November 11<sup>th</sup>. The U.S. Secretary of State, Hamilton Fish – an aristocratic Whig politician from New York known for his diplomacy in handling international incidents – received the information on Ryan, Quesada, and Bembetta's executions first, informing then President Ulysses S. Grant that an incident had occurred in Cuba. Fish then requested more information on the ship from his consuls in Venezuela and Cuba, who informed him about the *Virginus*'s clandestine missions to Cuba.<sup>37</sup> Before he could hear back, Fish and Grant received a cable confirming the thirty-six subsequent executions.

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<sup>36</sup> Vice-Consul in Santiago to Fish, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

<sup>37</sup> Diary of Hamilton Fish, November 11, 1873.

Fish cabled Daniel Sickles, the Ambassador to Madrid, ordering him to, “protest in the name of the government and of civilization and humanity, against the act as brutal, barbarous, and an outrage upon the age, and declare that this government will demand the most ample reparation of any wrong which may have been committed upon any of its citizens, or upon its flag.” For all of his chest thumping, Fish also included a coded postscript. Decoded by Sickles, the script read, “You are confidentially informed that grave suspicions exist as to the right of the *Virginias* to carry the American flag, as also with regard to her right to the American papers which she is said to have carried.” Considering this, Fish urged Sickles to act in a manner that avoided “all appearance of menace.”<sup>38</sup>

The next day, Fish gathered the ministers from France and England, whose colonial or trade holdings in the Caribbean necessitated their involvement in resolving the dispute, and met with the Spanish minister to the United States, Don Jose Polo de Barnabe, known as Polo. Although the meeting remained unrecorded, Fish recalled in his diary that he confronted Polo about every possible action that led to the executions. The Secretary of State castigated Burriel’s refusal to allow legal aid to the prisoners, the inactivity of the Spanish colonial government in Havana, and the hasty military tribunals. Fish suggested that the errors in Cuba were largely due to the distant imperial rule held by Spain and, perhaps, to ensure the safety of foreigners in Cuba, other nations should be allowed more control within the island.<sup>39</sup> While the consuls from France and England were involved in the process, Fish’s clearly meant to promote more American political and economic involvement on the island. To relieve Spain of the Cuban anti-colonial tensions, Fish sought unfettered access to Santiago in order to effect reprisals. Polo responded noncommittally, saying he would take Fish’s suggestions to President Castelar in Madrid.

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<sup>38</sup> Hamilton Fish to Daniel Sickles, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

<sup>39</sup> Diary of Hamilton Fish, November 13, 1873.

On November 14<sup>th</sup>, Fish met again with the cabinet and Grant. Their first topic was the fate of the *Virginius* and its crew. Again, Fish urged caution claiming that Sickles in Madrid and the General Consul in Cuba would need to relay more information before any definitive action could be taken by the U.S. While giving his arguments, Fish received another communiqué from the island from a member of the American Press Association. The news of the final ten executions finally had finally arrived to Washington. The reporter, however, claimed that Burriel executed one hundred and eleven of the crew, rather than only ten.<sup>40</sup> Similar news came from other periodicals and newspapers throughout the nation.<sup>41</sup> This update prompted immediate action from the cabinet. Before the meeting, Fish had drafted a cable to Sickles ordering the general to leave his ministry if Spain had not provided ample explanation or reparations for the *Virginius* Affair.<sup>42</sup> He had left the ultimatum on his desk, however the false announcement of over one hundred deaths provoked furious reactions from the secretaries. Initially, Fish called for Sickles to petition the Spanish government for an explanation of the affairs in Cuba; he assumed that the Voluntarios illegally executed the sailors under no orders from Madrid. The cabinet, however, urged Fish to castigate Castelar and his ministry for the incident. They agreed upon a thirty day embargo before Sickles should protest the Spanish government's actions, shut down the legation in Madrid, and return to the United States and, most likely, to war.<sup>43</sup>

Before those thirty days had concluded Fish and Polo had negotiated a resolution to the incident, and presidents Grant and Castelar each agreed to resolve the issue without conflict. The Spanish Government, Polo and Castelar agreed, would give an official apology for the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, November 14, 1873.

<sup>41</sup> See "The Capture of the *Virginius*", *New York Evangelist*, November 20, 1873; "The *Virginius* Affair", *New York Times*, November 17, 1873.

<sup>42</sup> Draft of a cable from Hamilton Fish to Daniel Sickles, November 14, 1873. Hamilton Fish Papers, Library of Congress. Box 314, folder 9.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton Fish to Daniel Sickles, November 14, 1873.

desecration of the U.S. flag as well as an indemnity to the families of any American citizens that served as crew on the *Virginius*. In exchange, the U.S. would maintain the legation in Madrid and refuse to recognize the belligerency of the Cuban rebels.<sup>44</sup> Fish and Polo sent a joint cable to Cuba, ordering Captain-General Jovellar, the leader of the *Voluntarios* in Havana, to release the *Virginius* from the port in Santiago. Initially, Jovellar had stood by the actions of General Burriel in Santiago. Jovellar believed that a war with America in Cuba could help his *Voluntarios* in their battle against the Cuban insurrectionists. When the cable came through to Havana, the Cuban general waited for two days, contemplating potential action. On December 11<sup>th</sup>, he finally accepted the terms that had been agreed upon by Polo and Fish. In a public speech, recorded by the U.S. General-Consul in Havana, Jovellar claimed that any noncompliance with the agreement would, “bring on war, war with great power, and war without the aid of Spain...”<sup>45</sup> Jovellar lost any hope of reinvigorating the *Voluntarios*’ war against Cespedes’ Cubans, although his speech serves as a crucial reminder of the interconnected worldviews of these actors in this period.

Although the incident of the *Virginius* Affair took less than two weeks to play out in Santiago, and less than two months for Fish and Polo to resolve, public awareness lasted for several months, albeit with massive amounts of misinformation. News filtered sporadically to the United States and Madrid and numerous false reports colored the actions of both the U.S. government and private citizens. News, both false and true, of the incident would sweep across the United States and Spain, igniting fierce controversy over the role that the United States should play in world affairs. To curtail such rumors, Presidents Grant and Castelar ordered for a joint investigation of the incident, administered by Hamilton Fish.

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<sup>44</sup> Diary of Hamilton Fish, December 8, 1873.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Hall to Hamilton Fish, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

Near the end of December, Fish's son-in-law Sidney Webster, appointed as lead investigator, uncovered the total extent of the *Virginius*'s extralegal dealings.<sup>46</sup> Fish had been aware of the general character of the *Virginius*, informed by his consuls throughout the Caribbean, but he quickly repudiated the ship when Webster revealed the years long extent of its blockade-running. As the days following the executions turned into weeks, the thundering calls for war among the public in America eventually died out.

A few weeks after the affair, one American reporter commented that, "no war between this country and the Spanish Republic is likely to grow out of the *Virginius* Affair. The American people certainly have great reasons to rejoice that war is to be averted, and at the same time that our national honor is to be maintained." The ardent annexationists, the articles continued, "will feel chagrined and not a little disgusted at this peaceful issue of the difficulty, but the country cannot afford to go to war to gratify this insignificant portion of the population."<sup>47</sup> While the sensationalist newspapers turned their attention back to the growing economic troubles of the United States and the prosecution of Boss Tweed, the annexationist fervor that swept the nation largely dissipated. Fish had steered the immediate official action of the U.S. government away from belligerent public opinion. The *Virginius* Affair had been immediately resolved, and any potential military action to be taken by the U.S. or Spain averted.

In a strange way, however, the *Virginius* Affair contributed to the hastiness of the War of 1898. Following the diplomatic resolution of the conflict, Fish called for a reevaluation of America's naval forces. Spearheaded by Secretary of the Navy George Robeson, a long process of technological modernization and improvements of America's aging ironclads began in 1873.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For the entirety of the inquiry, see *FRUS, Spain, 1873*, 990-1022.

<sup>47</sup> "Dissipation of the War Cloud", *Maine Farmer*, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1873.

<sup>48</sup> George Robeson to Hamilton Fish, February 18, 1874. Hamilton Fish Papers, Library of Congress. Box 314, folder 7.

By 1898, the American Navy had been thoroughly renovated, and American naval superiority quickly disabled Spanish military effectiveness with key raids at Santiago and Manila. This relation was not lost upon the agitators for war in 1898. One reporter noted the similarity between the potential conflict in 1873 and the mobilization of 1898, writing, “The fleet at Key West will be augmented within the day by the arrival of several more gunboats... These and the other vessels previously ordered to that point constitute the largest assemblage of war vessels made since the *Virginius* affairs...” Considering the naval might of the United States in 1873, the reporter continued, “although formidable in its day, this aggregation was made up of the old style wooden ships, monitors which had gone through the civil war... Compared with the modern battleships and cruisers of the new navy, it was insignificant...”<sup>49</sup> Fearful of the sorry state of their own dilapidated navy in contrast to Spain’s in 1873, the *Virginius* Affair prompted the construction of the fleet that would eventually smash Spain’s twenty five years later. In its own indirect way, the potential for conflict contained in the *Virginius* Affair would contribute to the eventual war that all sides had so desperately tried to prevent in 1873.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Contingency remains one of the most difficult topics of study in history. While war did not occur in 1873 over the fate of the *Virginius*, the conditions of the affair held enormous potential for conflict. Through peeling back the layers of teleology that dominate the current scholarship on Cuban, Spanish, and American history the microhistorical narrative of the

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<sup>49</sup> “Big Fleet at Key West”, *New York Times*, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1898.

<sup>50</sup> A strange coincidence further illuminates this irony. When the U.S. declared war against Spain in 1898, Theodore Roosevelt mobilized a unit of well-educated young men from New York into his famed Rough Riders brigade. Hamilton Fish II, Fish’s oldest grandson, volunteered for the unit. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1898, Hamilton Fish II became the first casualty of the War of 1898 when Spanish troops shot him outside of Santiago, Cuba; the same city where the *Virginius* had been held and from where his grandfather had helped to deter war against Spain a generation earlier.

*Virginus* and the *Tornado* reveals the narrowness that separates war from peaceful resolution. A missed telegraph, a case of mistaken identity, a single bullet could have led to a transatlantic war in the 1870s. While such a conflict did not occur, the potential suggests the limitations of the valorizing teleologies that dominate nationalist historical projects. By pushing back against the institution of nationalized categories of analysis, the tracing of contingency offers new historical insight into the networks of connection that bound the Caribbean and those involved in the region.

Most importantly, the travels and routes of the two ships in this study reveal the deeply imbricated nature of the Caribbean during this period. Tasked to fight in an American war and ultimately ending up as tools for Cuban revolutionaries and the Spanish empire, the *Virginus* and the *Tornado* served as pieces in the complex borderlands of national, imperial, and revolutionary interests in the Caribbean. While the Spanish-American war in 1898 led to longer lasting political, social, and cultural consequences for Spain, the U.S., and Cuba, myriad conflicts in the preceding decades indicate the importance of historicizing the extranational connections of these polities. In other words scholars should – much like the Maine – “remember the *Virginus*.”