

[Title Screen: French Intervention . . .]

Thank you all for being here today. Thank you, Emma for your introduction, and Dr. Luft for moderating the conference. Though he couldn't be present, special thanks are due to Dr. Jonathan Katz, who guided me through the writing of my major research paper, and Dr. Christopher Nichols, whose comments have pointed out new avenues of research. The paper I'll be reading today is a bit of a departure from the one I presented in my 407 class, but only just a bit. In my original paper I focused entirely on the French perspective, especially a particular worldview which revolved around redemptive colonization. It examined the intervention in Mexico in the light of French colonial experience. This presentation

will look a little more closely at American response, highlighting policy and lawmakers.

[Mexico]

In the predawn hours of May 29, 1867, the beleaguered army of **Maximilian I**, emperor of Mexico, watched as the republican forces under General Escobedo launched a final assault against the walls of Queretaro, Mexico. Running through the streets, Maximilian desperately sought escape, but the stables had already been captured and the gates of the city would soon fall. Finally, with no recourse but to surrender, he drew up a white flag and presented himself to Colonel George Green, leader of the American Legion of Honor, a group of ex-Union soldiers and mercenaries hired out of San

Francisco. Green assured Maximilian that because of a letter he'd received from the United States government, Maximilian would be treated well. But in the ensuing chaos, General Escobedo asserted his authority, and Maximilian was handed over to the Republican forces.

Almost immediately, a flurry of telegrams were sent between Lewis Campbell, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, and William Seward, Secretary of State under President Johnson. Seward ordered Campbell to head from New Orleans to Queretaro to demand clemency for the Emperor. Campbell, two days later, begged for a naval vessel to be turned round to carry him to Mexico. When none could be secured, Seward ordered him to go by whatever means he could, even if it was a French or

English ship. Unwilling to sail under the British or French flag, Campbell refused. When finally he discovered a ship that could take him to Mexico via Cuba, he was warned by his doctor that the trip might be detrimental to his health. At last, in a fit of pique, Campbell suggested that if an ambassador was so vitally needed in Mexico, he would gladly resign. Seward accepted.

Meanwhile, Maximilian and his general were tried by court martial. At issue was a series of decrees which had been made by Maximilian ordering the deaths of captured republican troops. The decision seemed foregone. Though Juarez had assured Seward that he would have liked to have spared Maximilian, his hand

was forced, and when the guilty verdict was passed, Maximilian was sentenced to death by firing squad.

In the early morning of June 19, 1867, a rough cart rumbled from the town. **In back** were Maximilian and two of his generals, Tomas Mejia, **and** Miguel Miramon. The cart mounted a small hill and stopped in front of a hastily constructed adobe wall.

Maximilian descended first, and “unaccustomed to such treatment . . . gave him [Gen. Escobedo] a look of doubt which finally changed to a scowl, descended hesitatingly, and walked mechanically toward the summit of the hill.” Seeing Maximilian walking the wrong way, Miramon called him back, and all three **were positioned** in front of the adobe walls to face the firing squad. After

a brief, defiant speech to General Escobedo, Maximilian lifted a crucifix before him. **Then**, “the sharp crash of the volley came, and all three rolled upon the ground.” His generals died immediately, but Maximilian “repeatedly clapped his hands on his head as if in agony, and expired with a struggle.”¹ Thus ended what has been referred to as both the French Intervention in Mexico, and the Maximilian Affair.

Two years later, former Secretary of State William Seward would stand at the same spot and silently gaze down at the three black, plain wooden crosses which marked where Maximilian, Miramon and Mejia had been executed. There, he listened impassively as General

¹ Albert S. Evans, *Our Sister Republic: A Gala Trip through Tropical Mexico in 1869-70* (Hartford, Conn.: Columbian Book Company, 1870), 235-237.

Miramón's uncle recounted the story of the execution.

The **second Mexican empire** lasted barely three years, from April 1864 until late June 1867, but those years tested American resolve to remain neutral in the face of French aggression, challenged the legitimacy of republicanism, forged an incipient nationalism, and finally underscored the futility of territorial aggression by European powers in the western hemisphere.

Since independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico had been a hotbed of corruption and strife. Sectional violence between monarchists and republicans, clericals and anticlericals, as well as natives and *mestizos*, produced a seething cauldron of unrest that provoked distrust and contempt from neighbors and foreign nations. The

secession of Texas in 1835 sparked a war that left Mexico financially insolvent. The Mexican-American War reduced its territory by half, though an indemnity of \$15,000,000 helped convince foreign backers that loans in default might soon be repaid. A government *coup* in 1858 opened the door once more to war, as Conservative forces opposed the Liberal government under Benito Juárez.

This War of Reforms led once more to bankruptcy. Hoping to negotiate better terms, Juárez announced that Mexico would cease paying interest on foreign loans. A **tripartite alliance** of France, Spain and Great Britain agreed to **capture** Mexican customhouses to secure repayment. Shortly after landing at Veracruz in December 1861, however, **Spain** and Britain learned of the French

plans to invest Mexico with a monarch and withdrew from the alliance. Mexican forces, **despite** a heroic victory at the Battle of Puebla were unable to counter French forces in fixed battles. Guerrilla troops harried the French for nearly three years; despite controlling not more than a thin strip of land connecting the important port of Veracruz and Mexico City, Napoleon III declared victory in Mexico and invited then² Archduke **Maximilian** to take the throne.

For three years, Maximilian struggled to establish his Mexican empire. Popular support, despite the plebiscite which had convinced him to take the crown in the first place, never materialized. Benito Juarez maintained an effective guerrilla war, attriting Maximilian's forces.

² As part of a concession to his brother, Maximilian relinquished claims to the Austrian throne.

Matias Romero, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, successfully lobbied American neutrality and prevented US recognition of Maximilian's government, echoing the diplomacy of Seward to prevent European recognition of the Confederacy. **Facing** severe domestic opposition and the threat of American mobilization, Napoleon III announced he would withdraw his forces in three stages beginning in 1866. The final troops departed Mexico in March, 1867.

The story of the French Intervention of Mexico is often overshadowed by the Civil War. Seward's diplomatic victories are viewed through that lens, and keeping Britain and France neutral toward the Confederacy was no small feat. Yet it was *this* moment

that he thought was his crowning achievement. Indeed, many Americans saw it as vindication of the permanent **foreign policy** of the United States articulated by James Monroe in his 1823 message to Congress. The **Monroe Doctrine** asserted unilaterally that henceforth the western hemisphere was closed to European colonization.

Bismarck called it “insolent dogma” and a “spectre that would vanish in plain daylight.”³ According to an intimate of Napoleon III, the French emperor viewed it as a declaration of war by the New World against the Old.

These two men, William Seward and Maximilian, stood at the intersection of doctrine and application. An **avowed** proponent of Manifest Destiny, Seward

³ Wolf von Shierbrand, *Germany: The Welding of a World Power* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903), 284.

envisioned a world in which the entire North American continent would be enfolded in the embrace of republican institutions, if not the borders of the United States. He saw that “our **population** is destined to roll its resistless waves to the icy barriers of the North, and to encounter Oriental civilizations on the shores of the Pacific.”⁴

According to the historian Gordon Warren, “Like Jefferson, Seward wanted to create an empire for liberty.”

This empire for liberty would not only extend republican institutions, Seward asserted, but also “renovate the condition of mankind.”⁵ Historian Walter LaFeber agrees, but sees Seward's continental ambitions tempered by

commercial goals. Declaring the Monroe Doctrine

4 Ronald J. Jensen, *The Alaska Purchase and Russian-American Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 63.

5 Gordon H. Warren, “Imperial Dreamer: William Henry Seward and American Destiny,” in *Makers of American Diplomacy: From Benjamin Franklin to Henry Kissinger* edited by Frank J. Merli and Theodore A. Wilson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 201

realized, Seward saw American expansion crossing the Pacific into Asian markets, and avowed repeatedly that the United States did not have its eyes on Mexico.⁶ But to members of the Monroe League, the Defenders of the Monroe Doctrine, and the Monroe Doctrine Committee in New York, Seward's policy of **cautious neutrality** seemed cowardly at best.⁷ Wary of provoking France toward recognizing Confederate belligerency, Seward in 1863 announced that he would maintain the “traditional” policy of non-intervention, which, as “peculiar as it may seem to other nations . . . could not easily be abandoned without the most urgent occasion”⁸ For many

Americans, the French invasion of Mexico might seem

6 Walter LaFeber, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Vol. II: The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8-9.

7 Robert Ryal Miller, “The American Legion of Honor in Mexico,” *Pacific Historical Review* 30:3 (Aug., 1961), 231.

8 *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, Part One 1863* (Washington: Government Printing Office), 668.

like “the most urgent occasion,” nevertheless, Seward carefully tempered American response.

Finally, with the **Confederacy** defeated, Philip Sheridan and 50,000 men were sent to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border and offer their services to Benito Juarez to maintain republican institutions. The immediate presence of Sheridan and his troops may have indeed influenced Napoleon's eventual decision to withdraw, but certainly he and his advisers were aware of the military and economic potential of the United States, witnessed by the mass mobilization of millions of men during the Civil War. According to Richard O'Connor, “historians have generally credited Sheridan with a skillful show of bluff and deception along the Mexican border which preserved

the Monroe Doctrine's integrity and warned other intruders from the shores of the Western Hemisphere for many years.”⁹ Instead, the ultimate credit should be given to William Seward's deft manipulation of domestic fervor and foreign diplomacy.

Which brings us **back** to that windswept hill, and the three little crosses which commemorated the fall of the Mexican empire. For most Americans, the death of Maximilian symbolized the victory of republicanism in the New World. Moreover, that it signaled the death of monarchy world-wide. Indeed, Sheridan would witness the final defeat of Napoleon III in 1870, and the United States would assume a belligerent interpretation of the

⁹ Quoted in Matt Matthews, *U.S. Army on the Mexican Border: A Historical Perspective* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press), 44.

Monroe Doctrine which helped ensure its sudden rise to prominence at the turn of the twentieth-century. The **French Intervention**, then, encapsulates the struggle between Old and New, between divergent political agendas, and the ever-present dangers of foreign intervention and entangling alliances.