

Some American Perspectives on French Intervention, Confederate Recognition, and the Saga of the Empire of Mexico

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Feature Essay

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Another Cinco de Mayo has come and gone. Alternatively a celebration of Mexican culture or Mexican liquor, few who observe it—especially among those of the latter grouping of participants—probably know anything of its actual reason for existing, *viz.* the commemoration of the First Battle of Puebla in 1862. For readers of the *Civil War Book Review*, Cinco de Mayo begs reflection on the second French intervention in Mexico (1861-1867) and its influence on the course of the US Civil War. The wealth of studies that have considered the Civil War within an international context, which have appeared over the past twenty years, make this a particularly opportune time to recall Napoleon III’s Grand Design in the Americas.

Don Doyle, formerly of the University of South Carolina, has written on the wider meaning of the conflict for the contemporary world in both Europe and the Americas.¹ Enrico Dal Lago of the University of Galway likewise has written extensively, but has confined his work to comparative studies of the United States and Italy, as both nations exhibited a strikingly similar division between a richer, industrialized north and a poorer, agrarian south.² Other historians have picked up from there, such as Andre M. Fleche’s *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (2012), Stève Sainlaude’s *France and the*

¹ Don H. Doyle, *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Don H. Doyle, ed., *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Jörg Nagler, Don H. Doyle, Marcus Gräser, eds., *The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Don H. Doyle, ed., *American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017)

² Enrico Dal Lago and Rick Halpern, eds., *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno: Essays in Comparative History* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Enrico Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Southern Italian Landowners, 1815-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Enrico Dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Enrico Dal Lago, *Civil War and Agrarian Unrest: The Confederate South and Southern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

American Civil War: A Diplomatic History (2019), and Evan C. Rothera's *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860-1880* (2022).³ These last two works especially provide a profitable focus on the intersection of French, Mexican, and American interests in this period, which are illustrated in some of the resources of the LSU Libraries Special Collections.

Following the liberal victory in Mexico's War of the Reform, Emperor Napoleon III of France acted on his Grand Design of restoring European monarchical rule to the Americas and creating a sphere of Latin Catholic strength to rival the Anglo-Saxon powers of North America. An affront to the Monroe Doctrine, Napoleon took advantage of a United States distracted by civil war to launch his enterprise. Waged ostensibly in response to Benito Juárez's declaration of a two-year suspension of foreign debt repayment, France, Britain, and Spain easily seized the port at Veracruz in December 1861. The British and Spanish quickly dropped out when it became apparent that the French emperor nurtured ambitions beyond simple debt collection and intended to overthrow the Mexican government and install a European monarch in a conspiracy with disaffected Mexican conservatives. The French marched into Mexico City in June 1863 and installed Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria as Emperor of Mexico in April of the following year.

But the Second Mexican Empire lasted a mere three years. Following the close of the US Civil War, the American government surreptitiously supplied arms to the Mexican republican army, which waged a successful counteroffensive against imperialist forces. Battlefield defeats, international censure, and the looming threat of Prussia eventually compelled Napoleon III to withdraw French troops from Mexico early in 1867. Having lost the only force capable of propping up his regime, Maximilian soon was defeated, captured, tried, and executed.

³ Andre M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Stève Sainlaude, *France and the American Civil War: A Diplomatic History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Evan C. Rothera, *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022). All three of these books were reviewed in *Civil War Book Review* in Fall 2012, Winter 2020, and Winter 2023, respectively.



Cartes-de-visite (actual size) of Emperor Maximilian and Empress Charlotte (better known as Carlota, the Spanish version of her name) of Mexico from the Wayne Binning Collection, Mss. 2043, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

It did not take long for the United States to take alarm at the French incursion into Mexico, as the House of Representatives passed a resolution on March 3, 1862, asking for what the government knew of the situation. *The Present Condition of Mexico (1862)* reproduced the correspondence of Secretary of State William Seward with the US ministers to Mexico, Britain, France, and Spain,⁴ as well as with Matías Romero, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, between April 1861, when the outcome of the War of the Reform was still only imperfectly known in Washington, and April 1862, as French forces headed toward their fateful rendezvous at Puebla.⁵ These letters were joined in the text by an equally ample collection of British correspondence documenting the United Kingdom's role in the affair, from its earliest financial claims against the Mexican government in the spring of 1861 to the first murmurings of

⁴ These were Thomas Corwin (Mexico), Charles Francis Adams Sr. (United Kingdom), William Dayton (France), and Carl Schurz (Spain).

⁵ *The Present Condition of Mexico: Message from the President of the United States, in answer to resolution of the House of the 3d of March last, transmitting report from the Department of State regarding the present condition of Mexico* (Washington, 1862) [Hill Lincoln F1233 .U58]

a Franco-Mexican plot for regime change in early 1862, which ultimately split the Tripartite Expedition.

Probably no American was more troubled by the French intervention in Mexico than Nathaniel P. Banks, who assumed command of the Department of the Gulf at the end of 1862 and soon found himself pushed to invade Texas to disrupt both Confederate and French designs along the Rio Grande. The **Nathaniel P. Banks Letter Book (Mss. 2326)**, a letterpress copybook of official letters which he sent from his headquarters at New Orleans between August 1863 and February 1864, often revealed his concerns over the Mexican situation and its effect on the war in the United States. Banks complained of Confederate officers smuggling cotton out of Matamoros and asked the American consul there to enlist the still-operative Mexican republican authorities in its suppression (December 10). He conveyed to William Seward news of French advances on the battlefield, Benito Juárez's abandonment of San Luis Potosi, and his rumored flight to Matamoros and possibly to asylum in Brownsville (December 11 & January 2). The delicate military and diplomatic situation along the Rio Grande especially concerned Banks, as when his soldiers at Brownsville under General Francis Jay Herron had to cover the removal of the American consul at Matamoros: "This act seems to have been necessary, and in no wise a departure from the instructions you received" (January 26).⁶

The fledgling Mexican Empire received a more positive welcome in the Confederate States, which hoped to secure recognition from both Maximilian and Napoleon, a delicate issue discussed among others in the **Henry Vignaud Papers (Mss. 1281)**. Vignaud, a former New Orleans newspaperman and Confederate officer, had been taken captive after the fall of New Orleans in May 1862 but managed to escape to Paris where he entered the service of the Confederate mission under John Slidell. There he corresponded with Eugene Dumez, another expatriate journalist working to secure French recognition of the Confederacy. Dumez had been exiled from France in 1851 for running afoul of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte by editing an opposition newspaper, but he eventually settled in Louisiana where he acquired *Le Meschacébé*, a newspaper in St. John the Baptist Parish, in 1857. A shortage of newsprint compelled Dumez to suspend publication in 1862, after which he sped off to France to undertake adventures both

⁶ Nathaniel P. Banks Letter Book, Mss. 2326, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. It is also available on the Louisiana Digital Library at <https://www.louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/lsu-sc-banks:collection>

personal and diplomatic. Dumez surmised in his correspondence that the foundation of the Empire of Mexico offered the Confederacy a chance of success, but he still knew that recognizing the CSA would only complicate the highly unpopular French expedition. At the end of the day, he considered it foolish for the Confederates to seek an association with Maximilian rather than win the support of European liberals.⁷ A couple of months later, Dumez seemed more hopeful of a Confederate alliance with Maximilian, who appeared privately sympathetic to their cause.⁸

One year later, the matter of French recognition for the Confederate States remained unsettled and still proved most delicate, as attested to in a letter from the **Thomas O. Moore Papers (Mss. 305, etc.)**. Thomas Courtland Manning, an associate justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, wrote to Thomas Overton Moore, the former governor of Louisiana who had taken refuge in Texas, giving his take on the political situation in the desperate closing days of the war. Still clinging to hope for foreign recognition of the Confederacy, Manning perceived the question of US recognition for Maximilian as critical to the matter.

The indications of recognition are very decided. They [all] depend on one event. If the U.S. recognize Maximilian, then I have no [hope] that any foreign power will do the same to us soon enough for it to [be] any good, but the U.S. cannot recognize him without running counter to the wish of the whole nation, and abandoning the former policy of the Government. If they refuse to do it, as they must, [the] Mexican Emperor will receive Mr. Preston, our Minister, who is already in Mexico, France will support Maximilian's act by doing the same.⁹

Manning gleefully (and as it would be, accurately) predicted the US government would adhere to the Monroe Doctrine and rebuff the Mexican imperial representative in Washington: "He will be rejected, and I predict in eight weeks after he leaves Washington Mr. Slidell will make his

⁷ Letter from Eugene Dumez to Henry Vignaud, January 29, 1864, Henry Vignaud Papers, Mss. 1281, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

⁸ Letter from Eugene Dumez to Henry Vignaud, March 24, 1864, Henry Vignaud Papers, Mss. 1281, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

⁹ William Preston of Kentucky had served as US minister to Spain (1858-1861) and attained the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate Army before being dispatched as envoy to Mexico in 1864. A few words in this letter were lost because the side of the page is frayed, but the most likely words are supplied here in brackets.

presentation speech to Napoleon.”¹⁰ As it would turn out, the Confederacy didn’t have eight weeks left.¹¹

With the war over, the upholding of the Monroe Doctrine through opposition to the French intervention in Mexico offered itself as a cause around which a lately fractured country could unite. This sentiment rang forth from the lines of “**How are you Maximilian?, or, Off for Mexico,**” a song sheet published in 1865.¹² A little ditty supporting American intercession in Mexico, it resounded with warnings for Napoleon III and Maximilian, while repeatedly stressing that the United States stood ready to assert itself to defend the Americas from Old World interference. Most significantly, the songwriter emphasized how united the country stood against French intervention in Mexico: “Though Yanks and Rebs have fought awhile, / Their quarrel now is done; / And Maximilian will find out / That they again are *one*.” A nation so recently rent by civil war could find a common cause ready made just south of the border.

The United States ultimately did not intrude militarily in Mexican affairs beyond leaving some caches of weapons along the north bank of the Rio Grande where they could easily be found by republican soldiers; however, Americans still held opinions about the Mexican situation. Gustave Paul Cluseret had seen a colorful military career, first as a French army officer where he had helped put down the June Days uprising, served in Algeria, and fought in the Crimean War, then as colonel of a French Corps fighting for Italian unification under Garibaldi. He then spent two years of undistinguished service as a brigadier general in the Union army, finally being forced out for his tyrannical and overbearing behavior toward his men. After the war, Cluseret published *Mexico, and the Solidarity of Nations* (1866), a scathing if rather rambling indictment of the rationale and conduct of the French misadventure in Mexico coupled with a plea for liberal government modeled on the example of the United States.¹³ Fired by his naturally rude temperament and the zeal of a burgeoning radical (Cluseret later claimed to have been a socialist and briefly became involved with the Paris Commune of 1871), he showed no

¹⁰ Letter from Thomas Courtland Manning to Thomas Overton Moore, March 30, 1865, Thomas O. Moore Papers, Mss. 305, 893, 1094, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., box 1 folder 15.

¹¹ Ironically, both men later found themselves in Mexico. Moore fled there to escape arrest after the war, while Manning later served as US minister to Mexico under the administration of President Cleveland in 1886-1887.

¹² “How are you Maximilian?, or, Off for Mexico” (Philadelphia: A.W. Auner, 1865) [Hill LLMVC M1640 .H69 1865]

¹³ Gustave Paul Cluseret, *Mexico, and the Solidarity of Nations* (New York: Blackwell, 1866) [Hill Rare F1233 .C638]

mercy in his attacks on Napoleon III and didn't fail to remind his American readers how the French emperor designed his endeavor to contain and hinder the political and commercial progress of the United States at a time of national civil crisis.

In the opposing camp stood Henry M. Flint, an American author who argued in *Mexico under Maximilian* (1867), a pro-imperial account which he dedicated to Empress Carlota, that the new French-imposed monarchy had saved Mexico from its troublesome history of near anarchy that the republican government had failed to quell.¹⁴ Flint's preface immediately tied the Mexican matter with the US Civil War, complaining of a Radical Republican chill on free speech that stifled dissent over both the conduct of the American war and judgment of the Mexican imperial regime, which northerners presumed to be another secret battlefield of the rebellion. Flint reasoned that the North kept out of Mexican affairs during the war only for the pragmatic goal of not provoking French recognition of the Confederate States, but with the war over, it was essential that the United States remain neutral, lest Mexico slip back into civil war, reconquest, and partition among the great powers. If left to its own expedients, Flint reasoned, the Empire of Mexico could attain a bright future. Fewer than four months after the publication of *Mexico under Maximilian*, the second emperor of Mexico was shot dead by a firing squad in Querétaro.

Hans Rasmussen received an MA degree in history from Louisiana State University and an MLIS degree in archives and records enterprise from the University of Texas at Austin. He worked as an archivist and catalog librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi until 2006 when he joined the Louisiana State University Libraries. He has served as Head of Special Collections Technical Services in the LSU Libraries since 2013.

¹⁴ Henry M. Flint, *Mexico under Maximilian* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1867) [Hill Rare F1233 .F62]