Fish, Hamilton (1808–1893)

Summary Article: Fish, Hamilton (1808–1893)
From Encyclopedia of Cuban-United States Relations

Fish was a congressman and senator from the state of New York prior to serving as secretary of state from 1869 to 1877.

In October 1868, five months before the Grant administration took office, war erupted in Cuba, pitting some of the planter class against Spanish rule. Known as the Ten Years' War, the rebels never evolved into a fully organized force nor controlled meaningful parts of the island, in part because the insurgents failed to gain significant Creole support with their call for social equality and an end to slavery. The war degenerated into a barbarous conflict, killing soldiers and innocents alike and the destructing of property. In the end, the Treaty of Zanjón (1878) provided some political benefits to the Creoles, and promised an end to slavery. Although President Ulyesses S. Grant often was inclined to intervene, he deferred to his secretary of state, Hamilton Fish, who guided U.S. policy throughout the war. Fish's disinclination to intervene was based upon his belief that the Cubans were incapable of practicing stable government, given the legacy of Spanish colonialism and the fact that too many of people of color, free and enslaved, dominated the island's population.

Immediately upon taking office in 1869, Fish confronted the question of granting belligerent status to the Cuban rebels. Many groups pressured him to do so. A good portion of the U.S. press demanded that the United States intervene on the insurgent side for moral reasons. The revived Cuban Junta in New York City also clamored for the United States to do something. It not only conducted a public relations campaign toward that end but also distributed bonds payable upon Cuba's independence. Among the bond recipients was Secretary of War John Rawlins, a strong advocate of granting belligerent status to the rebels. Fish, however, demurred, arguing that to do so would only encourage the British to intervene on Spain's behalf and result in a greater threat to Caribbean security. Throughout the war, Fish continually battled against the advocates of granting belligerent status to the rebels.

Fish also determined that the United States needed to bring resolution to the conflict for its own security and to protect American economic interests on the island. In June 1869 he instructed Minister Daniel E. Sickles and Special Envoy Paul Forbes to approach the Spanish government with the following proposal: Spain recognize Cuba's independence and abolish slavery on the island; Cuba pay Spain not more than $100 million indemnity (and with congressional consent the U.S. government would guarantee the money); and each side recognize an armistice during the negotiations to end the conflict. Believing that neither side would secure a military victory, and recognizing that prolongation of the conflict would destroy the island and bankrupt the Spanish economy, Fish was confident that his plan would work. He also threatened to grant belligerent status to the rebels if Spain refused to cooperate.

Spain agreed to accept U.S. mediation provided that the Cuban indemnity, guaranteed by the United
States, be raised to $150 million and that the insurgents lay down their arms during the negotiations. Spain was willing to give Cuba and Puerto Rico autonomy within the empire, but not independence. Furthermore, Spain wanted the mediation talks to be held in Madrid, not Washington. Spanish officials knew that the Cuban insurgents would reject the plan. In fact, Spain had no intention of abandoning Cuba. Spain also intended to use the negotiation period as the time to conquer the now-unarmed insurgents. An infuriated Fish attempted to pressure Spain by placing an October 1, 1868, deadline on Spain. It was to no avail. Spain did not budge, and Fish withdrew the mediation offer.

With its good offers rejected, the Grant administration resumed its position of watchful waiting. Grant occasionally suggested that recognition be extended to the Cuban insurgents. He may well have been influenced by the continuing newspaper campaign, congressional resolutions, and general anti–Spanish sentiment across the country. The House Foreign Affairs Committee reflected this sentiment in 1870 with a report announcing that there existed a moral and humane basis for intervention. Influenced by the report, Fish increased pressure upon Spain to abolish slavery in Cuba. The Spanish Cortés's feeble response did not satisfy the Americans. Only the aged and infants gained their freedom. An 1872 law went a step further, but it did not satisfy Fish. While Fish compared the Spaniards who emancipated the Cuban slaves with Jefferson or Lincoln, neither Fish nor his emissaries in Madrid understood that Spanish honor prevented capitulation to foreign demands, particularly regarding Cuba. Spain, however, was not affected by reality. In 1875, the new U.S. minister to Spain, Caleb Cushing, reported that the Spaniards remained aloof to compromise despite the economic and social chaos that the war caused at home.

U.S. relations with Spain and, hence, the Cuban issue, were exacerbated in November 1873 following the Spanish seizure of the U.S. vessel Virginius and the summary execution of its captain, 36 crew members and 16 of the passengers in Santiago de Cuba. Although the incident was subsequently settled, the incident severely damaged U.S.–Spanish relations.

The Virginius affair also served to further incite U.S. jingoism. The public, the press, and several congressmen demanded action, which prompted Fish to make one last effort to resolve the problem. In November 1875, Fish appealed to the governments in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, and St. Petersburg to pressure their counterpart in Madrid to terminate the conflict in Cuba. Save the Russians, who made remonstrances to Madrid, the others demurred. Fish was most hopeful of British support, and most disappointed at its refusal. Subsequently, when Fish's appeal for European assistance became public in the United States, he received a verbal lashing for his supposed violation of the Monroe Doctrine. The Ten Years' War dragged on until the Treaty of Zanjón in 1878.

Despite his diplomatic failures regarding Cuba, Fish left office suggesting a change in U.S. policy. In February 1874 he pleaded the cause of Cuban independence. In writing Minister Cushing in Madrid, Fish noted that that the Cubans themselves aspired to independence and that Cuba should take its place among the family of nations in the Western Hemisphere. Admitting that the United States had great interest in Cuba, he recommended that the island's political future be its own to chart. Although nothing came of it at the time, Fish became the first U.S. secretary of state to depart from the policy course set by John Quincy Adams. See also Adams, John Quincy; Ten Years' War; Virginius Affair!