



# Lincoln Lore

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## LINCOLN'S WORLD: SPAIN

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

The role of Spain vis-a-vis the American Civil War was relatively simple: as a weak European power, she would follow the lead of England and France in foreign policy. As with all the other European countries, weak or strong, however, Spanish public opinion on the American war divided along lines determined largely by internal politics. And as a country with a colonial presence in Cuba and Puerto Rico, she had vital interests in the New World and ran special risks of involvement occasioned by the Union's naval blockade.

Perhaps the overriding theme of the Spanish outlook on the Civil War was indifference and ignorance. This conservative Catholic nation shared few ties with the United States, either of blood or sentiment. Governed by a weak constitutional monarchy, Spain underwent several changes of ministries in the period of the American Civil War and was herself on the eve of internal revolution (which would occur in 1868). Knowledge of events in the United States was hard to come by. The first separately published work on Abraham Lincoln written in Spanish appeared only in 1865, and it was published in Cuba. Nothing was published in Spain itself until 1876, and that was a translation of a French biography of Lincoln.

No other Lincoln titles appeared until the twentieth century.

Like other European monarchies or empires, Spain found the disintegration of the world's model republic generally to her liking. The attitude of General Narvaez, for example, who led the Spanish government in 1864, was described this way by an American in Madrid, "He does not like the republic, and has no political sympathy with the United States." In the midst of America's war one editorial in the conservative newspaper *El Pensamiento Espanol* stated:

In the model republic of what were the United States, we see more and more clearly of how little account is a society constituted without God, merely for the sake of men. Look at their wild ways of annihilating each other's goods, mutually destroying each other's cities, and cordially wishing each other extinct! The Federals declare their enemies' slaves free, and the latter refuse to allow Federal regiments of whites and blacks any rights of war. Both muzzle the press; both vie with each other in reprisals; and at the end of a year of war they are both on the road to becoming barbarians. The history of this model republic can be summed up in a few words. It came into being by rebellion. It

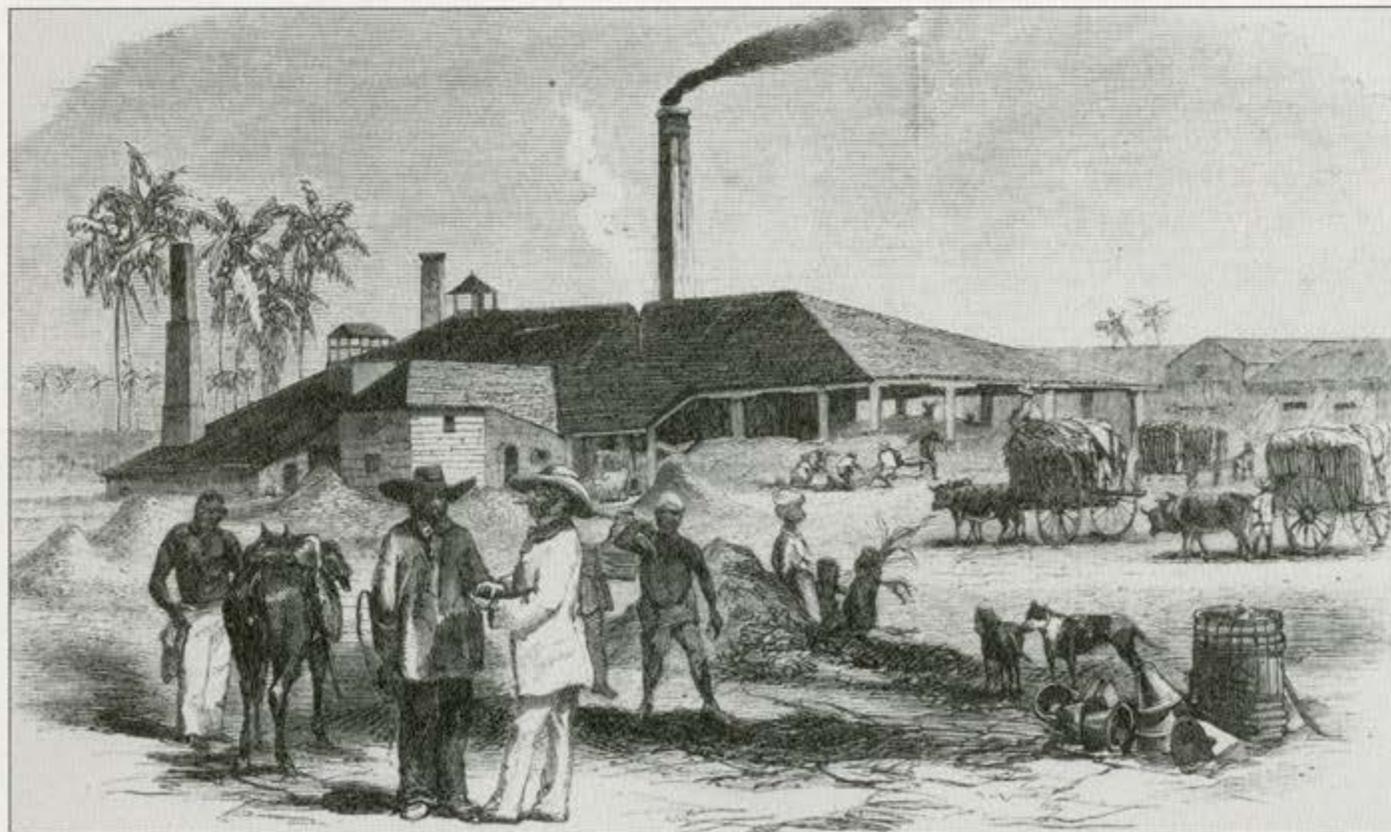


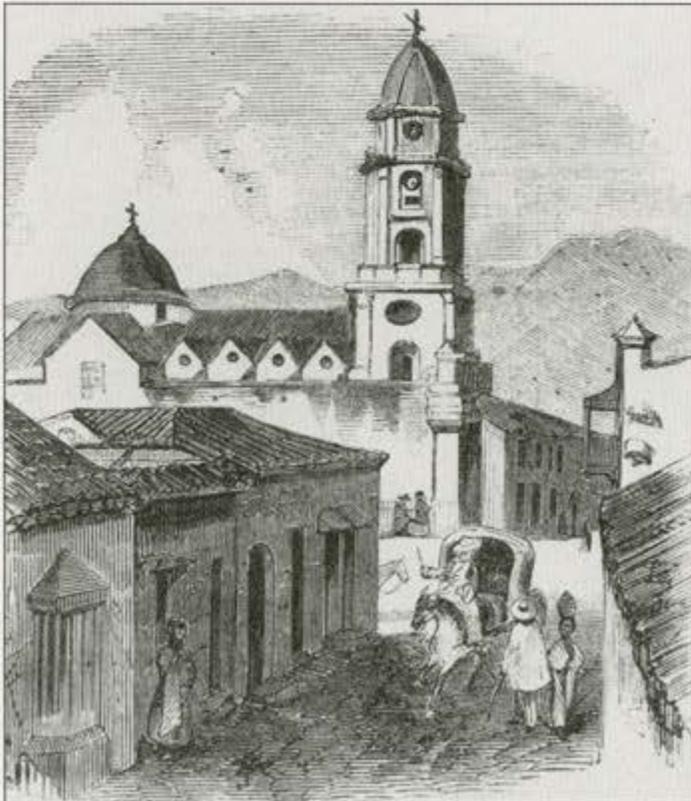
FIGURE 1. A sugar mill in Cuba, 1859.

From the Lincoln Museum



*From the Lincoln Museum*

FIGURE 2. "Oh, ain't we sorry!!!" exclaim the tyrants of the Old World when they hear about secession in the U.S.



*From the Lincoln Museum*

FIGURE 3. Street in Havana, 1859.

was founded on atheism. It was populated by the dregs of all the nations of the world. It has lived without law of God or man. Within a hundred years, greed has ruined it. Now it is fighting like a cannibal, and it will die in a flood of blood and mire. Such is the real history of the one and only state in the world which has succeeded in constituting itself according to the flaming theories of democracy. The example is too terrible to stir any desire for imitation in Europe.

Unlike the government, the nobility, and the church, Spain's liberals, many of them, wanted to see the American republic survive, but liberals did not rule the country.

Those Spaniards in government who examined the American conflict closely surely saw little to choose between the sides. Although the Confederacy was pledged to slavery, it was perhaps more likely, in the event of successful secession, to have designs on Cuba and Puerto Rico. Many Southerners, along with their Northern allies in the Democratic party, had expressed in the 1850s keen interest in the acquisition of Cuba. In his debates with Abraham Lincoln in 1858, Stephen A. Douglas, hardly a tool of the Southern interests in the Democratic party, had said, "The time may come, indeed has now come, when our interests would be advanced by the acquisition of the island of Cuba. When we get Cuba we must take it as we find it, leaving the people to decide the question of slavery for themselves, without interference on the part of the federal government, or any State of this Union." Although the Republicans disavowed ambition to acquire Cuba, they were an antislavery party, and their platform thus raised fears of hostility to the institutions of the two Spanish islands. Both the Confederacy and the Union were republics, besides; realistically, there was little for Spain's established powers to admire on either side.

Nor did Abraham Lincoln seem very appealing from his record. One student of Spain's views on the American Civil War, Professor James W. Cortada, has described the new president's image this way:

Lincoln became the object of Spanish attention during his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. At that time, the

future president expressed the widely held view that Cuba would someday become part of the United States. But he refused to work for that inevitable day, completely rejecting President James Buchanan's policy. Like many other Americans, Lincoln wanted to see slavery eliminated from Cuba, yet felt that the islanders would have to determine their own future and take the initiative in abolishing this institution.

In truth, Douglas' views, printed along with Lincoln's in the section on the debates in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, have been mistaken here for Lincoln's. Lincoln did not express belief in the inevitability of Cuban annexation in the debates — or anywhere else that I am aware of.

It is true, of course, that Lincoln wanted all men everywhere to be free, but whether he thought "the islanders would have to determine their own future" is not altogether clear from the meager record left us on this question in Lincoln's collected works. One thing is clear, however, and it would doubtless have been so to any Spanish government official who took the trouble to investigate: Lincoln held fairly horrifying views on Spain.

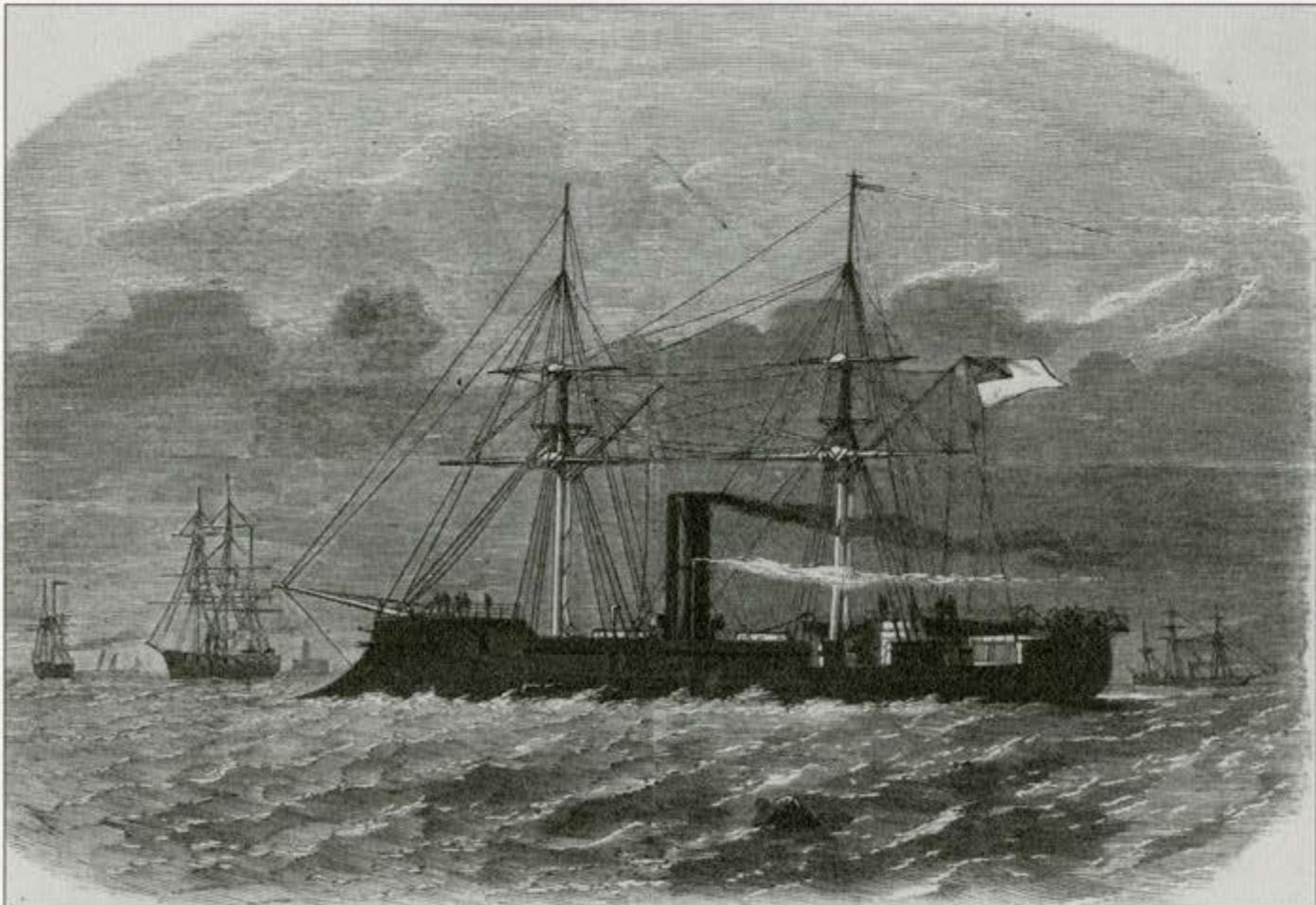
In a speech in the Whig presidential campaign of 1852 Lincoln discussed the recent execution of some fifty Americans by the Spanish colonial government in Cuba. A group of American adventurers, mostly veterans of the Mexican War, had joined a filibustering expedition led by a Venezuelan named Narciso Lopez, who wanted to overthrow the Spanish government on the island. They set out from New Orleans in 1851 and quickly ran into deep trouble in Cuba. When a rearguard of fifty men was captured by Spanish authorities, they were tried by a military court and executed within three days. President Fillmore, like Lincoln a Whig, admitted the right of the Spanish government to act thus against invaders. Lincoln defended Fillmore's policy in his speech, but in the course of doing so Lincoln also said of the executions of the Americans:

Their butchery was, as it seemed to me, most unnecessary, and inhuman. They were fighting against one of the real governments in the world; but their fault was, that the real people of Cuba had not asked for their assistance; were neither desirous of, nor fit for civil liberty.

Lincoln had, then, denounced Spain's as "one of the worst governments in the world," and he had expressed his opinion that even the "real people of Cuba" were unfit for civil liberty.

Such views of Spanish culture were common in Lincoln's day and Lincoln posed less threat to Spanish colonies than his Democratic political rivals, but there was cold comfort in that to any sensitive Spanish patriot.

As Lincoln's prejudices may suggest, American interest in Spain remained low throughout the Civil War, though some popular excitement was aroused by a revolt against Spanish authority in Santo Domingo that began in 1863. The United States government also ran into some difficulties over the pursuit of alleged blockade-runners in Cuban waters, leading Spain to claim a six-mile territorial limit. In his annual message of December 8, 1863, President Lincoln mentioned the dispute and proposed "in an amicable spirit to refer it to the arbitrament of a friendly power." Spain was well served in Washington by her minister Gabriel Garcia y Tassara. Lincoln's appointees in Spain proved less fortunate. Carl Schurz, a former German revolutionary, hated the old-fashioned aristocratic Spanish court. Gustave Koerner, a German-American leader from Lincoln's home state, replaced Schurz in 1862 and showed no particular interest in the job. Antislavery politician John P. Hale was the last of Lincoln's appointees there. Continuity and expertise, however, were guaranteed at the American mission in Madrid by the secretary of legation Horatio Perry, a Harvard graduate who had married a Spanish poet. Like many career



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 4. The Confederate steamer *Stonewall*.

diplomats, Perry saw his task as one of protecting American interests, and he thought mainly in terms of national strength. He crowed in 1865 when the triumphs of the Union armies created a diplomatic atmosphere in which "the *power* of the Republic lies heavy on the brain of European Statesmen."

Relations with Spain remained essentially amicable to the war's end. In 1865 there was a diplomatic incident involving the use of the Spanish port of Corunna for repairs of an ironclad vessel called the *Stonewall* destined for Confederate service, but the ship eventually sailed without serious incident. The assassination of Lincoln presented the Spanish government with a minor problem, and diplomatic manners dictated some official expression of sympathy from Queen Isabella II despite the dislike of the United States' form of government by Spain's ruling classes.

The queen quickly sent a minister to express her sympathy to the American charge d'affaires and then an official despatch was sent to Mr. Tassara in Washington to be communicated to the U.S. government. The liberal opposition party in the Spanish parliament hoped to take the initiative in prompting statements of sympathy to the U.S. The government party responded that such was not a party matter but rather a matter of universal sentiment in the country. A ministerial deputy named Claros managed to put a government spin on the debate by saying:

It is evident that this poison which corrodes the entrails of European societies has infiltrated itself beyond the Atlantic, and that it reaches all peoples. Consequently, if in the past we are afflicted by the crimes committed in Europe against crowned heads, on this occasion the future ought to afflict us still more, seeing that we discover the disease to have extended to all humanity. We who glory in being

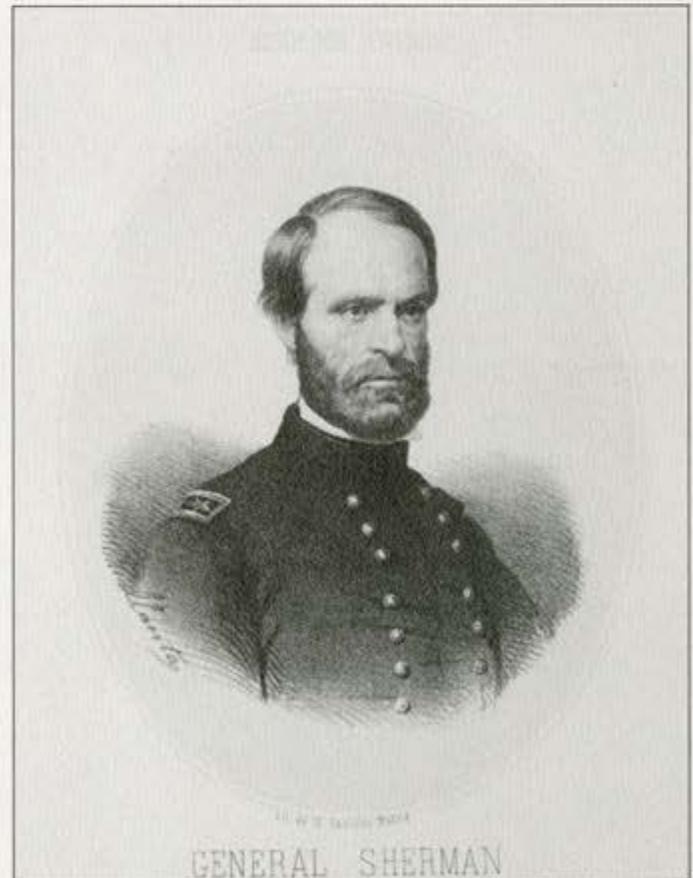
partisans of the principle of authority, we ought to feel this more than any. In fact, we believe that the principle of authority is a species of reflex of the Divine power — understanding this phrase in its right sense — in the sense in which it seems to me it cannot be denied by anybody, considering the public power in its august social manifestation, not precisely in kings, as is vulgarly believed, but in whomsoever represents it socially and legitimately, is sacred.

If the ingenious Mr. Claros almost managed to associate sentiments of grief over Abraham Lincoln's death with the divine right of kings, other Spaniards expressed more conventionally liberal sentiments. Manuel Mayol, of Jerez de la Frontera, identifying himself and his fellow townsmen as "political co-religionists" of the United States, united in "the cause of liberty throughout the world," wrote Andrew Johnson, condemning "the southern planters" and "the malevolent and cruel instincts of the unworthy merchants of human flesh." Providence, according to these Spanish antislavery liberals, had "placed the cause of humanity" in the hands of the U.S. The "frankness and loyalty of good liberals," however, led Mayol and his fellow citizens to remind Johnson of the "symptom of pain" that came with "remembering the hesitation of the great republic at the beginning of the war, and the excuses after victory was gained. Justice is tarnished by shadow, though they be cast by convenience; slavery is the negative of manhood; and if at first there was a moment of hesitation, be resolute, quick, and firm at last. Human rights are worth more than riches; let there be no more slaves for a single day, although great but passing calamities might be the result."



Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection,  
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FIGURE 5. "Roberto Lee" as Madrid saw him.



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FIGURE 6. William T. Sherman as Madrid saw him.