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THE PURCHASE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

W.H. Seward's Vision of Economic Strategy in the Late 19th Century

During my research on American foreign relations in the mid-nineteenth century and on the role played by secretary of State William H. Seward, I came across the fairly comical episode of the Purchase of the Danish Virgin Islands which, somehow, seems to epitomize Seward's complexities as a practitioner and a theorist of American international power politics. For, from a rational point of view, the reasons for acquiring them seem so luminous now that it defies logic to determine why he failed so miserably to convince his contemporaries. In an attempt to go beyond mere anecdote, this paper will try to show how the purchase of the Danish Virgin Islands fitted into Seward's plans concerning the future of the United States, how his views about overseas expansion necessarily encompassed the Caribbean basin, and how he produced an ideology of economic expansion which should govern American Caribbean policy. Hence, while he opened new perspectives and was a daring pathfinder, I will also try to show how far Seward was at the same time an heir to the mercantilist tradition and to then "traditional" views about political gravitation. This lack of clear ideological definition resulted, paradoxically yet logically, in his being out of tune with most of his contemporaries. As such, he appears as a point of uneasy juncture between pre-Civil War expansion seen as territorial and contiguous, and economic-commercial expansion as overseas and colonial.

The study of the failed attempt to purchase the Danish Virgin Islands is exemplary in many respects; for example, if it is pitted against the background of a general and projected American involvement in the Caribbean, one question arises: what part did it play in the definition or consolidation of an American Caribbean policy? Moreover can it also be interpreted as one stage in the project of ousting the Europeans from America, territorially, politically, and economically? The case of the Danish Virgin Islands is also an example, among others, of bilateral policy with a European nation which symbolized a de facto decadent old world presence in America; by purchasing Danish possessions, Seward was forwarding republican ideals while acqui-

ring necessary strategic islands for the progress of American commerce. Somehow, the United States was yet again disturbing the status quo in the Caribbean by showing its willingness to grasp at the weakest European power—Denmark—waiting in due time to obtain other bits of the Spanish and, why not, Dutch, French and British empires in the the same place.

Boosted by the tacit—and then recent—recognition by France of American moral and political leadership in Latin America, wasn't Seward voicing opinions about American development in the region which aimed at localizing and temporalizing the Monroe doctrine by redefining it in economic terms? Seward—the “prince of players” in what a historian has called the “unfolding drama of the new empire”¹—was trying to accelerate political gravitation but in an era, of public lack of interest in foreign policy in general and territorial expansion in particular. In terms of policy-making, the scholar is faced with a fascinating example of bad timing and ill assessment of the country's aspirations.

The Negotiation Process

From a geographical perspective, before the American Revolution, Europe and especially Great Britain had so to speak preempted the Caribbean Basin and even the Atlantic frontage, as any map of North America after the Seven Years War showed: from Labrador (British) to Florida and Western Mississippi (Spanish) down to the Bahama Islands via the Bermudas off the Carolina coast to Jamaica (British), and the Leeward and Windward Islands, the land and the sea was British. Even Cuba and Hispaniola seemed sandwiched, staunchly and stubbornly preserved by the Spaniards. As seen from a geopolitical perspective, when the United States stepped into the game, the situation was grim indeed for almost all the major European nations and some minor ones held territory in the Caribbean; moreover Britain and Spain held the key to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Central American and even Southern American trade (as strongholds or simple stations). Moreover when added to the fact that Americans of the early Republic were conscious of these islands' proximity, which used to be natural areas of trade in colonial times, it seems almost inevitable (and it was felt in some circles that this was the case) that American diplomacy would therefore be concerned with acquiring islands because of the various obstacles posed to free trade by the European belligerents in the early nineteenth century thus replacing Britain and others,

1. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire. An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 24. Cf. also, LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913*, Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1993.

especially Spain, the weakest, yet the possessor of the prize island of Cuba (in terms of trade and strategy). Hence, in the case of Florida, John Quincy Adams's concept of political gravitation was applied and might just as well be called "psychological gravitation;" moreover, there then developed a discourse on the real and potentially lethal menace of the British navy which could lock in the Caribbean sea.

After the calamitous war of 1812-1814, which had proven yet again Britain's maritime supremacy, it became obvious that footholds were necessary; this can be one explanation for the long-lived strategic concern with the Caribbean and the emergence of national security arguments as a justification for extra-territorial expansion as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. LaFeber's words about continental expansion could easily be applied—less consciously—to the Caribbean: "the U.S. annexed a continental empire by undermining, economically and ideologically, British, French, Spanish, Mexican, and Indian control and then taking final possession with money, bullets, or both." [LaFeber, *The New Empire* 2] Until the Civil War, the Caribbean "gravitated" to the United States for cultural and economic reasons, both linked to the divergent sectional interests: the South was "pulling" the Caribbean while the North was pushing. Because of the supposed Southern conspiracy to extend slavery, even Seward, who believed in political gravitation, had opposed any addition of slave territory in the Caribbean basin.²

From a comparative perspective, which deserves to be developed elsewhere, the Caribbean's meaning was therefore whether or not to serve American interests. This relative position hides however whatever designs the independent nations of the Caribbean had or did not have, and gives the impression that in terms of interest, they all had the same value and were globally taken. However, if the Danish Virgin Islands were mere specks on the Caribbean Sea, they also fell under a peculiar category: not strategically essential, nor even dangerous to American security and prosperity, yet incidentally desirable because nothing else was available. Seward was, so to speak, trying to erect an "empire by default," offering to purchase and annex any island which was not held by a powerful nation—like Britain—or a stubborn nation—like Spain. Was this sufficient to call his bargaining and chess-playing a policy?

Why choose the Danish possessions? This tranquil group of islands offered several advantages. The one most often put forward by historians, following the opinion of Seward's son and secretary Frederick, is the strategic

2. Frederic Bancroft gives a clear account of Seward's refusal to encourage expansion in the Caribbean before the Civil War because he feared the extension of slavery, in "Seward's Ideas of Territorial Expansion," *North American Review* (CLXVII, July 1898), 79-98.

argument in view of the recent experiences with Confederate blockade-runners during the War. As summed up by Van Deusen, island stations were "essential for naval observations, for police, for fleet concentrations in war, and for protecting American commerce when the nation was at peace."³ There are however other arguments which can give a picture of the context and of Seward's personal ratiocination.

First, the psychological argument, stressed by some of his contemporaries, like Gideon Welles, then Secretary of the Navy in the same administration as Seward, whose Diary was quoted by Bailey as proof of the general opinion in Congress and political circles about Seward's appetite for conquest (Bailey chose to describe Seward as "an expansionist of hemispheric voracity") : "Secretary Seward, who was being roundly condemned for remaining in the Cabinet, doubtless felt that he could improve his own political standing and strengthen the Administration by a sensational program of annexation" [Bailey 392]. This picture of Seward as a second-rate Machiavelli using foreign relations as a derivative does little justice to his political ability in that particular instance; although he knew that expansion was no longer in the mood he still tried to forward his ideas as long as he could, before seeing all his projects drowned in the Senate one after the other. Van Deusen echoes, although in a more sympathetic manner, the psychological dimension by suggesting that Seward had totally identified his personal status vis-à-vis posterity with the nation's; in a letter to Bigelow, then Minister to Spain, a disenchanted Seward regrets "how sadly these domestic disturbances of ours demoralize the national ambition."⁴

The psychological verges on the nationalist when it comes to analyzing why Seward made overtures to Denmark and not to another European power, like France for instance. According to Bancroft, Seward was spurred by the memory of the attitude of the inhabitants of British, Spanish and French islands who openly supported the Confederate cause, with the tacit and unofficial support of their authorities, while the Virgin Islanders had been most friendly to the United States [Bancroft 480]. Such arguments were also put forward to justify the opportunity of purchasing Russian North America.

3. See Frederic Bancroft, *The Life of William H. Seward*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1900), 480; Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 5th ed. (New York: Appleton, 1955); Julius Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980); and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 526. One should also refer to Charles C. Tansill's monograph, *The Purchase of the Danish Virgin Islands* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1932) and the personal account made by Seward's daughter, Olive Risley Seward, "A Diplomatic Incident," *Scribner's Magazine* 2, 5 (November 1887): 585-602.

4. Seward to Bigelow (October 8, 1868), quoted in Van Deusen, 530.

Lastly, there is one fundamental argument which is seldom noticed in spite of the immediate context, that of American triumph over France in Mexico: Seward surely had at the back of his mind the old paradigm of the United States benefiting from European troubles, namely here the conflict between Denmark and Prussia, leading to the weakening of Denmark (which lost its Schleswig-Holstein peninsula to Prussia): while national pride worked against the cession to the United States and slowed down negotiations, the financial needs of the Danish government worked the other way to accelerate payment of money that the United States, as represented by Seward, seemed so eager to part with. One can safely say that if not for the Danish domestic and diplomatic situation, the United States would never have been offered the islands, or at least not so soon [Tansill 26]. As Tansill demonstrates, the Danes saw their interest through American need, combining short-term strategic concerns and long-term strategies which were political and commercial.

Dealing with Denmark

Negotiations opened—secretly—with the Danish Minister to Washington, General Raasloff, as early as January 1865, before the end of the Civil War. For Bancroft, and Tansill, Lincoln had given his tacit approval [Bancroft 527]. In January 1866, Seward departed on a vacation tour of the Caribbean, officially to rest after the trials of the attempted assassination; he was to take advantage of warmer weather and no doubt satisfy his personal taste for travel. It should be remembered that this tour was the first of its kind by an American Secretary of State. It gives symbolical value to Seward's role in opening the U.S. internationally with the highest representative of the Executive, after the President, touring abroad. Yet, this 'mélange des genres' probably explains—at least partly—why Congress was so hostile to all the projects he brought back with him. He arrived on a U.S. battle-ship,⁵ but on a private journey, in the Danish islands where he stayed from January 9 to 12, 1866. There he met Danish officials and started informal and secret talks about purchasing the islands St Thomas, St Croix or Santa Cruz and St John, which he visited and found convenient, especially St Thomas (because of the desirable port of Charlotte Amalie), described by Admiral Porter as a "Gibraltar of itself."⁶ Considering the opinion the Virgin islanders had of their identity and the long tradition as a free port, it is inevitable that Seward understood what commercial advantages could be drawn.⁷ An indication that this explanation was as

5. He sailed on the *De Soto*, named after one of the Spanish explorers of North America, creating unwittingly an interesting symbol, that of an American statesman making *De Soto's* reverse journey, and probably for the same reasons, which were discovery and conquest.

6. See Tansill's analysis of the navy report on the islands in *Purchase*, 35-36.

valid as the strategic interpretation, is the lobbying by some North-East businessmen in favor of the acquisition. His tour also led him to the Dominican Republic, to Haiti and to Havana.⁸ On his return to Washington he resumed talks with Raasloff with Andrew Johnson's approval, although the Cabinet was divided on the issue. Negotiations were still secret but official over the purchase of St Thomas and St John. As many historians report, the whole negotiation process was a long haggling over the price demanded by Denmark and the question of organizing a plebiscite among the population of the islands, which Seward objected to on account of the delay and the possible rejection of the American annexation plan by the people. The treaty was eventually signed on October 24, 1867, ratified by Denmark in January 1868 while it was submitted to the United States Senate where, in spite of the President's reiterated queries about it, in spite of the Danish minister's active lobbying and the Secretary of State's cajoling, it was laid on the table by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Hence, in Bailey's and Bancroft's mind, the cruise in the Caribbean was imagined in the wake of his masterful resolution of the Mexican affair: "After studying the situation at first hand, he entered with negotiations for a base, or seriously contemplated doing so, with Spain, Sweden, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Denmark." [Bailey 393] Paolino has demonstrated that Seward's design were not mere caprice and that he had carefully studied the forces in the Caribbean only to realize that the simplest solution was to acquire territory which was offered—namely the Danish Virgin Islands and the whole or only part of Santo Domingo—instead of bullying others into giving up any territory to the United States: I am thinking here of the French reticence to part with their islands or Spain's adamant refusal to do the same. Inversely, when the Swedish authorities heard that Denmark was negotiating for her islands with the United States, they followed suit by offering the island of St Bartholomew.

As for Julius Pratt, he underlines the military argument, the "need for insular naval bases in both the Caribbean and the Pacific." What matters most here is not that he was partly wrong about Seward's motivations but that he stresses the analytical necessity to link the forays into the Caribbean with the same openings in the Pacific. In Seward's mind both sides went together. This explains why Seward also decided to open and conclude negotiations with

7. Bancroft ironically recalls that the inhabitants of the islands who were devoted to their island as a free port feared the American tariff policy (484 and 490).

8. He stayed in the Virgin Islands from January 9 to 12 and visited the four main islands: St John, St Croix, St Thomas; he stayed in San Domingo (Dominican Republic) on the 14th, in Port-au-Prince (Haiti) from January 16 to 17, and in Havana (Cuba) from January 20 to 23; he finally returned to the United States on January 28, 1866.

Nicaragua over the future isthmian passage: unlike Pratt, who believes that the question of the canal lost much interest to the mind of the Americans because of the construction to be completed in 1869 of the first transcontinental railway, Seward, who was always one move in advance, had stopped pressuring for the railroad (he had devoted lengthy interventions in the Senate the need to construct a railroad) and turned to the acceleration of the construction of a canal which he did not see as redundant with the transcontinental. Once again, he was showing that the priority was international trade and domination of vital trade routes, adopting some of the views of British statesmen who stressed the vital importance of a Mediterranean canal just as he stressed the necessity of an American isthmian canal.

An Ill-Timed Project

Back in the United States both the Senate and the House objected for reasons of principle and of political factionalism. First, Seward had not been commissioned to negotiate for further territorial acquisitions. The Treaty with Russia over the cession of Russian North America had just been ratified and was being discussed in the House, when news leaked out that Seward was negotiating for overseas acquisitions (in the Caribbean and in the Pacific) to be followed by the presentation of the treaty to Congress. From a psychological point of view, which in this particular instance weighed on the decisions taken,⁹ Seward had recklessly bypassed Charles Sumner's caveat concerning Alaska as the last way-out territory to be purchased and during the discussion over Alaska in the House, Representative Washburne had warned the Executive against any new acquisitions.¹⁰ Now, the price agreed upon was ridiculously high as compared with the price paid for Alaska (7.5 million for a few islands did not fare much in view of the same price—7.2 million—paid for a much larger territory).

Congress also objected to the general climate of secrecy which had surrounded the negotiations. Meanwhile, the treaty with Santo Domingo which he had negotiated "for purchase or lease of Samana Bay" in the northeastern corner of the island was left to die in the Senate, just like the Danish Virgin Island treaty because of the *fait accompli*. What they had accepted concerning "Walrussia" was not unbearable. Such vigorous executive action was all the

9. Cf. Richard H. Immermann's psychoanalytical approach as defined in "Psychology, Personality, and Leadership," *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 151-162.

10. *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 40th Cong., 1st Sess. (November 25, 1867), 792.

more difficult to accept since the Administration had confiscated the powers of Congress during the War, under the influence of Lincoln and Seward. Now that the War was over, Congress had been reinstated in its power and was very jealous of anything that might look like an infringement by the executive. So Seward's power to negotiate treaties was bound to be checked by Congress and much cajoling and persuasion was needed. In the case of Alaska, Charles Sumner, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had managed to win the day because he was convinced that this was justified; in the case of non-contiguous, ridiculously small territory and expensive islands, he and Nathaniel P. Banks, his counterpart in the House—though sympathetic to Seward—were not.

This attitude was not confined to Seward, whose plans suffered from Congressional hatred of Andrew Johnson, for when Grant came up with a Treaty annexing Santo Domingo, he was welcomed in the same way and his treaty, rejected by a 28 to 28 vote on June 30, 1870. Some Senators, as Pratt remarks “warned against the dangers, inherent in an effort to extend American institutions into a climate, physical and human, where they could not flourish” [Pratt 172]. What is also fascinating about this vote is how many senators did approve of the treaty, which goes against the general view that the mood was not for expansion: in particular instances, the Senate had voted for expansion (the case of Alaska and the acquisition of the Midway Islands) and a strong minority was in favor of the acquisition of Santo Domingo. The difference between the case of Santo Domingo and the Virgin Islands might be that annexing Cuba or Santo Domingo had long been contemplated.

The study of the failed attempt to purchase the Danish Virgin Islands should be set in the context of a general and projected American involvement in the Caribbean, bearing in mind the recent “recognition” by France of the validity of the Monroe Doctrine during the episode of Maximilian's Mexican empire. Boosted by this tacit recognition of American moral and political leadership in Latin America, Seward voiced opinions about American development in the region which localized and temporalized a doctrine by redefining it in economic terms.¹¹ The end of the Civil War had lifted Seward's misgivings as to a Southern conspiracy for the extension of slavery. There was also pressure by economic lobbies for the extension of American control over raw material producing areas, especially of sugar, while chronic political instability in the region was at once a fact and a readily usable argument, as appears in the opening lines of the bill for the acquisition of Cuba in 1859 : “whereas the geographical position of the island of Cuba invests it with a

11. Cf. Dexter Perkins, *History of the Monroe Doctrine* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963) or the chapters devoted to the Mexican affair in Bailey.

commanding influence over the large and annually increasing trade, foreign and coastwise, of the Mississippi Valley; and whereas that island, in its existing colonial condition and proximity to the United States, must continue a constant source of injury and annoyance.”¹² Such arguments were twisted and used to fit in with any of the islands, whether independent or under foreign rule.

In spite of Seward’s universally professed belief in peace and expansion using peaceful means, the international partners of the United States could not ignore the fact that the United States had emerged from the Civil War a much more powerful military nation than it ever had been. However, its navy was in poor shape as deplored by Seward himself thanks to the action of the Secretary of the Navy who disposed of it as fast as he could. Yet for her partners, the United States was actually a power, albeit regional, but potentially annoying in what was not yet called her “sphere of influence.”

An Enactment of the Monroe Doctrine?

Considering the geographical proximity of the Caribbean, can one speak of an accidental expansion? Yes if one considers that—in the short term—during the years following the Civil War, all national energies were concentrated on inner reconstruction and development and that any expansionist achievement was due to a general state of absent-mindedness concerning foreign ventures. Yet, Seward’s plans find their roots in long-held geopolitical theories which a few policy-makers had tried to actualize concerning territory felt vital to American development, either in terms of national security or economic prosperity or, trade development (Cf. for example Jefferson concerning the Floridas, Quincy Adams concerning Cuba, Fillmore concerning Cuba, etc.), to which one can add private, more or less legal adventures involving private businessmen trying to secure for themselves comfortable sources of income (as in the case of Edward Cooper in Haiti).¹³ In other words, why did it take so long for the U.S. to devise a genuine Caribbean policy if there was such an interest (economic, strategic, and cultural)? Moreover, did Seward have a Caribbean policy and, more generally, a Latin and Central American policy into which the Danish Islands fitted?

12. Bill S. 497 (January 17, 1859), 35th Cong., 2nd Sess.

13. During the negotiations about Nicaragua, and especially the Darien canal across the Panama Isthmus, Seward showed how much he could manipulate New York businessmen to reach his aims: “Meanwhile, Seward began prodding New York capitalists—Peter Cooper, William H. Vanderbilt, and others—to take an interest in the Panama route, which was under the control of Colombia,” to the point of forming the Isthmus Canal Company with a charter from New York State obtained in September 1868 and “raising a capital of 100 million dollars for the project.” [Van Deusen 517-518].

What is clear is that he had a few ideas which he was trying to push forward: an isthmian canal under American control, the consolidation of the Caribbean basin as the American *mare nostrum* which meant the gradual eviction of the European powers there, starting with the weakest: just as Russia had left/been paid off North America, and France bullied out of Mexico, it might be possible to use various means from persuasion to threats through purchase in order to achieve that aim and stabilize Central America as a privileged area for the U.S. and Latin America as the first trading area with the United States (these old Pan-American dreams inspired by John Quincy Adams were later revived by an admirer of both Adams and Seward, Secretary of State James Blaine). Thus, the United States was stepping into European spheres of influence; this process took the better part of the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth.

Concerning the Caribbean, Seward rested his thought and actions on two pillars: the Monroe Doctrine and pan-Americanism which he believed history had given the opportunity to implement. Although he had shown great reverence for European culture, his nationalism started at home and he was intent on pushing Europeans away. This was wishful thinking in the 1860s although, from his perspective, he had managed to get rid of France's re-colonization schemes in Mexico, and discouraged Spain from recolonizing Santo Domingo; he was in the process of attracting Caribbean islands, either dependent on a European power like the Virgin Islands or independent, but in need of American tutelage, like Santo Domingo. Hence, his voracity—in the scope of a few years from 1865 to 1868, he had offered to purchase St Bartholomew (Swedish), Môle St Nicholas (Haitian), the whole of Haiti and Santo Domingo, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Culebra and Culebrita (Spanish), St Pierre and Martinique (French). To the Europeans, the least one can say is that he was like a dog let loose in a quiet play ground: annoying, cumbersome and potentially nefarious. In short, a factor of instability and disorder.

Through diplomacy and defiance, he had made true the words of Representative Samuel Sullivan Cox about the rivalry between England and the United States: "If we cannot enact the Monroe doctrine into international law, we can create and consecrate it as a national sentiment. Let it be national genius."¹⁴ Meaning that the United States was to become the sole power in the Americas and that its future was economic rivalry with Great Britain. Interestingly, these words are in the concluding paragraphs of a long speech on American foreign affairs (18 March, 1860) and on the possible Anglo-French alliance against the United States especially in the form of the establishment

14. Samuel S. Cox, *Eights Years in Congress, from 1857 to 1865. Memoir and Speeches* (New York: Appleton, 1865), 128.

of a French protectorate over Mexico. Cox has this central opinion which binds together peace and trade: “trade is powerful for peace.” [Cox 127] From the point of the view of the Caribbean islanders, and certainly, of the rest of Latin America, it became clear that the future did not hold so many alternatives: a partial or total loss of sovereignty to the United States (like Santo Domingo, who agreed to be annexed); the certainty that the United States was now concerned with the developments in the region, in a manner that was fairly new (at the highest level of government); hence, their fate was irremediably linked to the United States, if only because of their proximity with one of the most powerful and seemingly expansionists of a new kind; lastly, relations could never be equal. So the only margin left was to grasp at as much independence as they could keep between European actual supremacy and American future ascendancy. The United States confirmed that they were troublesome and meddling. They carefully chose the weakest prey, played on their internal difficulties (like the factions or the chronic political instability in Santo Domingo) and could rely on a much larger capacity to cash out for territory than anybody else at the time.¹⁵

Economic Expansion as Political and Cultural Hegemony?

How do business interests and public policy interrelate to produce a Caribbean diplomacy? Can the plans to acquire territory in the Caribbean and elsewhere off the mainland be considered as expansion of the antebellum kind? Or does the major difference lie in the avowed commercial motivations behind such ventures? Seward belongs to the group of “urban expansionists,” like James G. Blaine, or William McKinley described by Williams: “powerful and persuasive minds focused on the explicit or implicit need to transform the idea and the tradition and the reality of continental empire into global empire” [Williams 101-102]. If trade volumes with Latin America remained low as compared with the European trade, one must remember that a small yet active minority emphasized the potential development of those markets: “exporters and importers valued these areas for their potentialities” [LaFeber, *The New Empire* 43].

Seward was trying to map an American empire based on economic power, a “Christian-commercial vision”¹⁶ which went beyond mere trade to encompass a civilizing mission of the noblest kind based on commercial supremacy and cultural influence. A geo-economic design which “had to fit into

15. This remark should be qualified by the argument opposed to Seward, who was accused of plundering the federal budget while the priority was to reduce the national debt.

16. Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny. American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 63.

a universal view of Christianity and progress in world history” [Stephanson 62]. In his December 3, 1867 and December 9, 1868 messages to Congress, the global analysis and justification of American Caribbean policy was presented: first, foreign policy is generally defined as the securing of peace as the condition for material prosperity and social advancement. Concerning the so-called “West India Islands,” their present colonial status was simply but adroitly compared with that of the United States representing the counter-example and model to be followed in terms of republican and democratic institutions; follows a reminder of the danger for the United States of having such European appendages in the close vicinity. Hence, until the eviction of all European “policies and designs” out of the area, the United States was in danger. Interestingly, the same rationale is used to make a parallel between national security in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. Hence, naval and commercial interests require the same course of action in both areas. Johnson, voicing Seward’s opinions, referred to Adams and “political gravitation,” so as to convince Congress of the need to take action now and make provisions for future conflicts. This effort to put the Danish West Indies and the Hawaiian islands into the intellectual scope of gravitation failed miserably, not because the reasoning was faulty but probably because the premise itself was incorrect: that the natural laws of gravitation could be applied to geography, politics, and economics.

In the 1868 message, he adds a new argument, that of the inevitable relation of tutelage to be established between regions so dissimilar, in terms of development (cultural, political, economic). Security, tranquillity and commerce: these three terms were combined by John Quincy Adams (as analyzed by Williams in “The Imperial Logic”).¹⁷ Considering Seward’s life-long admiration for Adams, one can say that this trinity became his guiding policy and forms the basis of his foreign policy theory.

Erratic Dreams or Laying the Foundations of a New Foreign Policy?

Was there anything accidental about the attempted acquisition of the Danish Virgin Islands by Seward? No, because he had a plan, yes, if it is seen as an ill-timed, opportunistic and fumblingly presented case because American opinion and opinion-making circles were reluctant. He certainly had great plans and most of them had been universally announced before the Civil War, especially during his term as U.S. Senator. For example his April 27, 1852 speech in the senate on steam navigation sketched his vision of an American empire

17. William A. Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 65.

reaching out to Asia; he stressed his belief in a fundamental shift of focus taking place under the aegis of the United States from Europe—the Atlantic basin—to Asia—the Pacific basin. But when it came to implementing them as a member of the executive, he failed in his tactical moves.

Was he then as Bailey suggested a desperate Secretary leaving the scene and trying to leave grandiose projects behind as stepping-stones to a higher destiny? In his insistence on negotiating and meet so many small humiliations from the Senate, was he “blinded by the map” and mistaken? To the point of leaving public life, a disenchanting aging man, as in Henry Adams’s words, “he appeared to have closed his account with the public; he no longer seemed to care; he asked nothing, gave nothing, and invited no support; he talked little of himself or of others, and waited only for his discharge, recalling his meeting with Seward in 1868, in the last months of Johnson’s administration. The future proved him right but the whole process is extremely ironical. As Anders Stephanson underlined, Seward made “repeated efforts to bully Congress more than the peoples whose territories he coveted. This flexibility, which could also be called a cynical pragmatism, allowed him to contemplate speeding up the Danish Treaty and bypassing the plebiscite (which would have made the cession morally and politically more acceptable) while establishing *de facto* American rule over the Sandwich Islands through military occupation and later making it lawful through formal purchase from the Hawaiian authorities; or closing his eyes on the bribing campaign led by Russian ambassador Von Stoeckl to secure appropriation of the Alaska Treaty. What is genuine in his motivations though is the devotion to peace, to the principle of attraction as preferable to subjugation: “Toward the end of the century, when Seward’s themes were revived, it was ironically often in a militarized and territorialized form that he, along with Adams, would have found historically retrograde.” [Stephanson 61, 63]

Seward was trying to give a new—modern—meaning to his much admired English philosopher Francis Bacon’s concept of empire. Although one cannot really call a concept the various philosophical musings by Bacon around what we—and Seward—are tempted to call an empire, giving to that word a meaning which is more administrative, political and practical than what Bacon, had in mind. Truly, just as Seward’s references were the European and, precisely, the British imperium over the nineteenth-century universe, Bacon’s were the Spanish domination of the seas and of the New World. What Seward recognized in Bacon are his intuitions about the future glory of Britain as a maritime and cultural power, just as Seward was hoping to see the U.S. become, in the near future, one of the very few leading nations of the world. As he had predicted in his speech, “The Destiny of America:” “mankind shall

come to recognize us a successor of the few great states which have alternately borne commanding sway in the world.”¹⁸ The reference to the Roman Empire allowed Bacon, and certainly Seward, to elaborate a harmonious combination of republican virtues and empire.

Might with Right

In a chapter entitled “Commerce Follows the Flag,” Sidney Lens gives his vision of the use of force, trying to show how flexible yet principled American expansion at mid-century was:

The use of force to gain economic advantage in foreign lands obviously was no alien principle to American statesmen; it was applied as well as threatened repeatedly, to impose Washington’s will on weaker peoples. The United States still drew a line, however, at stationing a permanent army to rule other nations—in other words establishing colonies or protectorates¹⁹

How does this apply to Seward? Lens dismisses him somehow as an “imperialism-minded man” intent on engaging the United States in a planetary imperial career. Whereas in fact, Seward was deep at heart in favor of peace as the best climate for economic prosperity and trade expansion. While he could consider, through force or cajoling, the incorporation of *useful* territory, he was a believer in self-government and not colonial government by the United States of those newly acquired territories. One could argue that he was influenced by old shibboleths about the extension of the area of freedom and exceptionalism which excluded any European form of territorial control. How to secure an empire without war?

Seward’s originality was to believe that American exceptionalism—sometimes misconstrued as weakness—was to defend a peculiar imperialism that rejected standing armies, warfare and direct political domination alike, as a counterpoint to the British empire and, concerning warfare, with a total blindness to the actual conditions of the conquest of American territorial empire in North America, through permanent warfare either with the various Indian nations or European colonizers (France, Spain, Britain).

Actually, when he came to national politics (he was elected U.S. Senator in 1849) one can say that territorial expansion was well over. The actual settlement and development of the Far West was slowly under way but the business of conquering had been completed with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). One can suggest that Seward was for devising new spaces to

18. Speech delivered in Columbus, Ohio, 1853 [Baker 328].

19. Sidney Lens, *The Forging of the American Empire*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1971), 157.

conquer, influenced by his favorite Bacon's misgivings about territorial empires without leadership on the seas:

To be master of the sea is an abridgement of a monarchy. [...] But that much is certain, that he that commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much and as little of the war as he will. Whereas those that be strongest by land are many times nevertheless in great straits.²⁰

He was opposed to expansion by conquest and favored diplomacy, diplomatic footholds which he never clearly defined from an institutional point of view. Varying from annexation of the pre-Civil War era which meant incorporation into the Union to annexation with American citizenship without provision for future incorporation (as was the case in the Alaska Treaty), Seward seemed to adapt the acquisition of territory to his imperial project with no systematic plan. Hence, he was so intent on obtaining the Danish Virgin Islands speedily that he contemplated overlooking the fundamental idea of self-determination by not organizing a plebiscite among the islanders; and in the case of Santo Domingo, there was no mention of a plebiscite to show that the islanders desired annexation. In practice, he seemed to have in mind the result which was the advancement of U.S. maritime presence rather than the actual means to reach that end. This was rightly summarized by Paolino as "the real empire: commercial hegemony."²¹

This peculiar American equation was based on the ideology of American exceptionalism defined by Seward as cultural superiority, a blend of republican virtue and Christian values. This "genius for colonization" went together with American inventiveness, intelligence, industry and labor. He expected the U.S. to dominate the world through the sale of American goods to the world, and especially to the mythic Chinese market. Once again, the counter-model was Great Britain who was using force in her colonies to facilitate trade. Historians have shown that the growth of naval and military power in India was intended to break down the barriers to trade. Symbolical, the interweaving of trade and force came about when the East India Company shifted from trade to administration in the early nineteenth century. Military

20. Francis Bacon, "Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms," *Essays* (London: J. M. Dent, 1915), 96-97. What inspired Seward most in Bacon's thought is the application of empiricism to politics, the devising of a program for a happy nation that might help to adapt to the dramatic changes surrounding her. This means a fundamental autonomous approach to one's resources, and the correlation he made of national independence and technological know-how. Cf. Antoinette M. Paterson's studies of Bacon's *Novum Organon* (*Francis Bacon and Socialized Science*, Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1973).

21. Title of chapter 11 of *The Foundations of the American Empire*. William H. Seward and *U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

strength and commercial vitality relied on sea power and created a need for naval stores.

He was redefining the Monroe doctrine related hemispheric ideology, which by then had been accepted as part of American foreign policy stances in economic terms as if the hemisphere could only be homogeneous through domination by the U.S., by virtue of its superior qualities and culture. The best means being economic relations which would foster cultural and political homogeneity. In this sense, one can apply his pre-Civil War aphorism to his post-Civil War plans: "Commerce is the great agent of this movement."²² He was precisely trying to define a "coherent approach to international affairs" which Beisner²³ demonstrated how much American diplomacy was devoid of. As Pletcher²⁴ remarked, one must thank Seward for creating and developing an efficient consular network which was instrumental in infusing regularity and organization in U.S. foreign affairs, and, especially instrumental in providing useful information to American businessmen and investors, particularly in Latin America.

The Search for Markets

When it came to applying his ideas, he chose to be pragmatic. The mercantilist system had not been one of the grievances put forward by the colonists. British historian Esmond Wright has noted that "the system brought prosperity, assured markets and easy credits. Where it hurt, it was tacitly evaded."²⁵ Indeed, the colonies prospered under that system and, later, the Americans had a tendency to retain good memories of it. As Hobsbawm argues in his analysis of the British empire, when it came to giving up the mercantilist system in favor of an open economy devoted to free trade, the British decision backlashed on other less developed nations in terms of neo-mercantilism which went together with protectionism.²⁶ After the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the British had engaged in a policy of reducing duties and advantages given to colonies although a certain degree of preference was maintained, later removed

22. Speech in U.S. Senate, July 29, 1852 in Baker, *Life of William H. Seward with Selections from his Works* (New York: Redfield, 1855), 286.

23. Robert L. Beisner, *From the Old diplomacy to the New, 1865-1910*, 2nd. ed. (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 9.

24. David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 1998.

25. Esmond Wright, *Fabric of Freedom, 1763-1800* (London, 1965), 37. Cf. also Michael Kammen, *Empire and Interest: The American Colonies and the Politics of Mercantilism* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).

26. Cf. John Stuart Mill's theory of infant industries to be protected; and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire. An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 112-115.

from 1853 to 1860. The idea was to treat colonies for economic purposes as if they were foreign countries. Free trade suited British interests best and set an example not followed by her partners.

Seward developed, and had done so since the 1840s, a constant rationale about the need to protect the American economy so as to create a national market and, once a critical point of development had been reached, to find new ventures and compete on equal terms with Great Britain and, at some stage, evict the British out of the American market and the Asian market. "National economists in the USA and in Germany never had much doubt about the value of protection and industrialists in fields competitive with the British had even less." [Hobsbawm 113] Hence, Seward was not a devoted defender of mercantilism but he saw it as a temporary stage to strengthen the national economy and prepare for the "final competition" (to use John Fiske's later terms) with the great world economies. However, what applied to Great Britain might one day apply to the United States:

The British hegemony in the undeveloped world was thus based on a permanent complementarity of economies; British hegemony in the industrializing world on potential or actual competition. The one was therefore likely to last, the other was in its nature temporary. [Hobsbawm 113]

In Seward's time, competition was yet to come while complementarity with the less developed Latin American and Caribbean nations was slowly organizing.²⁷

Hobsbawm's analysis has the advantage of placing the United States in the global context of the world economy and reminding us of what some contemporaries preferred to ignore: in spite of nationalist bombast, Britain was the leading economic nation and remained so during the better part of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the American economy was highly dependent of British capital and investment. So Seward's nationalism was preparatory, because he was hoping to consolidate American presence in the future protected markets of Latin America, while participating in the securing of the Asian market, so as not to lag behind Britain and the Europeans. He thus, following other statesmen like Webster, combined an open door/free trade ideology for remote markets with a neo-mercantilist vision of the Caribbean basin (tariffs were relatively lower from 1832 to 1860 and from 1865 to 1875 than they were so afterwards).

Seward had a flexible perception of space and geography of his own, sometimes ridiculed, but with a purpose: he probably felt that the United

27. Cf. the structure of American trade with that area: Latin Americans tended to export raw materials to the U.S. while importing manufactured goods from Europe.

States had reached a critical size which was bound to transform its perception of itself. Moreover, technological progress had dwarfed the world, leading to a revolution in the political geography of the world. Correlating geography and history,²⁸ he concluded that the United States had to open itself now that its domestic market was secure and create an international market (which was his greatest anticipation as compared to his contemporaries' views). Hence he could combine a form of political gravitationism with the Caribbean, Canada, Mexico and then the rest of Latin America falling like a ripe fruit as well as form of navalism in order for the United States to become the mistress of the seas and of the far-away markets. More than others, he believed that economic transformations and economic factors have political and territorial implications. Hence, privileged markets were necessary, and privileged stations en route to those markets.

As LaFeber puts it: "The empire would begin with a strong, consolidated base of power on the American continent and move into the far away stations of the Pacific as it approached the final goal of Asia. Each area would have its own functions to perform and become an integrated part of the whole empire" [LaFeber 26]. The part performed by the Danish Virgin Islands would have been to hold an important maritime route to the Caribbean basin, while waiting to lay hold of more valued positions (Cuba, Santo Domingo, Haiti), to secure a convenient coaling station for battle ships and merchant ships, and to signal the progressive withdrawal of European powers from the area. In this "integrated empire" nothing was insignificant by virtue of its having been gained through painstaking negotiation, haggling over prices, Congress and public opinion cajoling.

Although he cannot be blamed for future developments, Seward seems especially naive as he contemplates empire and right without might in a world of competition and subtle power politics. In economic terms, he was not original in basing it on faith in progress but he thought about it much earlier than any other politicians and rationalized the inevitable integration of the national economy into the world economy and the interdependence between both.

Politically, his empire presented a form of gradualism based on pragmatism resulted in him being remembered by late nineteenth century imperialists who paid tribute to his visionary policies: Henry Cabot Lodge wrote a long essay about Seward in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1884, and in 1898 Bancroft in the *North American Review* (quoted previously) to show his con-

28. Cf. Pierre Renouvin, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, 4e éd. (Paris: Colin, 1991), especially chapter 1 on the significance of geographical factors on international relations.

temporaries how legitimate imperialism could now be by virtue of its having been thought as inevitable thirty years before.²⁹ He made it simpler for them to show a genuine attachment to Republican ideals and Christian values as absolute standards, while making them extremely relative in the way they could be actualized by populations which were by definition different, and so useful to American grandeur. Seward therefore tried to define a new diplomacy and a new foreign policy based on old principles which still played their part but were to be adapted to new circumstances in a world of competition. As he had declared to a Yale university audience in 1854: “the governments of the United States [...] are nevertheless, like all other governments, founded on compromises of some abstract truths and of some natural rights.” [Baker 294]³⁰

29. Henry Cabot Lodge, “William H. Seward,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, LIII (May 1884), 682-700. Cf. also Walter Allen, “William H. Seward,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXVI (December 1900).

30. This was an address to students on the “Moral Development” of the American people (July 26, 1854).