CALCULATED CAUTION

Seward and France’s Invasion of Mexico

The American Civil War was a critical event in the history of the United States, and thus captured the attention of the country’s leaders at the time. While this internal crisis was not the only issue facing the United States, all other concerns became secondary when the continuation of the country was at risk. Thus, during the war, Secretary of State William Henry Seward made every effort to keep the conflict contained internally despite the seemingly imminent threat from the French who occupied Mexico at the time.

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In the 1860s, the United States Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, faced a major dilemma. Just as the United States erupted into the American Civil War (1861-1865), several European powers, including France, encroached upon the sovereignty of Mexico and thus violated the Monroe Doctrine. At first glance it appeared as though both a policy of direct involvement and of neutrality might prove disastrous to the continued existence of the Union. However, the situation was much more complicated. Seward demonstrated his genius as he carefully navigated through this issue. He came to the conclusion that, “The Mexican complication, so far forth as France’s interference is concerned, will, if left alone, soon wear itself out.” Thus, insofar as France was concerned, Seward’s policy during the Civil War was characterized by inaction. Yet this was only half the story. While he presented the United States as neutral concerning France’s occupation of Mexico, he made no secret of where his sympathies lay. Seward did all in his power to assuage the fears and concerns of the French and thus discourage intervention in the Civil War, while still lending as much covert assistance to Mexico as he could get away with. Ultimately he dealt with France in accordance with the practical threat it posed to the continuation of the Union, which proved to be not as severe as it appeared on the surface. Seward not only dealt with the French government shrewdly to avoid provoking it, but also actively voiced his discontent with its actions.

FINANCIAL CRISIS AND FRENCH AMBITION IN MEXICO

Before one can understand the reasoning behind Seward’s policy, it is important to understand the situation in Mexico and why France ultimately chose to invade and remain. Just before the American Civil War, Mexico had been engulfed in its own civil war. At its conclusion, the liberal reformer Benito Juarez emerged victorious. However his new government suffered from serious financial issues, owing over 80 million dollars to France, Great Britain, and Spain collectively. The financial crisis in Mexico escalated to such an extent that European involvement became a real possibility. In October 1861 these three European countries signed the Treaty of London, in which each agreed to jointly occupy Mexico until fair reparations were paid. Although this would directly infringe upon the Monroe Doctrine, there was little the United States could do to intervene as its own civil war captured its attention. France, Great Britain, and Spain agreed to refrain from taking any of Mexico’s territory or to interfere with the Mexican people’s right to choose their own government. Thus, on December 8, 1861 these powers invaded Mexico at Vera Cruz just as the American Civil War came into full swing. By the 17th of December the troops successfully occupied ports and customhouses awaiting action by the Mexican government. By April, however, French troops violated

William H. Seward, Secretary of State (1861-69)
Source: Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress

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the Treaty of London and began to push further into Mexico. At this point Juárez met with the leaders of the French and Spanish forces and came to an agreement about the money owed. After having achieved this, Great Britain and Spain chose to pull out by the end of April; however, Napoleon III, the Emperor of France, had grander ambitions.6

Napoleon dreamed of a French empire in Mexico and thus persisted, invading Mexico City. Even after Napoleon’s forces suffered a great defeat at Puebla on May 5th 1862, he continued to commit greater numbers of troops and supplies to the effort. Though the endeavor proved more difficult and costly than he had originally envisioned,7 ultimately the invasion was successful, and in 1863 Napoleon offered the throne to Maximilian of Hapsburg, younger brother to the Austrian emperor, who accepted it in 1864.8 With this new government formed, the United States withdrew their foreign minister, Thomas Corwin, and refused to recognize Maximilian’s government in protest.9 The United States viewed France’s actions as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine that undermined its authority and posed a threat to national security. However, because the invasion of Mexico coincided nearly perfectly with the start of the American Civil War, there was little Seward would dare do to counteract this. However, Seward did recognize the potential threat of a French presence in Mexico and thus did all he could to prevent this amid the internal turmoil of the American Civil War.

As soon as Lincoln took power, Seward made every effort to prevent European intervention through attempted mediation. The United States’ Foreign Minister to Mexico, Thomas Corwin, came to Seward with an idea for a negotiation between Mexico and Great Britain: Mexico would begin to pay its loans to the European powers while accepting several million dollars in loans from the United States over three to five years and agreeing to set aside some territory as collateral for this loan.10 When this failed, Seward instructed Charles Francis Adams, Foreign Minister to Great Britain, to offer 3% interest on Britain’s loan to Mexico in exchange for their pledge not to intervene directly.11 As the situation grew more desperate, Seward made it clear that he was willing for the United States to temporarily take up Mexico’s debt to prevent intervention. However, Great Britain insisted that its grievances against Mexico were more than monetary, and thus rejected this offer.12 Although Seward’s efforts to mediate ultimately failed, they demonstrated his understanding of the seriousness of the situation and keen diplomatic mind from the beginning.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE THREAT OF INTERVENTION
Despite France’s insistence that it would remain neutral in the Civil War, Seward remained cautious, as he understood the ample reasons for which France might intervene. Unlike Great Britain, France did not have a vast reserve of cotton, and thus its supply greatly diminished at the start of the Civil War. As soon as Lincoln took power, Seward made every effort to prevent European intervention through attempted mediation. The United States’ Foreign Minister to Mexico, Thomas Corwin, came to Seward with an idea for a negotiation between Mexico and Great Britain: Mexico would begin to pay its loans to the European powers while accepting several million dollars in loans from the United States over three to five years and agreeing to set aside some territory as collateral for this loan. When this failed, Seward instructed Charles Francis Adams, Foreign Minister to Great Britain, to offer 3% interest on Britain’s loan to Mexico in exchange for their pledge not to intervene directly. As the situation grew more desperate, Seward made it clear that he was willing for the United States to temporarily take up Mexico’s debt to prevent intervention. However, Great Britain insisted that its grievances against Mexico were more than monetary, and thus rejected this offer. Although Seward’s efforts to mediate ultimately failed, they demonstrated his understanding of the seriousness of the situation and keen diplomatic mind from the beginning.

In response to French demands for access to Southern ports Seward offered polite sympathy while refusing to jeopardize the war effort, demonstrating his deep desire to keep France neutral in the American Civil War. In discussing Thouvenel’s requests for access to southern ports with Foreign Minister to France William Dayton, Seward commented, “The blockade is already very effective, quite as much so as any other
nation ever established. Proceedings are now on foot which will remove the premature objections of the French consul to which you allude.” This highlights the ways in which the Civil War largely dictated his actions concerning foreign policy. Seward had no intention of allowing the French to break the United States’ successful blockade, for this would endanger the Union war effort. However, he painstakingly worked to appease the French by doing all within his power to supply them with the cotton they desired. He promised to reopen the trade as soon as Southern ports were reacquired and even attempted to grow cotton in southern Illinois.18 However, these “proceedings” proved unsatisfactory to Thouvenel.

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While Seward recognized that access to Confederate cotton posed a threat to French neutrality, he also understood that France’s dependence on Northern wheat largely counteracted this threat. Thouvenel declared that if France were not permitted to trade with the Confederacy, it would have no choice but to assist it.19 However, Seward recognized the complicated nature of this trade issue. Many European countries, including France, depended on the northern United States for wheat. As 1861 proved to be a particularly bad year for wheat in Europe, this trade became all the more crucial.20 Thus Seward recognized the unlikelihood of French intervention in the Civil War over cotton, as this would jeopardize France’s wheat supply. Consequently, he judiciously chose not to meet the demands of the French. Still, he sought to placate the French. Hence instead of straightforwardly rejecting their demands he inquired about the practicality of opening the blockade and politely suggested the best way for France to resume trading with the Confederacy was to hope for a swift Union victory.21 He recognized the importance of keeping good relations with the French, but by November 1861 his attention had turned to a more imminent threat posed by Great Britain.

The Trent Affair shifted Seward’s attention to Great Britain as this event constituted a more immediate threat during the Civil War. The diplomatic crisis involved the seizure of two Confederate diplomats sailing under the protection of the British flag.22 The event provoked outrage among the British. Though tensions were mounting with France at this time over the issue of cotton, Seward focused his attention on Great Britain. Talk of France’s desire to break the Union’s blockade in the correspondence between Seward and Dayton came to a near halt, replaced instead by the Trent Affair.23 Seward’s real concerns lay with Great Britain, demonstrated by his urgent message to Dayton explaining that he was caught up in the Trent Affair and simply did not have time to help Dayton work out the issues with France.24 Later he also asked Thouvenel whether France would go to war over the Trent Affair should Great Britain do so, demonstrating where his true concerns lay. Thouvenel replied that while France deplored this violation of international law, it would remain neutral in such a conflict.25 With this assurance, Seward pushed France to the back of his mind. Thus Great Britain captured the attention of Seward, as he understood its more immediate threat to the Union war effort.

In addition to understanding the importance of the British threat, Seward also recognized the practical barriers that made French involvement unlikely. By the time Maximilian took power in Mexico, a guerrilla force led by Benito Juarez had risen up in opposition to the French presence.26 Thus as the Civil War progressed, Napoleon III focused much of his attention on simply maintaining control in Mexico. In fact, by 1863, Napoleon III began contemplating abandoning Mexico altogether, as the cost of remaining began to outweigh the benefits.28 Additionally, French sympathies for the South diminished as the Confederacy showed less promise. Hence Seward’s focus on Great Britain was all the more prudent.

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economy in the Confederacy. Ultimately he concluded that while the people passionately believed in the Confederate cause, the weak, inefficient government doomed their prospects of success. Consequently he greatly discouraged French action in aiding the Confederacy. This in conjunction with France’s preoccupation with Mexico served to alleviate Seward’s fears of immediate French intervention during the American Civil War.

BALANCING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS
Though French intervention represented no immediate threat, Seward still sought to remain on good terms so as not to stoke Confederate sympathies. In a letter to Dayton in 1863 Seward explained the need for caution:

Circumstances tend to excite misapprehensions and jealousies between this government and that of France, in spite of all the prudence we can practice. On our part, we studiously endeavor to avoid them. You will, therefore, be fully authorized in assuming that this government does not inspire and has no responsibility for assumptions of a different character made by the press. Though the French might be less inclined to intervene in the American Civil War than the British, the French threat still could not be ignored. Thus, as Seward explains, foreign policy at this time would be characterized by caution. By permitting Dayton to disavow any statements by the press that might offend the French, Seward demonstrated extreme attentiveness and acknowledges the sensitive nature of this situation. Seward desired to, in appearance at least, remain as neutral as possible.

Seward demonstrated this prudence in 1863 in his handling of the French reaction to news of the United States’ participation in aiding Juarez. General Zirman of the Mexican army ordered arms from Great Britain. Wanting to secure safe passage to Mexico through Union blockades, he approached Charles Francis Adams about sending along a letter that would ensure the cargo’s safe passage. Having obtained the promise that such a letter would remain secret, Adams agreed. However, the letter made its way into the London press, and when the new French Foreign Minister, Drouyn de l’Huy, became aware of the situation, he furiously demanded that the United States disavow Adams’ actions. Mindful that this issue might provoke France to actively aid the South, Seward quickly complied. He instructed Dayton to assure Drouyn de l’Huy that the United States government viewed the incident “with disfavor and with regret,” and that “it regards the proceeding on the part of Mr. Adams as having been one of inadvertence and not of design or motive injurious to France.” With this assurance, Drouyn de l’Huy dropped the issue. However, Seward’s apology seems less than sincere. It is clear that Adams knew he was directly aiding Juarez in writing this letter, yet Seward passes it off as an accident. Additionally, Adams received no punishment whatsoever, suggesting that Seward approved, or at least did not disapprove, of Adams’ actions. Thus Seward carefully balanced his desire to see the Mexican government restored in Mexico with his need to maintain good relations with France.

This is not to say that Seward did not make an effort to explicitly discourage French occupation of Mexico during the American Civil War. The need for caution prompted him to primarily express his discontent verbally. Any direct assistance or support given to Juarez was done secretly, as demonstrated with Adam’s letter. He periodically sent word to Napoleon III reminding him of the United States’ disapproval of French actions in Mexico. Seward made it a point to emphasize the United States’ desire, “that peaceful relations may soon be restored between France and Mexico upon a basis... favorable to the independence and sovereignty of the people of Mexico.” Thus he actively encouraged the French to pull out of Mexico and made no secret of the United States’ disapproval of their actions. However, his opinion was not
accompanied by any explicit threats or strict consequences should France choose to remain in Mexico. Understanding the United States’ preoccupation with the Civil War and France’s sympathies with the South, Seward wisely made his opinion known while keeping any actions against France or in favor of Juarez quiet.

In the months following the end of the Civil War, Seward’s desire and support for the restoration of the Mexican Government in Mexico became more pronounced. With the Civil War concluded, many Americans turned their attention to France and some actively attempted to aid Juarez. To placate France, Seward initially promised he would do all in his power to stop ships leaving American ports with the intent to support Juarez in Mexico. He also sent Generals Grant and Sheridan to the American border with Mexico, explaining to the French that this was to ensure that no sympathetic Americans would cross the border to join Juarez forces. However, these forces on the border began covertly supporting Juarez soon after they arrived. While this constituted blatant disregard for Seward’s orders, Seward made no further effort to discourage this or withdraw the troops, suggesting some level of approval of their actions. Additionally, Juarez’s success and the decline in French popular support prompted Napoleon III to begin withdrawing his troops in January 1866. Seward, fearful that the Austrian government might send troops to support its interest in Maximillian, sent a message to Austria threatening that should Austria send troops, “the United States could not engage to remain as silent and neutral spectators.” Seward threatened war should the Austrians intervene in Mexico. Hence with the conclusion of the American Civil War, Seward made his opposition to European involvement in Mexico more explicitly known, using force and direct threats to emphasize his view.

Throughout the American Civil War and even after, Seward demonstrated his political genius in his dealings with foreign nations. Post-war, Seward’s threats proved successful as no Austrian forces came to the aid of Maximillian. Not long after France’s withdrawal, Juarez’s forces captured, court-martialed, and executed Maximillian as they took back the Mexican government. Thus Seward ultimately succeeded in both preventing European intervention in the Civil War and promoting the restoration of Mexican rule through his adept diplomacy. He recognized that while France’s presence in Mexico posed a threat to the United States, as it undermined the authority of the Monroe Doctrine and made French intervention in the Civil War possible, the immediate danger of this remained minimal. However, he took great caution in his dealings with the French. He did everything in his power to appear neutral while making his sympathies with the Mexicans clear and met French demands without interfering with the progress of the Civil War. Ultimately foreign policy was shaped by the desire to keep European powers from recognizing the Confederacy. In the case of France, Seward sought to minimize the threat of intervention by keenly avoiding fueling resentment for the United States in France. Thus Seward chose the path of indirect action by means of covert efforts and neutrality, to mollify the French and focused his attention on greater foreign issues that threatened disunion more immediately.

Calculated Caution

The execution of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico (1867)
Source: Kunsthalle Mannheim
Endnotes


[14] Ibid.


[20] Ibid, 140.


[22] Crook, David Paul. Diplomacy During the American Civil War. Pag 43.


[24] Ibid, Seward to Dayton Nov. 23 1861.


[28] Crook, David Paul. Diplomacy During the American Civil War. Pag. 162


[31] Crook, David Paul. Diplomacy During the American Civil War, Pag. 518.

[32] Ibid.


[34] Ibid, Seward to Dayton May 8, 1863

[35] Crook, David Paul. Diplomacy During the American Civil War, Pag. 521.


[38] Ibid, Headquarters Armies of the United States Dec 1, 1865.


[40] Ibid.
