Seward's Imperial Dream 1861-69

In the unrelenting drive to conquer the middle North American continent, the people of the American Republic pursued a goal that many historians consider the legitimate aspiration of large states—expansion within a contiguous landmass or region. However, when in the wake of the Union triumph over the Confederacy, some political leaders looked abroad for new territorial acquisitions, they crossed the line into what is termed imperialism. By strict definition, imperialism means any extension of authority or control by non-voluntary methods over people who otherwise would not submit. The greater the land and sea impediment transgressed to assault the victim, the more pejorative the opinion expressed by most historians.

William Henry Seward

It is generally believed that the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, rejecting European interference in the Western Hemisphere and implying a U.S. right to prevent such interference, was the first imperialist expression of the republic. In actual fact, U.S. interest in affairs outside North America revived immediately after independence. Reestablishing commercial contacts with Britain and other nations, U.S. traders became regular visitors to European ports. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson sent frigates to Tripoli to fight Barbary Coast pirates attacking U.S. shipping.

On the reverse face of the globe, merchants revived the dream of Christopher Columbus to trade with China, now a country of hundreds of million of persons. Because merchant ships lacked cargo capacity and sailing speed to make the crossing of the Pacific Ocean routine and profitable, a solution was way-stations and naval ports. In the 1820s, missionaries from New England, whalers from the west coast, and sugar planters conceived an interest in the Hawaiian Islands. Despite attempts by the British and French to confiscate the archipelago, Americans turned the islands into U.S.-dominated stepping stones for travel to the Orient.

The commercial and political value of Far East contacts was recognized in Washington. Four years after the British in the Opium War of 1839 compelled the Chinese to grant most-favored-nation trade concessions, President John Tyler sent out Commissioner Caleb Cushing backed by a fleet of four warships to insist upon similar privileges. By the Treaty of Wanghia July 3, 1844, Cushing not only secured those benefits but wrung from Peking extraterritorial right of Americans accused of crimes to be tried by a U.S. consular official, not a Chinese judge. This triumph seemed to presage U.S. participation in the coming carving up of China into spheres of influence. However, in the 1850s, as fast clipper ships carried U.S. goods to China and brought back tea and other products, American diplomacy concentrated instead on establishing an Open Door for trade. When the nation became consumed by the North-South conflict, the best the U.S. Navy could do to forward American interests was maintain sea lines of communication and lay long-range plans to make the republic preeminent in the Pacific.

To achieve the first objective, Washington sent Commodore Matthew C. Perry with a squadron of four warships to Japan. That island nation on the route to China had kept itself isolated from the outside world by executing shipwreck sailors. Perry's instructions were to intimidate the Japanese into behaving with hospitality to the unfortunate as well as compel talks to establish correct diplomatic relations and a trade treaty. Naval officials hoped to secure coaling stations in Japan for "black ships" that like Perry's were becoming steam-powered.

On July 8, 1853, Perry entered Yedo Bay and insisted upon delivering to the Shogun government a letter from President Franklin Pierce. When he was rebuffed, he sailed away but returned in February 1854 with seven warships. That dramatic show of force produced a treaty March 31 guaranteeing decent treatment for shipwrecked sailors. Small ports Shimoda and Hakodate were opened for most-favored-nation trading. However, when Consul General Townsend Harris arrived at Shimoda August 1855, he was ignored. Not until July 29, 1858 could he conclude a treaty opening more ports, obtaining more trade rights, establishing extraterritorial rights, and securing a Japanese ambassador for Washington.

Bering Sea
Alaska
Yukon
7
Gulf of Alaska
Danish Greenland
Hudson Bay
Pacific Ocean
BRITISH CANADA
Missouri
Quebec
Great Lakes
Mississippi
San Francisco
New York
UNITED STATES
5
Washington
Ohio
Richmond
1
Atlantic Ocean
Rio Grande
CONFEDERACY 1861-65
Charleston
Sherman, 1866
2
Bahamas
Gulf of Mexico
6
8
French Invasion, 1863
MEXICO
Puerto Rico
Spanish Cuba
4
Haiti
Danish West Indies
3
Mexico City
Dominican Republic
British Honduras
Jamaica
Caribbean Sea
CENTRAL AMERICA
Naval Action
Campaign
American
British
French
Seward's Ambition

It was then that sectional strife in the U.S. curtailed further expansion of American power in the Pacific and focused the attention of governmental leaders on the North American continent. Yet one man still dreamed of riding the wave of overseas expansion to world empire.

The first notable American imperialist was William H. Seward, secretary of state under Lincoln. In spring 1861, with Fort Sumter imperiled by Confederate forces, he brought to the President an astonishing plan. He wanted to rally southerners to defend the country against alleged attempts by European Great Powers to partition the republic. Because the plot struck Lincoln as fantastic and reckless, he rejected it.

Seward remained secretary of state after Lincoln's assassination by supporting President Andrew Johnson's moderate reconstruction policy toward the south. That political expediency cost him the goodwill of Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and other Radical Republican leaders who might otherwise have looked with favor on using U.S. military and naval power for overseas aggrandizements. On the other hand, war-weariness and the nation's desire to concentrate on westward expansion made plans to create a far-flung American empire a tough sell. Seward, it turned out, was a generation ahead of his time.

Under Seward's plan, the U.S. would simultaneously have fomented rebellions in Canada against the British, Mexico against the Spanish, and the Caribbean/Central America against all colonizing powers. Lincoln realized that if the gamble failed to head off the civil war, his rump republic would face enemies north, south, and east.

The secretary of state was on firmer ground in May sending U.S. minister Charles Francis Adams to England to protest Prime Minister Lord John Russell receiving two Confederate commissioners and getting Russell to agree that the British would not accept Confederate prizes in British ports. However, when Captain Charles Wilkes of the frigate *U.S.S. San Jacinto* seized rebel envoys James M. Mason and John Slidell in the Bahamas off a British steamer called the *Trent* on November 8, after vehement British protests and war talk, Lincoln ordered Seward to release them.

Later in the war in 1863, the secretary of state rejected an offer by Emperor Napoleon III of France to mediate the conflict between North and South. The French reacted to the snub by permitting shipyards to build Confederate commerce raiders. Then the emperor sent the French army to occupy Mexico City on June 7 as a precursor to placing Archduke Maximilian of Austria on the throne as a French puppet. With showdowns at Gettysburg and Vicksburg at hand, the foreign threat came much too late to arouse the latent patriotism of southerners.

Confederate success at running the Union blockade and raiding Union commerce motivated Seward to look for naval bases and coaling stations in the Caribbean. Among islands considered but never confiscated or purchased were Cuba, Puerto Rico, and smaller properties in the West Indies.

Meanwhile, Confederate raiders built in British ports were so effective that damage done to northern merchant ships became an issue of contention with London. At termination of hostilities and in a calmer environment, negotiations eventually produced the Treaty of Washington (1871) to submit the dispute to international adjudication. Representatives from Italy, Switzerland, and Brazil joined U.S. and British diplomats the next year in awarding the U.S. $15.5 million.

After Lincoln was assassinated, Johnson got caught up in Reconstruction and impeachment problems. Thus, the conduct of U.S. foreign policy fell largely into Seward's hands. Soon on February 12, 1866, he gave the French an ultimatum to exit Mexico. The presence of General Philip Sheridan and 50,000 troops on the Rio Grande border caused Napoleon to pull out French troops spring 1867, leading to Maximilian's execution by Mexicans on June 19.

Suddenly, Seward scored the success for which he would forever after be remembered. Capitalizing on friendly relations with the government of Czar Alexander II of Russia, he negotiated in March to buy the territory of Alaska. Because officials in St. Petersburg feared that the British, their arch-enemy in the "Great Game" global competition for power, would use a war in another part of the world as a pretext to invade Alaska from Canada, they decided to unload this frozen white elephant and obtain what they could in exchange. The final price agreed on March 30, 1867 was $7.2 million. Even Republican senators who detested Seward conceded that the secretary of state had negotiated the best real estate transaction since Peter Minuit picked up Manhattan Island from the Indians for a pittance. Despite jabs in the newspapers that Alaska was "Seward's Folly" or "Seward's Icebox," the Senate approved the transaction April 9.

As time ran out on Seward's tenure of office, he returned to the idea of picking up coaling stations and naval bases in the Caribbean. Eventually, he focused on the Bay of Samana in the Dominican Republic and islands in the Danish West Indies. However, a treaty with Denmark in October 1867 to buy the latter property for $7.5 million ran afoul of untimely natural disaster (earthquake, hurricane, and tidal wave) and the opposition of Senator Sumner. A final blow to Seward's aspirations for an American empire came when General Ulysses S. Grant, who loathed Seward, was elected 18th President, took the oath of office in March 1869, and showed the first notable American imperialist the door to political oblivion.