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FLORIDA AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION, 1895-1898

by WILLIAM J. SCHELLINGS

THE CUBAN REVOLT against Spanish rule in 1895 and the possibility that this might lead to war between Spain and the United States placed Florida in a dilemma. There were a number of reasons for the state's rejoicing at the prospect of Cuban independence, and for many individual Floridians to want to aid the rebels. Against this, however, was the fear that if the United States went to war against Spain it could end only in disaster for Florida. As a result, an attempt was made to walk a middle path, to encourage the giving of private aid to the rebels, and yet to strongly oppose any official action that might lead to intervention and war. During this period, Florida presented the unique picture of being the only state in which all important newspapers were united in opposition to war.¹ The journals continued to oppose it right up to the day on which President McKinley signed the joint resolution of Congress that, in effect, placed the country in a state of war. Then and only then did the press of Florida capitulate and begin to display any enthusiasm for war.

While the Spanish American War has recently been termed a "popular crusade,"² presumably with William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer acting the parts of Pope Urban II and Peter the Hermit, it can be seen that if it was a crusade, Florida was certainly a last minute recruit.

In opposing the war, the editors were concerned with the danger of possible attack by the Spanish fleet, and with compensation for the losses they feared would come as a result of the war. In these matters Florida was not alone. Every city and state on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts feared attack, and a number of other states sought to gain some material benefit from the prospective war.

1. The following newspapers were examined for the period under consideration: the Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, the Tampa *Tribune*, the Tampa *Times*, the Ocala *Banner*, the Ft. Myers *Press*, the Miami *Metropolis*, the Pensacola *Daily News*, and the Pensacola *Daily Journal*. Scattered issues of other papers were also scanned.

2. Frank Freidel, *The Splendid Little War* (New York, 1958), p. 3.

The attitude of the state towards the Cuban revolution as here depicted from the leading newspapers in Florida may not reflect the opinion of all Floridians, but it was undoubtedly the opinion and attitude of a large and influential group in the state, the business interests. In the 1890's especially, the newspapers of the entire state, while showing occasional political enmity toward each other, did present a united front in all matters economic. They read almost like the broadsides of an optimistic Chamber of Commerce for Florida. On the subjects of business, industry, tourism, agriculture, etc., editors became eloquent over the future prospects for the state, picturing a Florida that would soon be one of the leading centers of industry, an area where wealth and population would grow more rapidly than in any other state. While there was no Henry Grady in Florida, each editor probably imagined himself to be a second Grady, and his paper a second *Atlanta Constitution*. Differing politically at times, the papers were as one in economic matters, and in their handling of the Cuban question.

In fact, it was this very concentration on the future economic welfare of the state that occasioned a fear of any type of American intervention that might lead to war. The editors represented a group which saw in war an interruption of business, a halt in expansion and growth, and the seeds of virtual ruin in a struggle between the United States and Spain. In their minds, war meant victory, victory meant the annexation of Cuba, and a Cuba within the tariff walls of the United States meant competition that could not be met.

In spite of the threat to business from a war with Spain, Floridians had enough common interests with the Cubans to make them favor Cuban independence. Historically, the two shared a common past of Spanish rule. Geographically, the proximity of Cuba to the mainland made Florida seem a second home to many Cubans, who found it easier for themselves to reach the Keys than it was for many Floridians. Too, the climate is similar, and many of the same crops could be raised on both the island and the peninsula.

Economically, apart from agriculture, Florida in normal times enjoyed good trade relations with Cuba. In return for cattle, fish, and timber, the state imported large quantities of Cuban tobacco. Tampa alone received more Havana leaf than any other American

city except New York. It was confidently expected that this trade would expand tremendously if the island became independent.

Finally, close ties with Cuba were ensured by the presence in Florida of some eight thousand Cubans. These people were almost all living in Tampa and Key West, and formed the bulk of the labor for the cigar industry. That industry, paying wages annually in the neighborhood of \$3,000,000, and producing nearly \$10,000,000 worth of cigars, was one of the largest and most important in the state.³

The effort of the newspapers to steer a middle course, to avoid war and yet give no impression of supporting Spain, clearly did place local interests above what many regarded as national interests. But those local interests were, in their eyes, the paramount issues for Florida. Convinced as they were of the results of a war for the state, it is hard to see how they could have acted otherwise.

When Florida first heard about the revolt, on February 25, 1895, the Cubans in Tampa and Key West were probably the only ones to give the event much attention. In Tampa, a thousand Cubans danced in the streets to celebrate, but elsewhere, apart from noting the outbreak, few paid it much heed. The state was just beginning to recover from the effects of the terrible freeze of that winter and was still adding up the estimated losses of from fifty to seventy-five million dollars. Citrus groves throughout the northern and central part of the state had been destroyed, and the future appeared bleak indeed for many thousands of Floridians.⁴

With its perennial optimism, the state began a remarkable recovery. Henry Flagler pushed his railroad down the east coast. A city sprang up at the southern end of the rails, quickly adopting the ways that have marked Miami since then. New lands were opened for development, both for citrus fruits and truck farming. New towns appeared, with full facilities for tourists, on both the east and west coasts. The census of 1900 was to show that population had continued its rate of increase. The state had counted 391,422 citizens in 1890, and it added 137,122 more in the

3. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900* (Washington, 1902), Vol. VIII, Mfg., pt. 2, p. 124.

4. J. E. Dovell, *Florida, Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary* (New York, 1952), p. 631.

next ten years.⁵ The continued growth and development of the state seemed assured, and all attention was concentrated on it. The only cloud on the horizon was the Cuban revolution, and the increasingly warlike attitude of some of the newspapers to the north.

It became impossible to ignore the revolt, especially with the Cuban junta in full operation. Reorganized by Jose Marti and Tomas Estrada Palma in 1891, the junta had established over two hundred political clubs. Seventy-six of those clubs were in Florida, all of them devoted to aiding the revolution. The junta collected ten per cent of the wages of the cigar workers, and used the money to finance the shipment of arms and ammunition to the rebel forces.⁶

Many Floridians participated in this activity, and profited greatly thereby. Among others were the future governor of Florida, Napoleon P. Broward, with his tug *The Three Friends*, and Captain "Dynamite" Johnny O'Brien with *The Dauntless*. Such filibustering expeditions were illegal, but many people cooperated in aiding the ships to escape detection. Business firms as well as venturesome individuals took part. Finlayson and Cottrell of Cedar Key, Knight and Wall of Tampa, and others, were known to have acted as purchasing agents or receiving agents for shipments of arms for the Cuban rebels.⁷ The revolutionary work of the junta was so effective that the Spaniard, Captain General Salamanca was reported to have exclaimed that if he could destroy the Cuban centers of Tampa and Key West the rebel organization would collapse.⁸

Be that as it may, the junta did aid in keeping the revolution on the front page of the newspapers. In addition to the sending of arms to Cuba, the junta saw to it that a sufficient number of stories designed to stimulate sympathy for the Cubans reached the newspapers in all parts of the United States. Many of the stories may well have been true, but there can be no doubt that many also were manufactured, particularly in Key West. General "Butcher" Weyler and his *reconcentrado* policy received perhaps

5. *Twelfth Census*, Vol. I, Population, pt. 1, p. lxxxii.

6. George M. Auxier, "Propaganda Activities of the Cuban Junta in Precipitating the Spanish American War, 1895-1898," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XIX (August 1939), 285-384.

7. Richard Vernon Rickenbach, "A History of Filibustering from Florida to Cuba, 1895-1898" (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1948), 53-55.

8. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint* (New York, 1947) p. 88.

more than his share of attention. His acts, and those of the Spanish generally, were depicted as needlessly and deliberately cruel and barbaric. While the Florida papers did not publish quite as many of this type of story as appeared in the northern journals, some were printed. They acted as stimulants for fund raising drives for the relief of the *reconcentrados*, an activity that was nationwide. In this Florida joined wholeheartedly and contributed her share.

In the north, the deluge of such tales of cruelty and barbarity hastened the appearance of demands for intervention by the United States. No such demand emanated from any Florida newspaper. Instead, the editors condemned such acts as those charged to the Spaniards. They expressed their sympathy, contributed to funds for Cuban relief, and wished the rebels good luck in their endeavors. One paper, however, went even further. The *Tampa Tribune*, a journal owned in part by a group of Cuban cigar manufacturers, pointed out that cruelty and terror were used by both the Spaniards and Cubans.⁹ The paper showed no desire for direct American intervention.

From the beginning of the revolt in February, 1895, until the end of 1897, the Florida papers gave little heed to the Hearst-Pulitzer demands for such intervention. Apart from occasionally rebuking the northern journals for their jingoistic tendencies, the peninsula editors apparently felt that there was little danger of any such action. As long as Grover Cleveland remained in the White House, they were correct. Cleveland was just as convinced as they were that intervention was both unnecessary and undesirable. Although he offered to mediate between Spain and the rebels, and used diplomatic pressure to try to secure a compromise, he gave every indication of being firmly opposed to actual intervention by the use of force. But when William McKinley was inaugurated as President, an element of doubt appeared. The Republican platform had contained a plank calling for the recognition of Cuban independence, and that was too close to intervention to suit the Floridians. However, even McKinley made it clear that he opposed the use of anything other than the weapons of diplomacy, and as a result he was applauded for his statesmanship.

In December, 1897, Spain finally promised what seemed to be adequate concessions of self-government to offer at least a hope

9. *Tampa Tribune*, December 28, 1897.

that the struggle could be ended. When McKinley announced the concessions promised, he asked that all Americans and Cubans grant the Spanish sufficient time to carry out their pledges, and at the same time he again repudiated the idea of using force to aid the Cubans. Again the Florida press applauded. The Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen* took the occasion to warn the Cubans that if they were intent on full independence, they must not look to the United States for aid, but must accomplish the task by themselves. The editor wished them good luck, but no more. The same idea was echoed in the other state papers.

In the ensuing months, the state press continued to allot adequate space to the revolt, but gave most of its attention to local matters. In addition, there now began to appear a rather surprising amount of news that represented the Spanish side of the story. The Ocala *Banner* and the Tampa *Tribune* in particular were more impartial as far as the news stories were concerned than most other newspapers. News about the revolt seemed to decrease, and even filibuster activities were on the decline. Until February, 1898, a peaceful settlement, or at least an end to the conflict without the United States being involved, appeared possible.

In February, however, two events occurred that changed the picture abruptly. The publication of the famous DeLome letter and the sinking of the battleship *U. S. S. Maine* in the harbor at Havana brought demands in the national press and in Congress for war. The demands were expressed most forcefully and immediately by the New York *Journal* and the New York *World*, the Hearst and Pulitzer papers respectively. The *Journal* charged that the explosion that sank the *Maine* had been set off by the Spaniards deliberately, and it even published a diagram, an "artist's conception," showing how the mine had been placed.¹⁰

Compared to the warlike stand taken in that paper, the Florida press was most conservative. It might be added that their stand on both the DeLome letter and the Maine explosion was more realistic than that of the northern papers. Instead of viewing the DeLome letter as an unforgivable insult, the Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, in common with other state papers, saw it as a regrettable, somewhat stupid error, but one that should cause no difficulty. As for the *Maine*, most of the Florida editors gave

10. New York *Journal*, February 17, 1898.

the story full coverage, but cautioned their readers that no judgment should be passed until the Navy had made its investigation.

Several papers, including the *Tampa Tribune*, offered the theory that the explosion had been an accident. The Tampa editor also declared that if it had not been an accident, then he tended to believe that the rebels were the ones to be suspected. His reasoning was plain. He realized that the destruction of the ship might well cause the United States to take stronger steps, and that the rebels were the only ones likely to benefit should those steps include war.¹¹

By the time the first excitement over the sinking had subsided, signs began to appear that the editors were now becoming aware that they were fighting a losing battle even among their own readers. On February 3 the Miami *Metropolis* commented on the prevalence of war talk in Key West, declaring that people in that city were predicting war in sixty days. The following day the *Times Union and Citizen* joined in, denouncing talk designed to hasten war. Shortly afterward, the letters-to-the-editor column in the Ocala *Banner* began to reflect the fact that many people in Florida now believed war was both necessary and desirable. Soon the editors themselves began to admit that war was probably going to come, even though they still maintained their attitude of opposition to it.

With that admission, a subtle change took place in the news and editorial columns. While continuing to denounce the jingoes, the editors began casting about to see if there was some way in which the state could benefit. Their speculations about the nature of the war, and the observation of increased activity at Key West gave them both a ray of hope and a new headache. Trainloads of ammunition began to pass through Jacksonville, headed for Key West via Tampa. While rejoicing in the additional railroad business, both the Jacksonville and the Tampa papers saw that the greatest benefit would accrue to Key West. That sparked some hope that the Navy would require another base to keep Key West supplied, and claims for both Miami and Tampa were advanced, with nothing more in mind at the moment than their service as subsidiary supply bases.

The Florida East Coast Railroad, on the other hand, felt capable of handling the supply problem. J. P. Beckwith, Passenger

11. *Tampa Tribune*, February 17, 1898.

Agent for the railroad, wired Secretary of War Alger on March 1, offering the service of his road. The telegram was published in the *Times Union and Citizen*, and read as follows:

In the event of war should you need quick movement of troops to Key West, the FEC Railway, from Jacksonville to Miami, 367 miles, and the FEC Steamship Company, Miami to Key West, 135 miles, are in a position to give 20 hours time between Jacksonville and Key West and have equipment to handle 3,000 troops daily and can add more if desired.¹²

The wire was typical of the thinking that was to continue to be evident for some time. Thoughts of the war concentrated on the fact that it would be a naval war, and, if the Army entered into it at all, it would be based on Key West. Not even in the business-minded Jacksonville paper did any thought appear that there might be other aspects of the military activity that would be of advantage to Florida. Even after publishing the Beckwith telegram on March 2, the editor accompanied it with an article that was gloomy in the extreme. Saying that activity that might be helpful to the railroads would not compensate for the war, he outlined what he believed would happen. War would shut down the lumber shipping trade; lumber mills and camps would have to close; the tourist trade would halt; and the coastal cities would be subject to attack by the Spanish fleet.

While the editor was obviously worried, and still detested the thought of war, other Floridians saw more than a ray of hope. As early as February 16, the *Tampa Tribune* let its guard down momentarily, and proclaimed :

If Uncle Sam does decide to give Spain a slap in the face, and does not thump the pumpkins out of her too soon, then times in Tampa will certainly boom. Tom Weir and W. V. Lifsey have already made arrangements to buy all the sweet potatoes in South Florida, with expectations of making a fortune out of the speculation.

Such items tended to encourage some degree of optimism, but not nearly enough to overcome the feeling that war would be catastrophic for the state as a whole. By March 1, the probability of war had become almost a certainty, and several editors began to show concern over a naval war which might bring the Spanish

12. *Times Union and Citizen* (Jacksonville), March 2, 1898.

Navy to Florida. Although in February the editor of the Jacksonville paper had ridiculed the request of the Army Engineers for funds for the fortification of Washington, D. C., he now joined in the swelling chorus of voices rising from all the east coast cities, demanding that fortifications be built at once.

Most of the coastal cities joined the chorus. Only two, Key West and Pensacola, had no worries on this score. Possessing naval bases, their defenses were in better shape than most, and the Army had already begun strengthening the batteries at each harbor. But the truth of the matter was simply that the Army did not possess the guns, the money, or even the men that would be required to defend each city. Nor, for that matter, did it have the time, Brigadier General John M. Wilson, Chief of Engineers, covered the situation in a letter sent to Representative Stephen Sparkman, referring to an inquiry about plans to defend Tampa. He began by saying simply that the plans of the Army did not at that time include any provision for Tampa. He then mentioned the delays that would be encountered in such a project, touching on the problems of land to be secured, plans to be drawn up, and then the actual construction. He concluded by saying that these were insuperable obstacles barring any defense of the city in the emergency at hand.¹³ Similar replies were sent in answer to inquiries from other Florida cities.

All during the month of March the cities bombarded Secretary of War Alger with insistent demands for protection. Mayors, chambers of commerce, congressmen, and many others sent off letters and telegrams. All were met with the same polite answer, but without any promise of action. Tampa was the first city to receive any action on its request. Henry B. Plant, with the extensive Plant System yards and docks at Port Tampa, took a hand. Three days after he personally wrote to Alger on March 22, Alger ordered his Chief of Engineers to prepare plans for Tampa's defense.¹⁴

The Florida East Coast Railroad sent J. B. Ingraham to Washington to try to get action for Jacksonville, but that city had to wait until April 5, at which time a general plan was announced by the War Department to provide batteries for a number of cities,

13. National Archives and Records Services, *Selected Records Relating to Tampa, Florida, 1896-1898* (Washington, 1934) Items 1, 2, 3. Microfilm.

14. *Ibid.*, Items 4, 5.

including Jacksonville, Fernandina, St. Augustine, and Miami. Actual work was not to begin until after the President had sent his message to Congress on April 11, and as a result not one of the cities had any real protection until after the war was over. In the meantime, worry had increased to the extent that several cities, including Miami and a number of smaller communities on the coast, raised and equipped troops of Home Guards for defense, arming them with rifles secured from the state.

The last ten days before the war, the period in which Congress was debating the Presidential message, was a rather mixed-up time for the editors. Still holding on to their opposition to war, their tone gradually mellowed as they noted more and more activity taking place in Key West and in Pensacola. The constant stream of trains loaded with guns and ammunition, the work on the various defense works, and the prospect of at least an extended stay of the Fleet, had cheered Key West tremendously, and some of the excitement seeped into the other parts of Florida. Reports of prosperous and happy merchants, the recruitment of labor for the bases, and the vague sense of excitement may not have reconciled the editor of the *Times Union and Citizen* to the impending war, but they did help to alleviate his pain and ease his mind. He still continued to denounce the war, frequently observing somewhat acidly that enthusiasm for war increased the farther away one went from the scene of action. As far as he was concerned, no one in his right mind desired war.

The editor's dislike for war is not hard to understand, but his overlooking the one development that could and would bring great economic benefit to the state is. As early as the middle of March it had been announced that the War Department planned to concentrate all its available troops into several camps that were to be located in the Southeast. With the knowledge, and the repeated assertion of the fact that Florida was closest to Cuba, why did it not occur to the editor, or to anyone else, that Florida might at least secure one of the camps? As it was, no one took any more note of the announcement than merely to publish it along with other news. It required a news item in the New York *Times* of March 30 to alert the state to the possibility.

On that day, the New York *Times* carried the news that a conference had been held in Washington to determine the location of the camps. No final decision had yet been made, but, according to the *Times*, four cities were being considered. These were

New Orleans, Mobile, Tampa, and Savannah. It appeared that the city to be chosen was to act as a base of supplies and a shipping base, as well as a camp for troops. All of the cities named were ports fairly close to Cuba.

The *Times* item started a chain reaction in Florida. Tampa in particular was galvanized into action to attempt to ensure its being selected, and Jacksonville supported the claim of the West coast city. The campaign waged by Tampa to secure the nomination cannot be detailed here, but it should be noted that the prospect opened up a vista of future possibilities that soon engaged the attention of most of the towns and cities in the state. When Tampa learned, on April 16, that it had won out over the other cities on the list, the entire state rejoiced, with but a few snide remarks on the part of cities that thought their situation was better than Tampa's for the use of the Army.

However, even the rejoicing over the location of the base and the camp did not lessen the regret still being expressed by most of the editors. They would have preferred to see no war at all. The Miami *Metropolis* again denounced the "loud-talking jingoists," declaring that the very ones who demanded war would remain silent when it came time to volunteer. The editor of the *Times Union and Citizen*, just prior to the war, on April 9, finally gave a full explanation for his stand.

Convinced by then that nothing could avert war, and aware of the benefits that might be secured, the editor still had no appetite for the prospect. He firmly believed that the end of the war would see the annexation of Cuba, and it was this that underlay his opposition. He foresaw Cuban competition in the areas of citrus fruit growing, truck farming, and sugar cane. He did not think that the Florida growers could meet that competition, and he also thought that with Cuba within the tariff walls, Florida would lose its attraction for new developments and new settlers interested in any of those lines. He predicted that the cigar manufacturers and cigar workers of Tampa and Key West would return to Cuba. As for the tourist trade, he predicted that within ten years Florida would be only a way station on the road to Cuba.

He then turned to seek what cheer he could in the situation. The building of fortifications, plus the establishment of an Army camp, would rebound to the benefit of Florida business, and the editor believed that Jacksonville would share in the gain to be

made. However, once more his pessimism took over, and he warned that an upturn in business of that nature would be only temporary, and would be offset by losses in the lumber, phosphate, and tourist industries. Other editors, while not speaking as plainly, appeared to agree, and they still maintained a rather somber attitude until April 20.

On April 11, President McKinley sent to Congress a message that, in effect, asked authorization for the use of the armed forces in order to expel Spain. The House of Representatives agreed by an overwhelming vote, and by April 16, the Senate also approved a similar resolution. By April 20, the two houses had ironed out some differences in wording, and the resolution was sent to McKinley. As soon as a copy of the resolution reached Florida, one section caught the eyes of all newsmen, and the war could now be seen in a different light.

That section was what is known as the Teller Amendment. By this, the United States disclaimed any desire to add Cuba to its possessions, and pledged the nation to leave the island's future government up to the Cubans. The sigh of relief that swept the editorial offices was so deep that it might have been heard all over Florida. The Jacksonville editor threw off any restraint and plunged into the task of promoting the war effort, and, incidentally, promoting Florida for a more active part in that war. The editor of the *Tampa Times* came right out and declared that the city was now relieved of all fear for the future, that it could rest assured that the cigar manufacturers would not return to Cuba. With that off his chest, he too turned joyfully to the prospect of reaping profits from the war. As he wrote, troops were already arriving in the city, and merchants were already doing business with the Army.

The material benefits to be secured by Florida would far exceed the expectations of anyone in the state, but great as they were, they did not distract the editors from their self-imposed task of trumpeting the advantages of the state far and wide and of advertising their belief that Florida was destined to be one of the truly great states of the Union. Before the summer was more than half over, before the war was ended, the editors began to warn of the need to prepare for the resumption of normal business, the business of building a greater, more populous, and more prosperous state. The press of Florida had thus early anticipated the Chamber of Commerce in its converted promotional efforts.