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Santo Domingo – A Rejected Annexation in Retrospect

by

Blanton E. Black

The administration of President Ulysses S. Grant is peculiarly characterized by his persistent efforts in favor of the annexation of the Caribbean republic, Santo Domingo, to the United States of America.

This letter appears in the initial phase of his first term:

Washington, January 10, 1870

To the Senate of the United States:

I transmit to the Senate, for consideration with a view to its ratification, a treaty for the annexation of the Dominican Republic to the United States, signed by the plenipotentiaries of the parties on the 29th of November last.

U. S. Grant¹

This official request was but the first among a welter of repeated petitions, explanations, and exhortations as to the wisdom of the annexation of the Negro republic and the inclusion of its residents as citizens of the United States. For President Grant, this proposal and its advocacy became an obsession disturbing in its persistence and disruptive in its intrusion.

Santo Domingo had secured independence from Haiti in 1844. Her sovereign status, however, proved to be a doubtful blessing due to internal dissension and intrigue as well as constant threat of invasion by Haiti. In desperation, the tiny republic entreated various European powers to consider her a protectorate. Such efforts failed. However, in 1861, Santa, as president, brought about the annexation of the country to Spain. This state of affairs met resistance from the populace who resented the reactionary colonial policy of the Spanish. This opposition, plus the scourging effect of yellow fever, precluded Spain's efforts to reinstitute her former political dominance.

The end of the Civil War left the United States free to reassert the hands-off tenets of the Monroe Doctrine. Whereupon, Spain in 1865, gracefully relinquished jurisdiction of her former dependency.

The petition for annexation to the United States was made in 1869 and found strong support in the newly elected President, U. S. Grant.

¹James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. 7, 1908, p. 46.

This study does not purport to evaluate the motives, now a century old, which prompted the Dominican Republic's plea for annexation. There still remains the question as to whether its ratification in Santo Domingo was truly indigenous in its popularity, or whether the project was inspired by conniving American adventurers and unscrupulous local politicians. Neither will this study review the acrimonious debates and interparty quarrels which the protracted affair engendered in the 1870's.

It is expedient, however, to consider a tragic and puzzling development in the Dominican affair. Its chief opponent and most outspoken critic was Charles Sumner, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Sumner's opposition was vindictive and vitriolic even in the face of those proponents who heralded Santo Domingo as a haven for the free Negroes of the South who would find there immediate and full exercise of their civil rights.

Why then the vitriolic opposition of Sumner, champion of Negro freedom and suffrage? Had he not publicly stated that the Negro could be protected only by giving him the ballot? Did not this same Charles Sumner foster the enactment of civil rights legislation to secure equality of treatment of Negroes in public places? And was he not filled with remorse and chagrin when this act was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court?

Sumner's opposition was based upon the surmise that the cost of annexation was unduly expensive. It was felt that parties close to President Grant who favored the measure were seekers after personal gain, and, moreover, there was the danger of the establishment of a questionable precedent: would not, ultimately, the rest of the West Indies and republics of Central America follow suit with like pleas of annexation resulting in the dire prospect of the United States incorporating as its territorial jurisdiction the islands and nations of the Caribbean? Such a state of affairs, Sumner felt, would indeed be deplorable! Thus many of the Republicans and all of the Democrats arrayed against the measure.

Against such a coalition the blandishments of Grant's inept political maneuverings were of little avail. Particularly, his reticence and taciturnity were a handicap to legislative persuasion. There persisted, too, around U. S. Grant, President of the U. S. A., the military image of U. S. Grant, General of the Army. His rigid military decorum was a paltry substitute for political finesse. In the position of president, U. S. Grant possessed neither the politician's perception of the popular mood, nor the statesman's penchant for moulding public sentiment.

The proposed annexation was rejected by the Senate, but not before acrimonious debate, allegations of fraud, and interparty schism had done their irreparable harm. President Grant, though beaten, never receded from an abiding faith in the benefits of his proposal. Encouched in the swan song of his farewell message to Congress, December 5, 1876, is his plaintive effort for vindication of his Caribbean venture:

Santo Domingo is fertile, and upon its soil may be grown just those tropical products which the United States use so much and which are produced or prepared for market now by slave labor almost exclusively, namely, sugar, coffee, dyewoods, mahogany, tropical fruits, tobacco, etc.

In reference to Cuba in this matter he says:

About 75 per cent of the exports of Cuba are consumed in the United States legislation, particularly in Cuba, being unfavorable to a mutual exchange of the products of each country All that is produced in Cuba could be produced in Santo Domingo The Cuban question would have been settled long ago in favor of "free Cuba"

He spoke of the sparsely settled areas of Santo Domingo by saying:

The island (Santo Domingo) is but sparsely settled, while it has an area sufficient for the profitable employment of several millions of people. The soil would have fallen into the hands of United States capitalists.

Grant also describes possible improvements in Negro-white relationship stemming from his proposal by saying:

The products are so valuable in commerce that emigration there would have been encouraged; the emancipated race of the South would have found there a congenial home, where their civil rights would not be disputed and where their labor would be so much sought after that the poorest among them could have found the means to go. Thus in cases of great oppression and cruelty, such as has been practiced upon them in many places within the last eleven years, whole communities would have sought refuge in Santo Domingo. I do not suppose the whole race would have gone, nor is it desirable that they should go. Their labor is desirable—indispensable almost—where they now are. But the possession of this territory would have left the Negro "master of the situation," by enabling him to demand his rights at home on pain of finding them elsewhere.²

An objective reappraisal of the rejection of the petition for annexation of the Dominican Republic a century ago can but lead to the following conclusions that now, even as a century ago,

1. the Dominican Republic is perplexed with the problems of (a) political intrigue from within, and (b) Haitian attack from without.

2. there exists the fear that unless the United States asserts paternalistic protection, a left wing European power with inimical ideology will fill the void of the domestic security.

3. the government of Cuba is hostile toward the United States;

²Richardson, *Messages*, p. 412.

moreover, there persists the problem of "free Cuba:" namely, chattel slavery in the 1860's—communistic slavery in the 1960's.

4. there persists a plaintive though unanswered appeal for the exercise of civil rights by a major segment of America's native born citizens.

5. there is the urgent need for reaffirmation of the Monroe Doctrine emphasizing America for the Americans.

6. the privilege of power politics can not be divorced from the responsibilities of paternalistic protection.

7. the Halls of Congress are hampered by coalitions of obstructionists and caucusing conventicles of ineptitude.

8. prolonged and acrimonious debate is self-defeating resulting in desultory decisions and inane procrastinations.

9. the diplomatic perception and prophetic foresight of Ulysses S. Grant continues to be maligned and unrequited.

A view in retrospect of President Grant and Santo Domingo is related to Reconstruction repressions, Negro migration and civil rights, national expansion, and hemispheric policy.

And where do we stand today? For an answer there is but the frustration of silence conceived in ignorance, prejudice and misunderstanding, for we know not.

Admittedly, the objective historian, picturing a true narrative, concedes little room for the subjunctive emphasizing "what might have been." Nevertheless, the philosophy of history holds yet a cup for lamentations withal praying that the recognized and admitted mistakes of the past will point a clearer path for action in the future.

What, then, may be said to be some philosophical implications of this study?

1. Oftentimes, individuals for personal aggrandisement are, nevertheless, proponents of measures beneficial to the plurality. And men of base ideals may perchance be involved in events of momentous importance. Indeed, such events should be evaluated on their merits rather than by the reputations of the persons associated therewith.

2. Moreover, for those who aspire to freedom, there is no delimiting of time, creed, or place. And, for such aspirants there is a natural proclivity toward union and the desire for corporate annexation with those already free. The realms of democratic idealism are beyond defining, for freedom is composed both of material condition and spiritual circumstance.

3. There is a *manifest destiny* of the United States of America—not of America's own choosing; but rather the resultant of forces engendered by international crisis coupled with compelling demands of national survival. Already her growth from within constitutes

the marvel of nations. Yet, it is imperative that the eagle wings of the Dominion of Democracy spread further to shelter even the waifs among nations. The writer holds that *democracy's growth is inevitable*. Nevertheless, it is felt that there *must be* expansion by peaceful annexation rather than expansion by military aggression. A broader territorial base of the blessings of democratic idealism can and will arrest the cancerous spread of the arch-enemy, communism. Mutual incorporation and territorial adoption are far more potent than atomic domination or dollar diplomacy.