Fifty-Fourth Congress

Dec. 2, 1895 - Mar. 4, 1897

Second Administration of Grover Cleveland

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Historical Background

As President Grover Cleveland neared the halfway point of his second term, the economic crisis known as the Panic of 1893, which was inaugurated by the twin insolvencies of a Pennsylvania railroad and a New Jersey rope manufacturer, showed little sign of slowing down, much less giving way to recovery. The Panic wrought tremendous destruction across all sectors of the economy, leading to the closure of some 500 banks, the shuttering of 15,000 businesses, sending stock prices plummeting and unemployment rates skyrocketing. It came as little surprise then, that the President's Democratic Party took a veritable shellacking in the 1894 midterm Congressional elections. Republicans had their greatest electoral success in a generation securing a 254 to 93 seat majority in the House of Representatives, an increase of 130 seats over their total in the 53rd Congress, while also winning the majority in the Senate, with 44 seats to the Democrats 40, a reversal of the party breakdown in the last Congress.

Thus, loathed by the public, the opposition, and his own party's Congressional delegations, President Grover Cleveland had little hope of advancing any major legislative initiatives aimed at curtailing the economic bloodletting. Absent a comprehensive economic agenda, the President found himself occupied in an area for which he had little enthusiasm—foreign policy. Urgent developments in the Caribbean and in South America demanded the President's attention and lead him to stake out a strong position for the prerogative of the United States to adjudicate and intervene in any affairs impacting the western hemisphere.

In Venezuela, a half-century old territorial dispute over a strip of land claimed by the British as part of British Guyana and by Venezuela threatened a diplomatic crisis when Venezuela retained the services of William Lindsay Scruggs, a former United States Ambassador to Colombia and Venezuela, to lobby the United States to intervene under the auspices of the Monroe Doctrine to force the British to submit to arbitration. This policy principle,



President Grover Cleveland

Majority Party: Republican (44 seats) Minority Party:
Party: Republican (44 seats)
Republican (44 seats)
(44 seats) Minority
Minority
•
Party:
Democrats
(40 seats)
Other
Parties:
Populists
(4 seats);
Silver
Republicans
(2 seats)
President
Pro
Tempore:
William P.
Frye

first expressed by former President James Monroe and fully articulated by his Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, held that the western hemisphere falls under the exclusive prerogative of the United States and that while the U.S. would remain neutral on the question of existing European colonies, it would oppose any attempts on the part of European powers to establish new colonies or otherwise molest the newly independent Latin American republics. As such, a minor territorial dispute between a sovereign Latin American republic and the British Empire whose colonial territory in British Guiana long antedated the existence of the United States would seem to fall neatly outside the purview of the Monroe Doctrine. But President Cleveland saw in the crisis an opportunity to improve U.S. relations in Latin America.

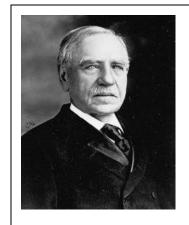
As the President and his Secretary of State were busy kneading and stretching the Monroe Doctrine to justify U.S. intervention in the Venezuelan-British dispute, events were developing in Cuba that would generate a response seemingly at odds with the principles articulated to justify the Cleveland Administration's position in the matter in South America. Cuba was the scene of great upheaval and unrest throughout the 19th century, with rebellions against Spanish rule cropping up numerous times, beginning with a push by Cuba's Creole aristocracy to separate from Spain. Activists working toward Cuban independence found safe harbor among Cuban expatriate communities in the United States and occasionally used U.S. territory as a base from which revolutionary plans could be hatched, and funds and weapons raised, in contravention of U.S. law. Such incidents deeply angered Spain, which issued communications to United States officials accusing them of duplicity and exploiting idealistic Cuban activists to promote its own ambitions for annexation. Successive administrations made periodic efforts to enforce the prohibition on using U.S. territory to plan operations against a sovereign government but putting a stop to the practice proved to be all but impossible.

In the spirit of putting the matter of the Civil War to rest at long last, Congress enacted the Act of Oblivion in March 1896. The Act repealed an earlier law that imposed restrictions on individuals who held commissions or otherwise served in an official capacity for the Confederate States of America, banning them from serving in the U.S. Army or Navy. As President Cleveland reasoned, thirty years after the end of the conflict and long after the work of rebuilding and Reconstruction were complete, there could be little justification for continuing a policy that calls attention to that dark period.

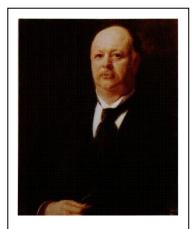
On January 4, 1896, the appeal of the Territory of Utah to be admitted as the 45th state in the union was finally approved, the culmination of years of mistrust, fear, and outright hostility toward a fledgling iconoclastic religious tradition that never gave up its ambition to find a home where they can organize their society in accordance with their novel belief system.

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President Pro Tempore William P. Frye



Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed

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War or Peace?

Ottoman Depredations

The 54th Congress transpired during a period of relative peace for the United States. Be that as it may, developments around the world with the potential to put American interests at risk forced President Grover Cleveland to spend much of his final two years in office dealing with foreign affairs. One such case involved depredations allegedly committed by the Ottoman government against Christians living in Ottoman territory.

In the mid-1890s, the Ottoman Empire found itself in the deepest crisis in its 600 years of existence. The growth of nationalism in Europe and calls for national self-determination under the nation-state system to replace imperial political arrangements had contributed to the Ottoman's loss of sovereignty over the Balkan territories. Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II viewed these pressures as evidence of treachery on the part of the Christian European nations who sought to dismantle the Islamic Ottoman Empire. The large, Christian Armenian community living in Ottoman Turkey had been subject to Ottoman Muslim repression for centuries and the new ideologies of national liberation spreading throughout Europe and Asia during this period held great attraction for the long-suffering Armenians. The Sultan, for his part, viewed the Armenians peppered throughout Ottoman territories to be little more than an extension of the hectoring Europeans who were threatening the territorial integrity of his empire.

In the early-1890s, Sultan Abdul Hamid II conferred official status on the bands of Kurdish bandits occupying mountainous eastern Anatolia, which was also the home of a great number of the empire's Armenians. These so-called Hamidiye were given free rein to attack Armenians. In 1894, the Sultan stepped up the pressure on Armenians ordering increased persecution and direct attacks against Armenians. Activists associated with the two major Armenian nationalist parties that were active in the period—the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party (Hunchaks) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaks)—encouraged their fellow Armenians to resist Turkish depredations against the Armenian community. In the eastern Anatolian district of Sasun in the Armenian highlands, local Armenians confronted the Ottoman Army and Kurdish Hamidiye in the district. Overwhelmed by the Turkish-Kurdish forces' superior numbers, the resisters were massacred, setting off protests by the governments of France, Britain and Russia.

In response to the incident, the aforementioned great powers imposed a series of reforms on the Sultan aimed at curbing the abuses of the Hamidiye and generally ease the pressures on the Armenian community. The reforms such as they were, were never implemented. Instead, the Sultan initiated a series of massacres against Armenians in Constantinople, Erzurum, Diyarbekir, and other towns and villages with significant Armenian

communities. Though it is impossible to determine the precise number of casualties, estimates of the death toll range from 80,000-300,000.

The massacres were covered widely and often sensationally in the international press, generating no shortage of expressions of appalled indignation but little action to protect those at risk of further violence. President Cleveland expressed concerns over the safety of Christians in Ottoman Turkey. Though the bulk of the violence to date had been committed against Armenian and Assyrian Christians living in Ottoman territory, the President was most concerned for the safety and property of U.S. missionaries—virtually all U.S. citizens living in Ottoman Turkey at the time were missionaries. Though no U.S. citizens had been victims of violence, there had been claims against the Ottoman government for damage to missionary property.

Renegotiating the Monroe Doctrine

The territorial dispute between Venezuela and Great Britain was escalated by the Venezuelans' decision to employ William Lindsay Scruggs, a former United States Ambassador to Colombia and Venezuela, to lobby the Federal government to intervene in the dispute under the auspices of the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine describes a foreign policy principle first articulated by former President James Monroe during his seventh annual address before a joint session of Congress. The Doctrine, penned by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, claims that the lands of the new world are no longer open to colonization by European powers. Adams opens the doctrine: "The occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." The case is made most explicitly in a later passage:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power, we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

Thus, as articulated by its original formulators, the Monroe Doctrine asserts U.S. prerogative in the territorial affairs of the western hemisphere and in declaring the region closed to future colonization by European powers. However, the Venezuela dispute involved a European colonial possession which antedated the establishment of the United States and therefore was technically not subject to U.S. intervention under the Monroe Doctrine. Be

that as it may, President Cleveland saw an opportunity to generate some goodwill among the Latin American states by standing with them against the designs of an imperial European power. For this more nuanced interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, President Cleveland turned to Secretary of State Richard Olney, who articulated a broad interpretation of the nation's paramount foreign policy doctrine, which proved sufficiently flexible to adapt to the changing role of the United States on the global stage.

As a self-described isolationist, President Cleveland was wary of involving the United States in foreign disputes unless the interests of the United States were directly involved. As such, the President had to weigh the risks of being seen to officiously intervene in the affairs of sovereign states against the risks posed by the threat of hostilities erupting in the Caribbean. Cleveland's Secretary of State, Richard Olney, solved the issue by proposing a new, broader interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. The Olney Corollary states, in part, "Today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition . . . its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and practically invulnerable as against any or all other powers." Thus, the anti-interventionist Cleveland embraced an audaciously broad interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine to justify intervening in the dispute between Britain and Venezuela and force the British to submit the matter to arbitration.

In July 1895, Secretary of State Olney dispatched a communication to the British, outlining the history of the dispute between the British and Venezuelans and asserting the U.S. prerogative to intervene in the matter according to his refined conception of the Monroe Doctrine. The British initially rebuffed Olney, responding that "the Government of the United States is not entitled to affirm as a universal proposition, with reference to a number of independent States for whose conduct it assumes no responsibility, that its interests are necessarily concerned in whatever may befall those States, simply because they are situated in the Western Hemisphere." That December, President Cleveland stepped up the pressure on the Venezuelans during an address on the issue before a joint session of Congress. In his address, the President asked Congress to appropriate funds to organize a commission to study the matter and asserted that it was the duty of the United States "to resist by any means in its power as a willful aggression" upon the rights of Venezuela any attempts by the British to assert sovereignty over any territory held by the United States to be Venezuelan. Congress approved a law establishing a commission to study the border dispute, appropriating \$100,000 to fund the effort in December 1895. Meanwhile, in January, as the commission began the work of investigating the border dispute, the British signaled their willingness to relent and submit the matter to arbitration. Though the process would extend beyond the end of the 54th Congress and Cleveland's Presidency, the final decision of the arbitrators, which awarded Britain nearly 90% of the territory it claimed. but granted Venezuela full sovereignty over the mouth of the Orinoco River, was accepted by all parties and the profile of the United States as a reliable and honest arbiter of international disputes was raised considerably in Latin America as well as among the great powers.

If President Cleveland's response to the crisis in Venezuela exploited an unwontedly broad interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine to justify U.S. intervention in the affairs of sovereign states, his cool refusal to intervene in the Cuban Civil War arguably reflected an inverse interpretation of U.S. prerogatives in the western hemisphere. When José Martí launched his rebellion against Spanish rule in Cuba, he was, in part, relying on the United States to act on its worst tendencies and intervene in the affair. As Martí and many others saw it, the United States had been actively eyeing the island of Cuba for annexation virtually since the birth of the republic. To be sure, Martí was horrified at the prospect of U.S. annexation of Cuba and the impact that a fresh round of speculative plantation operators would have on the island's people and its economy. All the same, a U.S. intervention represented the surest route to dispatching the Spanish without suffering too many casualties, so it was a risk the revolutionary felt he could not afford to pass up.

On Christmas day in 1894, three ships, the *Lagonda*, the *Almadis*, and the Baracoa, sailed from Fernandina Beach, Florida, loaded with soldiers and arms and headed for Cuba. The launch was the opening salvo in a rebellion against Spanish rule on the island and advocating Cuban independence. The operation was the long-cherished and meticulously prepared plan of the exiled Cuban revolutionary poet and Cuban independence activist José Martí. Martí, who was born in Cuba but was exiled to Spain at the age of 16 after being arrested for treason when the Spanish authorities discovered a critical letter written to a friend who'd just joined the Spanish military. Martí had spent the last several years shuttling between Cuban expatriate communities in the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, reading his revolutionary poetry delivering speeches on Spanish abuses in Cuba and the struggle for independence to organize support and raise funds for the effort. The history of Spanish depredations in Cuba were exceedingly familiar to Americans who had read accounts of Cuban exiles and expatriates and deeply sympathized with their longing for independence.

Though two of the three ships that Martí deployed from Florida were seized by U.S. authorities and returned to Florida, the plan unfolded as designed. In March, Martí drafted the Manifesto of Montecristi, which outlined the official policy of the Revolutionary Party of Cuba in prosecuting the war. The manifesto stipulated the values and intentions embodied by the independence struggle. These include the equal right of black and white Cubans to fight as soldiers in the war, that the participation of blacks, the vast majority of whom were emancipated slaves, was crucial to victory, that Spaniards who do not oppose the rebels will be left unmolested, among other progressive principles.

Confronted with the developing crisis in Cuba, President Cleveland found himself caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. On the one hand, Cuba was far and away the most important trading partner of the United States, in addition to the location of numerous U.S. commercial interests around the island. The American public, sympathetic to the Cuban people's striving for independence as an echo of their own revolutionary history, were largely in favor of U.S. intervention and an overall greater U.S. presence on the island. To make matters worse, newspaper owners, often with vested

interests in drawing Cuba and the United States closer together, published stories of the excesses visited upon the poor Cuban people at the hands of the brutal, decadent Spaniards, many of which later turned out to be exaggerated or even wholly fabricated strictly for their propaganda value. Be that as it may, the President had little sympathy for the rebel cause and he was plagued by fears that an independent Cuba would prove to be a tempting inducement to further colonization by other European powers. Ultimately the President decided that intervention was not in the country's best interest and in 1895 declared United States neutrality in the matter.

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Cleveland, Grover. <u>Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, with the annual message of the President, transmitted to Congress December 2, 1895.</u> Department of State, House, Dec. 2, 1895. 54th Congress, 1st Session, H.Doc. 1/2. ProQuest Congressional, 3368 H.doc.1/2

Cleveland, Grover. <u>Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, with the annual message of the President transmitted to Congress December 7, 1896, and the Annual Report of the Secretary of State.</u> House, Dec. 7, 1896. 54th Congress, 2nd Session, H.Doc. 1/1. ProQuest Congressional, 3477 H.doc.1/1

Economic Trends and Conditions

Though the previous Congress had repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the Panic of 1893, the economic depression that ensued continued to put enormous pressure on the Treasury's gold reserves. In his address before the first session of the 54th Congress, President Cleveland laboriously recounted the Treasury's concerted efforts to maintain a reserve of \$100 million in gold to redeem Treasury notes. The problem, as the President saw it, was that rather than retiring the notes once redeemed, the government simply reissued them. The President's suggestions for remedying the strain on the Treasury included issuing low-yield bonds in exchange for gold-backed notes, or, simply cancelling notes when they are exchanged for gold. Be that as it may, the President's deep unpopularity among lawmakers from both parties, particularly those allied with the Free Silver movement meant that his prospects for ushering any major new legislative initiatives minimal.

President Cleveland used the opportunity of his address before the second session of the 54th Congress to recount some of the salutary effects of the Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act. During the first full fiscal year since the new tariff regime went into effect, that which ended on August 28, 1894, the President reported that imports increased by \$6.5 million over the previous year, U.S. exports increased \$70 million, and overall government revenue from tariff duties increased by \$8 million over the preceding year.

Though the President saw the Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act as an improvement over the McKinley Tariff it replaced, he was dissatisfied by changes made to the Act by the Senate. The effect of these was to limit many of the reforms intended by the Act by increasing protections for key sectors. The President attributed these changes to the influence of trusts in the Senate and devoted a portion of his address to elucidating the deleterious effects of trusts on the economic well-being of the United States. Cleveland then lamented the failure of legislation aimed at curbing the influence of trusts had proven insufficient and mulled over the Constitutional limitations on Federal power responsible for these difficulties. The President concluded his address by encouraging the Congress to consider all possible remedies for the pernicious influence of trusts, saying, "even though it may be found that Federal authority is not broad enough to fully reach the case, there can be no doubt of the power of the several States to act effectively in the premises, and there should be no reason to doubt their willingness to judiciously exercise such power."

Sources:

Cleveland, Grover. <u>Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, with the annual message of the President, transmitted to Congress December 2, 1895</u>. Department of State, House, Dec. 2, 1895. 54th Congress, 1st Session, H.Doc. 1/2. ProQuest Congressional, 3368 H.doc.1/2

Cleveland, Grover. <u>Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, with the annual message of the President transmitted to Congress December 7, 1896, and the Annual Report of the Secretary of State.</u> House, Dec. 7, 1896. 54th Congress, 2nd Session, H.Doc. 1/1. ProQuest Congressional, 3477 H.doc.1/1

Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Decisions

In re Debs, concluded that the Federal government had broad authority to regulate and protect commerce and the delivery of the mails, in this case by issuing an injunction against striking Pullman railroad car employees and holding the leaders of the union in contempt of court for failing to bring an end to the strike, 158 U.S. 564 (1895)

Coffin v. United States, establishing the presumption of innocence of persons accused in criminal proceedings, 156 U.S. 432 (1895)

Pollock v. Farmer's Loan & Trust Co., held that the unapportioned direct taxes imposed by the Income Tax Act of 1894 as a part of the Wilson-Gorman Tariff is a direct tax and therefore violates the Constitution, 157 U.S. 429 (1895), affirmed on rehearing, 158 U.S. 601 (1895)

Brown v. Walker, concluded that a Federal law authorizing transactional immunity for witnesses invoking their right against self-incrimination satisfied the fifth amendment's protection against self-incrimination, thereby allowing the government to compel the testimony of such witnesses, 161 U.S. 591 (1896)

Plessy v. Ferguson, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation laws under the doctrine of separate but equal, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

Source:

Costello, George A. and Johnny H. Killian. *Constitution of the United States of America, Analysis and Interpretation.* CRS, Library of Congress, Jan. 1, 1996. 103rd Congress, 1st Session, S. Doc. 103-6 (Y1.1/3:103-6). ProQuest Congressional, 14152 S.doc.6

1895 Events

- **Feb. 14:** Oscar Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is first performed at St. James's Theatre in London
- **Feb. 25:** Cuban War of Independence The first rebellions, led by José Martí and General Máximo Gómez y Báez, take place marking the start of the Cuban War of Independence
- **Apr. 6:** Oscar Wilde is arrested in London for "gross indecency" after losing a criminal libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry
- May 19: Willhelm Röntgen discovers a type of radiation later known as X-Rays
- May 23: Supreme Court of the U.S. rules in *Eugene v. Debs* that the federal government has the right to regulate interstate commerce in the suppression of the Pullman Strike in legal
- **Sept. 3:** The first professional American football game is played, in Latrobe, Pennsylvania
- **Sept.:** Cuban War of Independence <u>Spanish Captain-General Arsenio</u> Martínez Campos is defeated at Peralejo in Cuba
- Oct.: The London School of Economics holds its first classes
- **Oct. 8:** Empress Myeongseong of Korea is killed at her private residence within Gyeonbokgung Palace by Japanese agents
- **Nov. 25:** Oscar Hammerstein opens the Olympia Theatre, the first theatre to be built in New York City's Times Square district
- **Dec. 11:** Svante Arrhenius becomes the first scientist to deliver quantified data about the sensitivity of global climate to atmospheric carbon dioxide, otherwise known as the "greenhouse effect"

1896 Events

- Jan. 4: <u>Utah is admitted as the 45th U.S. State</u>
- **Mar. 3:** Adolf Brand begins publication of *Der Eigene*, the world's first magazine oriented to male homosexuality, in Berlin
- **Apr. 6:** The opening ceremonies of the 1896 Olympics, the first modern Olympic Games, are held in Athens
- **May 18:** The United States Supreme Court introduces the "separate but equal" doctrine, upholding racial segregation laws in its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*
- **June 15:** The Sanriku earthquake and tsunami kills 27,000 in Japan

- **July 21:** In response to a "call to confer" issued by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin to all women of color, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs is organized in Washington D.C.
- Oct. 8: George Washington Carver agrees to serve as Agriculture Director at Tuskegee University

Sources:

Wilde, Oscar. <u>The Importance of Being Earnest</u>, Dover Publications, 1990. ProQuest Ebook Central

Thompson, W. Naylor. *Memorials from Florida for belligerent rights to Cuba*. Senate, Oct. 29, 1895. 54th Congress, 1st Session, S.doc.19. ProQuest Congressional, 3347 S.doc.19

Borden, W.C. *The use of the Rontgen ray by the Medical Department of the United States Army in the war with Spain, (1898).* House, Dec. 9, 1899. 56th Congress, 1st Session, H.doc.729. ProQuest Congressional, 4009 H.doc.729

Cleveland, Grover. Report on the Chicago strike of June-July, 1894, by the United States Strike Commission, appointed by the President July 26, 1894, under the provisions of section 6 of chapter 1063 of the laws of the United States passed October 1, 1888, with appendices containing testimony, proceedings, and recommendations. Senate, Dec. 10, 1894. 53rd Congress, 3rd Session, S.exdoc.7. ProQuest Congressional, 3276 S.exdoc.7

<u>"Petitions and Memorials."</u> Congressional Record, 54th Congress, 1st Session (Dec. 11, 1895) Vol. 28, p. 131. ProQuest Congressional, CR-1895-1211

Cleveland, Grover. *Proclaiming Utah a state of the Union.* Jan. 4, 1896. Presidential Proclamation No. 382. ProQuest Congressional, 1896-PR-382

Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation; Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. House. *To Provide for the Establishment of the Tuskegee Institute National Historical Park*. Sept. 28, 1972. 92nd Congress, 2nd Session. ProQuest Congressional, HRG-1972-IIA-0204

Major Acts

Act of Oblivion. Repealed the law holding that those individuals who held commissions or served in any official capacity in the Confederate States were not eligible to hold a position in the Army or Navy of the United States. Approved Mar. 31, 1896. (29 Stat. 84, Chap. 84)

Source:

Dell, Christopher and Stephen W. Stathis. *Major Acts of Congress and Treaties Approved by the Senate, 1789-1980*. Government Division (CRS), Sept. 1, 1982. 97th Congress, 2nd Session, 82-156 GOV. ProQuest Congressional, CRS-1982-GOV-0005

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