
Tariff Reform in U.S.-occupied Cuba (1898-1902): A Prize Greater Than Sugar

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Abstract

When discussing tariffs in the 1890s and early 1900s, current newspapers seem to reflect the biases in the available scholarship. That is, even as they intend to warn of the consequences of imperialism, their discussion of tariffs does not go beyond brief mentions of the well-known Tariff Acts of 1890 and 1897 (known as the McKinley and Dingley Tariffs, respectively). Seeking to reveal a more complete story of the role of tariffs in the expansion of American Empire, this paper analyzes the processes whereby the United States occupied Cuba and captured the island's trade, removing European powers from their position as Cuba's main suppliers. I argue that using military expediency as a justification, the U.S. government carried out the revamping of the Cuban tariff system to consolidate itself as the primary beneficiary. This study traces a variety of goods that eventually came to be supplied by the United States during the occupation.

Introduction

Following President Trump's tariff threats to Mexico and other countries in his first two weeks in office, newspapers worldwide have announced the advent of a new economic age. "Free trade is in retreat," read a column from *Le Monde* on February 3, "but mercantilism, with its mix of horse trading, tariff wars and military threats, is on the rise."¹ *The New Yorker*, on the other hand, wrote that Trump's agenda is best described as economic imperialism – as the "mere

protectionism" that is associated with mercantilism does not account for his push to manipulate the economic policies of weaker nations.² Yet in a more comprehensive analysis, *Reason* magazine's Matt Welch connects the President's trade policy and imperialist rhetoric to his vocal adulation for William McKinley.³ After all, Trump's inclination toward tariffs as a negotiation tool and his expressed desire for territorial expansion are consistent with the methods of the McKinley administration.

¹ Jean-Michel Bezat, "Trump's return to the White House consecrates the rebirth of the original form of capitalism," *Le Monde*, February 3, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/02/03/trump-s-return-to-the-white-house-consecrates-the-rebirth-of-the-original-form-of-capitalism_6737714_23.html.

² John Cassidy, "Trump's Trade War Is Only Getting Going," *The New Yorker*, February 4, 2025,

https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-financial-page/trumps-trade-war-is-only-getting-going?_sp=1c5fa518-cd66-4d7a-84f5-f387fd4cd6fa.1739805260884.

³ Matt Welch, "Trump's Role Model McKinley Tariffed His Way to Imperialism," *Reason*, January 31, 2025, <https://reason.com/2025/01/31/trumps-role-model-mckinley-tariffed-his-way-to-imperialism/>.

However, when discussing tariffs in the 1890s and early 1900s, newspapers seem to intend to warn of the consequences of “straight-up imperialism,” their discussion of tariffs does not go beyond brief mentions of the well-known Tariff Acts of 1890 and 1897 (known as the McKinley and Dingley Tariffs, respectively). Both enacted by Congress (not executive orders), these laws followed the legislative process in its entirety and thus are not prime examples of America’s expansionist efforts. A better example of the latter can be found in the regulation of tariffs during the first Military Occupation of Cuba (1898-1902).

As changes in Cuban tariff law bypassed congressional oversight and were not guided by a rules-based global trading system as in the present, this chapter intends to analyze the methods used by the United States to establish its economic supremacy in Cuba during the military occupation. I argue that by strategically using military expediency as a justification for agency action, the U.S. government successfully carved out a space to revamp the island’s tariff system to consolidate the U.S. as the primary beneficiary of Cuban trade. In this process the elimination of prewar Cuban tariff policies favoring European goods was central. My analysis is based largely on a lengthy “Report on the Commercial and Industrial Condition of the Island of Cuba” submitted to the Treasury at the end of 1898 by Robert P. Porter.⁴ Having presided over the 1890

U.S. census and worked in tariff-related positions before, McKinley appointed Porter to make recommendations “in relation to the revenue and customs of the island” after conducting a thorough appraisal of the island’s conditions prior to the official beginning of the military government in 1899.⁵ Not only did Porter serve as McKinley’s special tariff and fiscal commissioner to Cuba but also to Puerto Rico.⁶ So influential were his opinions on industrial matters that after the occupation he joined the staff of *The London Times* to write on these subjects.⁷ In his report, Porter suggested tariff revisions and provided a rationale for every schedule change, often citing the testimonies of interested parties who had offered him information or the need to secure specific concessions for the United States in the face of “aggressive competition” from England, Germany, and France.⁸ This official report contains important statistical data and illuminates the concerns of actors in the island, the United States, and Europe.

Additionally, I rely on correspondence between French diplomats and U.S. agencies regarding tariff increases on French imports to Cuba.⁹ As the French Embassy in Washington vehemently complained that the new tariffs were excessive and targeted French manufacturers specifically, these exchanges reveal the commercial tensions that arose in the island during the occupation.¹⁰ And more significantly, they unveil a profound change

⁴ Robert P. Porter, “Report on the Commercial and Industrial Condition of the Island of Cuba,” District of Columbia: GPO, 1898.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ “Superintendent of the Census Robert Percival Porter,” United States Census Bureau, effective April 21, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/photos/1889/robert-percival-porter.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁹ Most of these documents are located at NARA in College Park, MD and belong to Record Group (RG) 350. All citations will include box number and record group.

¹⁰ Pierre de Margerie, Chargé d’Affaires of France to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, November 21, 1901; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

in the global diplomatic order. For even when causing substantial losses to French merchants, America's imposition upon Cuban economic affairs was not met with threats of war by France. For comparison, just a few years earlier in 1894, the French had threatened to use force on the Dominican Republic if its customs houses failed to pay reparations for the murder of a French citizen.¹¹ Overlooking the fact that a group of New York bankers shared control of these customs houses, France sent a naval squadron to Santo Domingo to fulfill its warnings, prompting the U.S. Department of State to intervene.¹² After the resounding victory of the U.S. in the war of 1898, however, this belligerence toward the Americas on France's end was no more.

As historian Walter LaFeber has documented, the United States had suppressed European encroachments in Latin America for most of the nineteenth century.¹³ Relying on the Monroe Doctrine as a pretext to protect and advance America's self-interests, the U.S. repeatedly clashed with France, Germany, and Britain in the region.¹⁴ However, whether it was a border dispute in Venezuela, a British-backed insurgency in Brazil, or negotiations that favored European trade in Central America, these U.S. interventions arose from specific disputes and aimed at securing American economic and political dominance. In U.S.-occupied Cuba, conversely, American dominance was the starting point, not the goal. Thus, while my analysis is informed by

LaFeber's extensive chronicles of American economic expansion in the Western Hemisphere, my focus is on the near-total takeover of Cuba's trade. I posit that this acquisition of Cuban markets was enabled by America's display of power in the war against Spain and the ensuing reality of military occupation.

The sympathy and respect evoked by the loss of American life in the Maine allowed the U.S. government to act without fear of opposition. In fact, the government would even frame the casualties of the Maine as an act of American benevolence toward Cubans to legitimize economic policy in the island. For example, in 1898, Robert P. Porter rationalized one schedule change to privilege the U.S. in the Cuban paper trade as being a "just compensation in a measure" for the sacrifices America had recently made on Cuba's behalf.¹⁵ The tragedy of the Maine seemed to have rendered Americans immune to charges of imperialism.

As sugar was the most valuable of Cuba's industries, the historiography on Cuban trade has naturally focused on the good's fluctuating production, as well as on the regulation of its distribution in the United States. In the work *Sugar and Civilization*, for example, historian April Merleaux underscores the centrality of sugar tariffs in U.S. Congressional debates about proper territorial governance since 1898.¹⁶ Louis Perez, similarly, has discussed how preferential tariffs for imported Cuban sugar

¹¹ Walter LaFeber, "The Background of Cleveland's Venezuelan Policy: A Reinterpretation." *The American Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (1961): 958. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1845865>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Cornell University Press, 1963).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Report on the Commercial and Industrial Condition," 34.

¹⁶ April Merleaux, *Sugar and Civilization American Empire and the Cultural Politics of Sweetness* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

to the U.S. increased the island's dependency on the crop, and thus, the influx of American investment and control during and after the occupation.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this emphasis on sugar overlooks the scale of the aggressiveness of America's commercial ambitions at the turn of the nineteenth century. As Emily Rosenberg has posited in her book *Spreading the American Dream*, U.S. corporations in conjunction with the U.S. government were completely determined to dominate all commerce in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁸ Namely, America's mission was to establish its hegemony over every European power in every existing Latin American market.

Thus, seeking to tell a more comprehensive story of Cuba's integration into America's economy after 1898, I concentrate on America's acquisition of Cuba's non-sugar and tobacco markets. A pioneer in this topic is American economist Carmen Deere, who has claimed that "the dominance of sugar in the Cuban economy obscures the considerable diversification in Cuban agricultural exports to the United States" in the early and mid-20th century.¹⁹ Deere, however, exclusively analyzes agricultural exports and does not cover Cuban trade before 1902. Instead, I discuss how American manufacturers supplanted Europe's preeminence as Cuba's supplier of a variety of goods such as paper, soap, machinery, and others during the first occupation. As I pay particular attention to the actions of U.S. agencies in the island, my

work relies heavily on Rosenberg's analysis of America's "promotional state," whereby American economic penetration abroad was procured and barriers to American business were removed via government agencies.²⁰ Moreover, Rosenberg's interpretation of America's tariff policies and reciprocity treaties as bargaining mechanisms for economic expansion in Latin America also inform my research.²¹

An Abrupt End to Preferential Tariffs for Europe

Since at least 1895, American government officials voiced loudly their confidence in the nation's military supremacy. Cleveland's Secretary of State Richard Olney famously expressed: "Today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition."²² Then, after rhetorically asking why in the same speech, he added "because, in addition to all other grounds, its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and practically invulnerable as against any or all other powers."²³ Hence, it is no surprise that in 1898, after a colossal victory over Spain, American defiance of European encroachments in the hemisphere would only intensify.

President McKinley mandated new customs tariffs through the War Department

¹⁷ Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Emily S. Rosenberg and Eric Foner, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (Hill and Wang, 1982).

¹⁹ Carmen Diana Deere, "US-Cuba Trade and the Challenge of Diversifying a Sugar Economy, 1902-1962," *Florida Journal of International Law* 29, no.

9 (2017),

<https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/fjil/vol29/iss1/9>.

²⁰ Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*, 49-51.

²¹ Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*, 51-54.

²² "Some Diplomatic Accomplishments," Office of the Historian, effective February 24, <https://history.state.gov/departmentshistory/short-history/accomplishments>.

²³ Ibid.

on March 31st, 1900.²⁴ Before the changes took effect on June 15th, the French Ambassador Jules Cambon disputed the new rates, claiming that they were excessive and targeted articles “90 percent of which [were] supplied for Cuban consumption by French manufacturers.”²⁵ The most affected classes of merchandise were seven: perfumery, soaps, umbrellas, linen wovens and knit goods, pocket knives, razors, and surgical instruments.²⁶ But while French importers and their embassy believed their claims constituted “fair ground” to demand a reduction of the duties, the U.S. government disagreed.²⁷

On June 21, 1900, days after the new tariffs took effect, Secretary of State John Hay responded to the French Embassy. His counterargument was threefold: first, that as the new duties bore on luxuries, they were not at all excessive; second, that they affected products from other countries in the same ratio; and lastly, that the Federal Government had bound itself to make no changes to the tariff schedules for the term of one year.²⁸ The French Embassy first refuted these points on December 26, 1900, saying that it was unreasonable to allege that rate increases of “25, 50, 100 percent, and even more,” were not excessive.²⁹ The phrase “even more” herein – as revealed in future complaints – refers to tariff increases as high as 500 and 600 percent applying to some French articles.³⁰ Indeed, France’s trade with

Cuba was under siege – but so were all European economic interests in the island.

As directly affected as French merchants felt by the changes in Cuba’s tariff policy, the rationale for schedule changes usually revolved around concerns with all, not some European competition in the island. For example, in a statement included in Porter’s report to the Treasury – which informed the schedule changes for soap and perfumery – the soap-makers of Havana argued that the United States needed to protect the domestic manufacture of these articles from the “encroachment of Spanish and other European makers.”³¹ They explained that Spain had monopolized the soap market of Cuba by taxing raw materials for soap production up to 10 and 20 times the amount levied on manufactured soap.³² Essentially, they accused Spain of forcing Cubans to consume Spanish soap by making it too costly to produce their own.

Therefore, facilitating an economic transition made at any rate imminent by the ever-present threat of American military force, domestic manufacturers presented an investment opportunity to the United States. “If the tariff is changed,” these manufacturers articulated, “the Cuban industry will be saved, and the United States will acquire a splendid market for all her raw materials.”³³ After all, they insisted, “the raw materials can only be imported from the United States, because neither England, Germany, France,

²⁴ War Department, *Customs Tariff for Ports in the Island of Cuba*. Washington: G.P.O., 1900, 5.

²⁵ Pierre de Margerie, Chargé d’Affaires of France to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, November 21, 1901; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ M. Thiebaut, French Diplomat to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, December 26, 1900; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

³⁰ Pierre de Margerie, Chargé d’Affaires of France to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, November 21, 1901; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

³¹ Porter, “Report on the Commercial,” 23.

³² Ibid., 23.

³³ Ibid., 23.

nor Spain produce either cotton-seed oil, tallow, or rosin.” Appearing knowledgeable of American appetite for reciprocity treaties and reduced trade restrictions abroad, Cuban merchants also added, “thousands upon thousands of tons will be shipped from American ports to Cuba” and “all raw materials ... be allowed to enter, if not free, subject only to a small duty.” Reciprocity, it seemed, was meant to be: “besides, Cuba being so near, it is natural and easier for her to get all her stock from the United States.”³⁴

In speaking of Cuba and the U.S. as natural partners, merchants in Cuba were only repeating a discourse that had for decades circulated in American political and industrial circles.³⁵ Hence, their display of ideological alignment was but an attempt to secure some profit in the new empire. Especially with annexation hanging in the balance, strengthening ties with the U.S. was a strategic move. A communication dated April 15, 1899, confirms that two local informants of the War Department asserted that “in annexing Cuba, the U.S. government would have the support of the property holding and industrial classes.”³⁶ While European exporters were hurt by America’s capture of the island’s economic relations, property holders – regardless of nationality – saw benefits in American intervention. Even a decade after the war, in 1908, powerful Spaniards who detested American influence in Cuba, but owned plantations in the island, welcomed and supported American intervention because it provided protection

for their property and widened a market for their products.³⁷

Hence, as American investors rushed to take over the sugar and tobacco industries of Cuba upon occupation, businessmen in Havana procured American collaboration for the development of various other “smaller, but comparatively important, industries.”³⁸ In selling the potential of these industries, they often resorted to the vilification of Spanish rule – yet another narrative likely to awaken American excitement. They claimed that Spain concocted the previous tariff system in its “absorbing desire of protecting her home industries without regard to her colonies,” and therefore, “in framing a new tariff, very little [could] be copied from the old one.”³⁹ Astutely, through their written statements to the Treasury, Cuban industrialists provided a strong body of evidence – external to America’s self-interests – for the U.S. to justify its acquisition of every Cuban market. As a result, America’s promotional state could conveniently blame “the cupidity and rapacity of Spanish officials” for its acquisition of the island’s trade, rather than admitting its own impetus for commercial expansion. By assisting a rightful U.S. seizure of these various industries – or at least the pretense thereof – the benefit for Cuban industrialists, in turn, was partnership with the U.S. in their development.

This alliance was so convenient that the most powerful Spanish families continued to own large plantations in Cuba for years after the occupation ended. In a September 1908 letter to Governor Wood,

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

³⁵ Rebecca Bodenheimer, “The Diverse Ideologies Behind Plans to Annex Cuba,” *Annexation Nation*, JSTOR Daily, effective March 5, 2025, <https://daily.jstor.org/cuba-annexation-nation/>.

³⁶ “War File,” Executive Mansion, April 15, 1899; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

³⁷ Miller Collier, American Legation, to Elihu Root, Secretary of War, Funterrabia, Spain, September 3, 1908; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

³⁸ Porter, “Report on the Commercial,” 25.

³⁹ Ibid., 23, 120.

U.S. Ambassador to Spain W.M. Collier stated that many influential Spaniards felt “grateful for American intervention and would be glad even to see Cuba annexed to the United States.”⁴⁰ Collier explained that “despite national and race prejudices,” self-interest prompted powerful Spaniards to welcome and support any government which would be stable and protect their property – as well as widen or assure a market for their products.⁴¹ It was the “masses without financial interests” in Spain that opposed U.S. expansion in Cuba, he added, guided by pure jealousy of the United States.⁴² But the types of the class of the Count of Peñalver, for example – then Mayor of Madrid and whose family had owned large estates in Cuba for over 200 years – “would not look with regret upon an extension of American control, even were it to go to the point of annexation.”

Although non-sugar and tobacco industries were relatively small pre-1898, they were certainly not insignificant or unprofitable. In December 1900, continuing to contend with the State Department over the increased duties on French merchandise, the French Embassy confessed to be under immense pressure from the French Chamber of Commerce to obtain a reduction of the duties.⁴³ Had the losses to French merchants been minimal, the embassy would not have begged Secretary Hay to abolish “the increases that [were] proving so injurious to the export trade of France.”⁴⁴ Neither would

have French diplomats – after being ignored for 11 months by the U.S. government – resumed their insistence on the reduction of duties.⁴⁵ On November 21, 1901, recalling one of the three arguments provided by Secretary Hay in June 1900, diplomat Pierre de Margerie pleaded:

“One can truly not consider as luxuries either perfumery, which in a country and among a people like those of Cuba has fallen into popular use; or umbrellas, which in a country where rainfall is so heavy in the spring or autumn are so to speak as necessary as shoes; or the linen woven and knit goods, which constitute the foundation of clothing for the more numerous class; or cutlery and razors; or surgical instruments which for hospitals are essentially a necessary article.”⁴⁶

Tragically for Margerie, no logical arguments or moral concerns presented before the State Department could help his cause. America was determined to fulfill its imperial ambitions, and its empire was, above all, commercial.

With a production of about one million tons of sugar by 1902, Cuba’s market for bags to pack sugar was lucrative.⁴⁷ Cuba’s sugar industry consumed between six and seven million sugar bags per year, and most were supplied by Great Britain and India.⁴⁸ During the occupation, however, East Coast manufacturers suggested to Porter that if the U.S. government reenacted the tariff to favor

⁴⁰ W.M. Collier, U.S. Ambassador to Spain to Gen. Leonard Wood, Military Governor of Cuba, Fuenterrabia, Spain, September 3, 1908; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ M. Thiebaut, French Diplomat to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, December 26, 1900; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Pierre de Margerie, Chargé d’Affaires of France to John Hay, Secretary of State, Washington, November 21, 1901; NARA, RG 350, Box 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ James H. Hitchman, “U. S. Control Over Cuban Sugar Production 1898-1902,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1970): 99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/174847>.

⁴⁸ Porter, “Report on the Commercial,” 32.

the United States, they could meet the entire Cuban demand for sugar bags.⁴⁹ As a result, not only would Cuba benefit from cheaper bags, but jobs would be created for thousands of working people in the United States.⁵⁰

Chester Lyman, a representative of the paper industry in America, announced another lucrative opportunity to Porter. In an 1898 letter, he explained that despite being the world's major producer of paper, the U.S. supplied only a tiny fraction of Cuba's paper demand.⁵¹ Thanks to duties discriminating in Spain's favor, the Spanish paper supply to Cuba was about 20 times greater than America's.⁵² Naturally, Lyman recommended the removal of the preferential tariff for Spain.⁵³ But fearful of Germany and England's "aggressive competition," he also called for burdensome duties for these powers.⁵⁴ Consequently, the paper trade of Cuba was turned over to the United States.

The Tactic of Military Expediency

By submitting the island's affairs to a Military Government, Washington officials strategically separated themselves from disputes arising in the island. While most important decisions did require Washington's approval, its role was only visible in politically advantageous scenarios. When legally questionable or otherwise controversial actions were required, cases were entrusted to the military government and their assessment of the situation. After all, being on the ground, they were in the best position to determine what was expedient.

For example, in his exchange with the French embassy over the increased duties, Secretary Hay's communications were only performative. He had no intention to intercede on France's behalf, but for diplomatic purposes he engaged in justifying the new policy. Namely, Hay's intention was to put forth that tariff revisions were based on careful analysis and not arbitrary government involvement, as this was consistent with American liberal tradition. As Walter LaFeber has suggested, American businessmen increasingly favored free trade and believed that friendly relations with England and France could help maintain peace and stability.⁵⁵ Yet, that ideal would not suffice to protect France's trade with Cuba during the occupation.

Officially, McKinley's order declared that "all questions arising in the administration of the customs regulations" should be referred to the collector at the port of Habana.⁵⁶ Additionally, he provided specific guidelines for the handling of complaints. Importers who were dissatisfied with the collector's decision, he explained, "shall pay the duties imposed, but may file a written protest or appeal."⁵⁷ The appeal, then, would be transmitted to the chief of customs service, and finally to the military governor for review.⁵⁸ In other words, all complaints would be resolved by the U.S. military government alone, without any oversight or participation from federal agencies like the State and Treasury Departments. As the radical alteration of the tariff system was anticipated to create innumerable disputes,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁵¹ Porter, "Report on the Commercial," 33.

⁵² Ibid., 34.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Cornell University Press, 1963), 41.

⁵⁶ War Department, *Customs Tariff*, 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

this scheme was designed to effectively lead all complainants to a dead-end alley.

Conclusion

The discretionary powers of the U.S. Military Government in Cuba enabled the economic expansion of the United States in Cuban markets. By placing all avenues for commercial dispute under the sole jurisdiction of victorious armed forces that made independent determinations, the foreign powers who had owned Cuba's markets for decades could only acquiesce to their impositions. Of these, the revamping of the Cuban tariff system was the most important for Washington, as it aligned with its long-held ambition: America's economic supremacy in the Western Hemisphere. This end, however, required first the nation's attainment of military supremacy.

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