

Preparedness Prevented Mexican War in 1866

Knowing That United States Could Call Civil War Veterans, France Withdrew Army and Left Maximilian to His Fate

FIFTY years ago preparedness enabled the United States Government to triumph in a critical Mexican situation without having to unsheathe the sword. While our civil war was in progress Emperor Napoleon III. of France had been complacently satisfied that the United States was going to pieces, and that the Southern Confederacy would be his friend and ally. Our Government, through William H. Seward, Secretary of State, had repeatedly declared its unswerving desire to see the backs of the French in Mexico. The French had been equally determined to remain where they were, since "France was not in the habit of marching except to her own tune."

But the tide turned. The Confederacy crumbled away; Richmond was taken; Lee surrendered; Jefferson Davis was a prisoner. Then the United States returned to the Mexican question, and the American Government informed Louis

not improve the war she made to raise up in Mexico an anti-republican or an anti-American Government, or to maintain a Government there. The United States Government did not desire to suppress the fact that its sympathies were with Mexico—that is to say, with the republican portion of the people—and that it desired the restoration of peace; neither did the United States Government in any sense disapprove of the republican Gov-

in November, 1866, and in March and November, 1867. When the time came for the first detachment to depart, Seward was informed that Napoleon had decided to postpone withdrawal of all his troops until the Spring of 1867.

Seward replied by cable, under date of Nov. 23, 1866:

We cannot acquiesce—
First—Because the term "next Spring," as appointed for the entire evacuation, is indefinite and vague.

Mexico. Already some United States soldiers, after their release from service, had crossed into Mexico and joined Juarez's republican forces, but Seward believed that in no event could enlistments amount to a sufficient number of men to give ground for the least uneasiness either to France or Mexico.

Grant, as practical head of the army, sent Sheridan to Southwestern Texas to subdue the Confederates still holding out under Kirby Smith, and to menace the imperial forces in Mexico by distributing United States soldiers and munitions of war along the Rio Grande. Schofield was given a leave of absence for twelve months in order, as he himself said, "to organize in Mexican territory an army corps under commission from the Government of Mexico, the officers and soldiers to be taken from the Union and Confederate forces, who were reported to be eager to enlist in such an enterprise."

"Seward cleverly disorganized the whole undertaking," says Mr. Bancroft, "by flattering its chief into believing that his services were needed at once in the field of diplomacy. Schofield was requested to meet Seward at Cape May. There the soldier, after four years of the hard fare of war, could look out upon the ocean and dream of important interviews and banquets at the Tuleries. The perfection of the strategy is shown by the fact that Schofield did not think it remarkable that such shrewd diplomats as Seward and Bigelow needed his aid. And Seward was supposed to be perfectly serious when he said: 'I want you to get your legs under Napoleon's mahogany and tell him he must get out of Mexico.'"

Mexico for forty years prior to 1861 had been almost constantly in a condition of anarchy. In the thirty years preceding 1860 the country had had between sixty and seventy Presidents. When President Miramon fled, Juarez, a native Mexican and Vice President, by operation of the Constitution became President. Unlike many of his predecessors, Juarez was a patriot and a faithful public officer, but he found the public treasury empty and foreign creditors clamorous. He could not pay the foreign creditors, but did the best he could to secure them. John Bigelow, in his "Retrospections of an Active Life," says:

The French, English, and Spanish creditors did not think that security sufficient, doubtless aided in arriving at that conclusion by the anti-slavery dissensions in the United States. The result was a treaty entered into on Oct. 31, 1861, between France and England and Spain, by which they agreed to send a joint expedition to Mexico under the pretense of protecting their countrymen, threatened by a faithless Government which could be bound by no treaties. Their own treaty thus defined the object of the combined expedition:

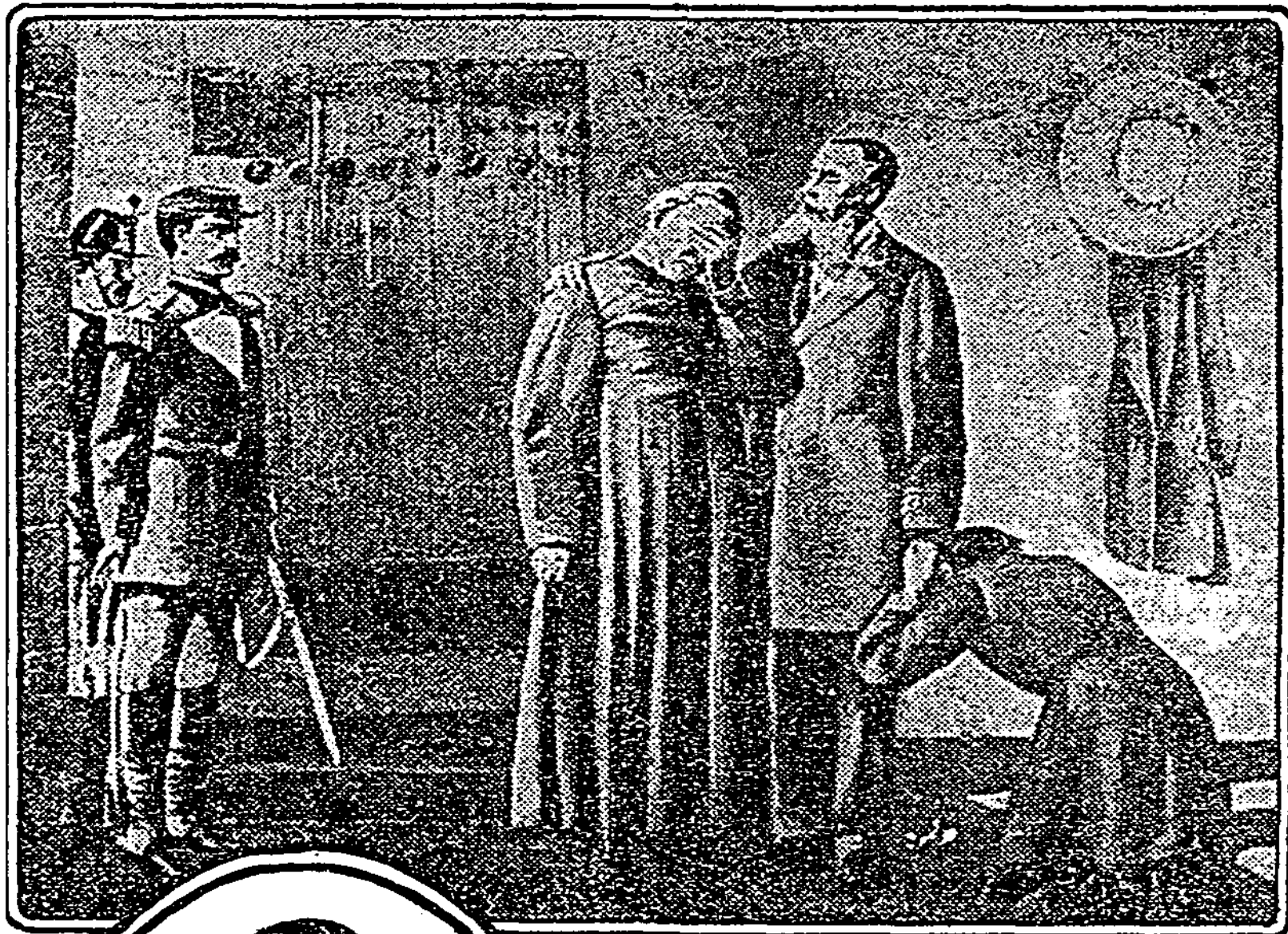
Article 1 stipulated that sufficient forces should be sent to seize and occupy the forts and military positions on the coast.

Article 2 declared that the three powers should not seek any separate advantage nor exercise any influence on the internal affairs of Mexico of a nature to impair the right of the Mexican Nation freely to choose and constitute the form of its government.

The purpose of intervention was implied in the very precautions taken in words to prevent it. Mexico was to be "free to choose and constitute its form of government." But it had freely chosen its form of government and maintained it for nearly fifty years. Under these circumstances, to guarantee to Mexico the right to choose and constitute the form of its government implied a purpose to have a new form of government, if an occasion for one should present itself.

The allied powers were not agreed before the signatures were attached to the treaty, and they openly disagreed afterward. So far as the justice of the claims made by the three powers against Mexico is in question, it is interesting to recall the views of Thomas Corwin, United States Minister in Mexico, who, in the course of an official letter dated March 20, 1862, addressed to Secretary Seward, says:

I speak from a very careful investigation made by myself when I say that the money demands of England are in the main, if not altogether, just. I am not surprised that her patience is exhausted. Those of France are comparatively small, very small, so far as they arise out of previous treaties, and those depending on claims of more recent date—and not included in former treaties—



Maximilian leaving prison to be executed, June 19, 1867. He is consoling Father Souza, his grief-stricken confessor, (from Maximilian in Mexico, by Percy F. Martin, courtesy of Scribner's.)



Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. (Courtesy of Scribner's.)

ernment then in force in Mexico, or distrust the Administration.

Before the end of 1865 practically everybody in the United States agreed that French intervention must soon end, and on Dec. 16, 1865, Seward sent a dispatch to John Bigelow, American Minister to France, as follows:

It has been the President's purpose that France should be respectfully informed upon two points, namely:

First—That the United States earnestly desire to continue to cultivate sincere friendship with France.

Second—That this policy would be brought into imminent jeopardy unless France could deem it consistent with her interest and honor to desist from the prosecution of armed intervention in Mexico, to overthrow the domestic republican form of government existing there, and to establish upon its ruins the foreign monarchy which has been attempted to be inaugurated in the capital of the country.

"This was as plain," says Frederick Bancroft in his "Life of Seward," "as if he had written 'Withdraw or fight'; yet it was not said in a way to precipitate conflict."

After considering the matter for several weeks Napoleon concluded that he could not afford to risk a war with the United States. On April 5, 1866, he announced that the French troops would evacuate Mexico in three detachments—



Gen. Philip H. Sheridan (From the 25th portrait taken, Courtesy of Scribner's.)

Napoleon that it would be inconvenient, gravely inconvenient, if he did not withdraw his soldiers from Mexico. A significant movement of American troops under General Sheridan, then flushed with success, was made in the direction of the Mexican frontier. Louis Napoleon withdrew. The part that American diplomacy, as conducted by Secretary Seward, played during the French intervention in Mexico is interesting to recall at this new crisis in the affairs of the United States and its southern neighbor; also, as it was just forty-nine years last Monday that the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico was shot.

No doubt the favorable end of our civil war, which had begun in 1861, almost simultaneously with the commencement of French intervention in Mexico, influenced the firm stand taken subsequently by the Washington Government.

"The intense popular interest which was awakened by the prevalence of this internecine struggle tended, to no small extent, to moderate the solicitude which the situation of foreign affairs was calculated to create," writes Percy F. Martin in his book, "Maximilian in Mexico," but with the subsidence of that interest and anxiety, occasioned by the return of the disaffected States, one by one, to the Union of the United States, Congress again became alive to the undesirability of any radical change of Government taking place so near at hand, and now found itself in a position to make its views both heard and heeded."

The position of the United States, as defined by Secretary Seward, was this: France had a right to make war against Mexico, and to determine for herself the cause. The United States had a right and interest to insist that France should

are as presented so enormously unjust as to be totally inadmissible as to the amounts claimed. The treaty with Spain, made by General Almonte, is said to be an outrageous fraud, but I know nothing of the facts except from a report too vague to be relied upon.

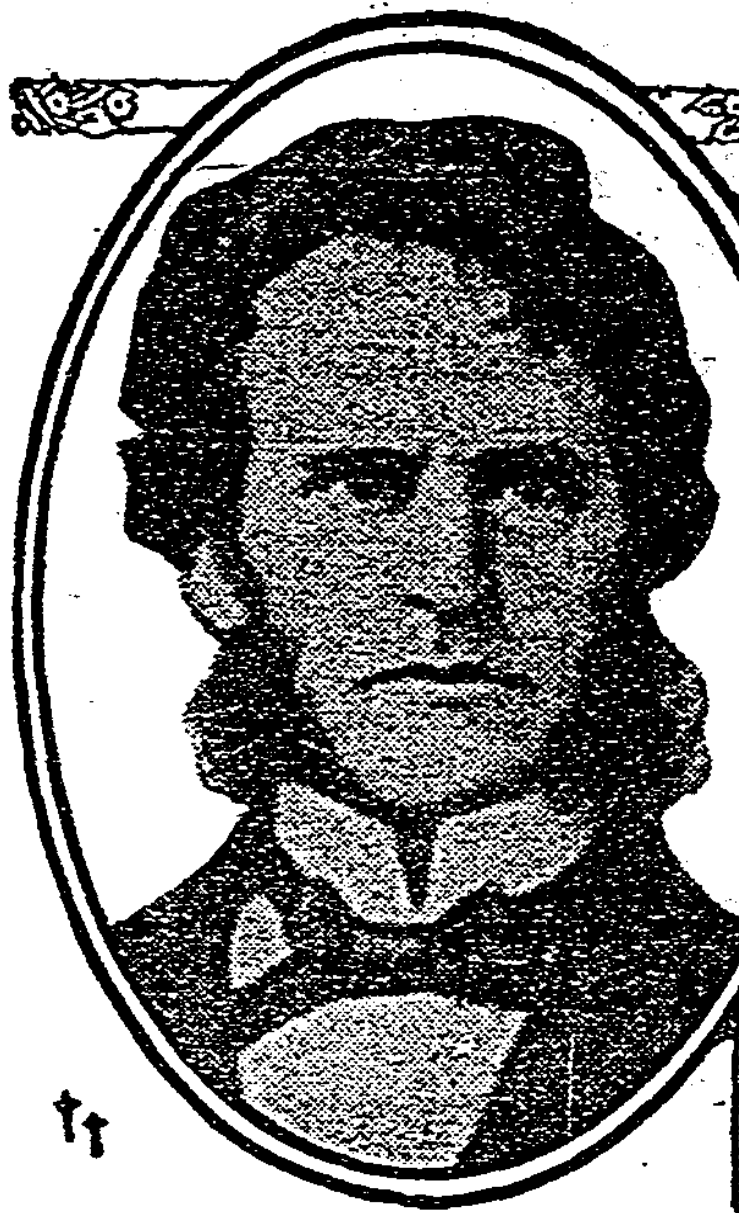
A disagreement between the allied representatives as to the interpretation of a clause in the treaty, proved acceptable to Mexico. On April 16, 1862, the French representatives issued a proclamation to the people of Mexico, which amounted virtually to a declaration of war against that country, but Juarez refused to regard it so. Mr. Martin says:

The most powerful stimulant was his firm belief in the counteracting influence of the United States. The jealousy with which the action of the powers was viewed across the border, the character of the diplomatic correspondence which had passed—and week by week was passing—between the accredited representatives at Washington and Paris were perfectly well known to this vigilant and well-informed President.

But by the beginning of May, 1862, the rupture between the French and Mexican Governments was complete, and hostilities were in full swing. Archduke Maximilian, brother to the Emperor of Austria, and Carlotta, his wife, started for Mexico on April 14, 1864, having been prevailed upon by Napoleon III. to accept the Crown of Mexico. They arrived at Vera Cruz on May 28. They entered Mexico City in triumph. No cloud appeared at this time to be looming anywhere near the horizon. But Maximilian's monetary troubles began upon the day that he landed at Vera Cruz, and they did not leave him during the course of his reign.

At the end of 1864 the French intervention had resulted in the nominal winning over, by force, of only a part of the nation to the imperial cause. On Oct. 3, 1865, Maximilian committed the worst blunder and most unpardonable act of his short but troublesome reign—the promulgation of the "Black Decree," the terms of which placed beyond the law all Mexicans who were found bearing arms against the monarchy, and who declined to lay them down. At the end of the year the Mexican Treasury was in a very poor condition.

When the funds were at their lowest



John Bigelow
Pres. Lincoln's second Minister to France. (Courtesy of Baker & Taylor Co.)

the French Minister for Foreign Affairs considered it advisable to dun the Mexican Government for overdue interest and repayment in part of the principal. Maximilian dispatched an Ambassador to Paris, and received a peremptory and almost insolent reply to his letter addressed to Napoleon, intimating that "Maximilian had acted dishonorably." This letter ended with the staggering announcement that the French Emperor had decided to withdraw his troops altogether from Mexico, having come to the sudden conclusion that "prolonged foreign protection is a bad school, and a source of perils; in domestic matters it habituates people not to reckon on themselves, and paralyzes the national activity."

Maximilian and his wife had exhausted their private fortunes. In the Spring of 1866, Carlotta left Mexico City upon her return to Enrope. After fruitless efforts



William H. Seward.
Secretary of State who conducted negotiations with France

to obtain justice for her consort, including a personal appeal to the Pope, she became insane, and has remained so until the present day. Maximilian was betrayed and found himself a prisoner in the hands of a horde of troops thirsting for revenge. He was tried by court-martial and shot on June 19, 1867.

The American Secretary of State was at least consistent in his sympathies, and at no time did anything, or permitted anything to be done, which could possibly assist Maximilian in his efforts to establish his monarchy upon a firm and permanent basis. Mr. Martin says:

One reason for Mr. Seward's antagonism was his belief that, during his visit to Paris, Maximilian had suggested to Napoleon III. the advisability of his acknowledging the Confederates in their secession from the Union.

William L. Dayton, Lincoln's first Minister to France, rather seems to have

exceeded the usual diplomatic latitude by venturing to "advise" the Secretary of State as to his future policy with regard to Mexico. He tells Mr. Seward, for instance, on April 7, 1864, that "any action at present by the United States would be sure to embroil us with France," adding, "we cannot, under existing circumstances, afford a war with France for the quixotic purpose of helping Mexico."

Mr. Seward, seemingly, approved cordially of the sentiments expressed, for at a later date, March 17, 1865, he wrote to Mr. Bigelow, who succeeded Mr. Dayton: "This Government has not interfered. It does not propose to interfere. * * * It firmly repels foreign intervention here, and looks with disfavor upon it anywhere. Therefore, for us to intervene in Mexico would be only to reverse our own principles, and not to adopt in regard to that country the very policy which in any case we disallow."

"Mr. Bigelow, however, went even further than his predecessor," asserts Mr. Martin, "in laying down the policy of the United States, and upon one occasion at least he seems to have provoked a mild kind of reprimand from the Secretary of State.

The Bigelow statement occasioned great satisfaction to the French Government, since it entirely put aside any intention of this country to object further should the monarchy in Mexico prove successful. Mr. Bigelow was informed, however, by Mr. Seward, in a dispatch dated June 30, 1865: "It is thought that the argument which you have recited is not warranted by the instructions of this department. It will be well, at your convenience, to make this explanation to M. Drouyn de l'Huys. So far as our relations are concerned, what we hold in regard to Mexico is that France is a belligerent there, in war with the Republic of Mexico. We do not enter into the merits of the belligerents but we practice in regard to the contest the principles of neutrality; and we have insisted upon the practice of neutrality by all nations with regard to our civil war." Mr. Seward concluded by assuring Mr. Bigelow that "he attached no importance to this matter."