

“A Prize for Warlike Ambition”¹

The 1885 Panama Crisis and the Rise of an American Power Complex

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¹ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1885: Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President*, December 8, 1885. 49th Cong., 1st sess. H. Doc. 1. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1886, vi.

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Introduction: The Panama Crisis of 1885

In 1885, two separate revolutionary factions seized power on the Isthmus of Panama, a fire destroyed the city of Colón, and the newly inaugurated President Grover Cleveland dispatched over 1,200 marines to protect American interests in Colón and Panama. For a short time, journalists speculated breathlessly about what the troops would do, whether they would conquer the small province or catch the rebel leaders, but soon the crisis was resolved and, eventually, nearly forgotten.² This was by far the largest and longest nineteenth century American invasion of Panama (see table 1). It is shocking that American scholarship has neglected the crisis so profoundly.

The overall course of events was as follows: in the winter and spring of 1885, as a result of a political controversy having to do with the election of President Nuñez and his efforts to expand the Central Government's control, revolts erupted all over what was then known as the United States of Colombia, a federation that included the Isthmus of Panama. Colombian troops were drawn inland, leaving too few soldiers on the Isthmus to suppress simultaneous revolts in Panama and Colón. The politically motivated revolutionaries Rafael Aizpuru and Pedro Prestán, respectively, briefly took over the two cities. Prestán was able to take over Colón without any initial bloodshed while Aizpuru fought a few small battles.³

Tensions flared in Colón in the last days of March when Prestán attempted to obtain a shipment of weapons from the American ship *Colon*. When Pacific Mail Steamship Company

² "The Burning of Colon." *The Washington Post*, Apr 05, 1885. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/137991749?accountid=10226>.

³ David McCullough. *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977, 176.

agent refused to turn over the weapons based on a neutrality law, Prestán arrested him and several other Americans, including agents of the Panama Railroad and a U.S. consul. A U.S. Naval commander stationed at the port, Commander Theodore Kane of the *Galena*, refused to give in to Prestán's demands, preventing the transfer after the arrested consul ordered the release of the arms. A battle ensued as Central Government troops arrived in Colón to put down the rebellion and U.S. seamen came ashore to guard American assets during the battle.⁴ On March 31, the Colombians triumphed, the American hostages escaped, and, as the rebels retreated, the city of Colón burned. Prestán was blamed for its destruction. The fire caused \$4 million in damages and left 10,000 people homeless.⁵

Because the insurgency disrupted the ports and railroad, and because the U.S. government claimed the Bidlack-Mallarino treaty of 1846 obligated intervention, 1,200 more U.S. Marines arrived in Colón on April 10 to protect American property. With the help of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and the Panama Railroad Company, U.S. Navy Admiral James Jouett and his second-in-command, Commander Bowman McCalla, occupied Colón and Panama in April. Following a short engagement in Panama, they returned both cities to the Colombian government. Aizpuru surrendered to American and Colombian forces and was exiled. Colombian troops captured Prestán in August. He was tried and hanged that month, with the approval of the U.S. Navy and the Panama Railroad Company.⁶

⁴ 20 to 30 men died in this battle. There is little information on casualties for the other battles available, but no Americans died in combat on this mission.

"Outrages by Insurgents: Prestan's Brief but Highhanded Rule in Aspinwall," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1885, 5, accessed November 25, 2018, 5. <https://nyti.ms/2DGE9Jw>.

⁵ "Outrages by Insurgents," 5.

⁶ McCullough. *The Path Between the Seas*, 67-9.

This moment in history was the result of clashes and collaboration between American diplomacy, ideology, commerce and violent coercion. The crisis of 1885 was more than a passing novelty or a fluke in the international relations of a peaceful country. The spring of 1885 shows us the roots of American global power as a multifaceted and often contradictory complex. While Grover Cleveland and his administration, particularly Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard and Navy Secretary William C. Whitney, fought to understand and explain the true value of

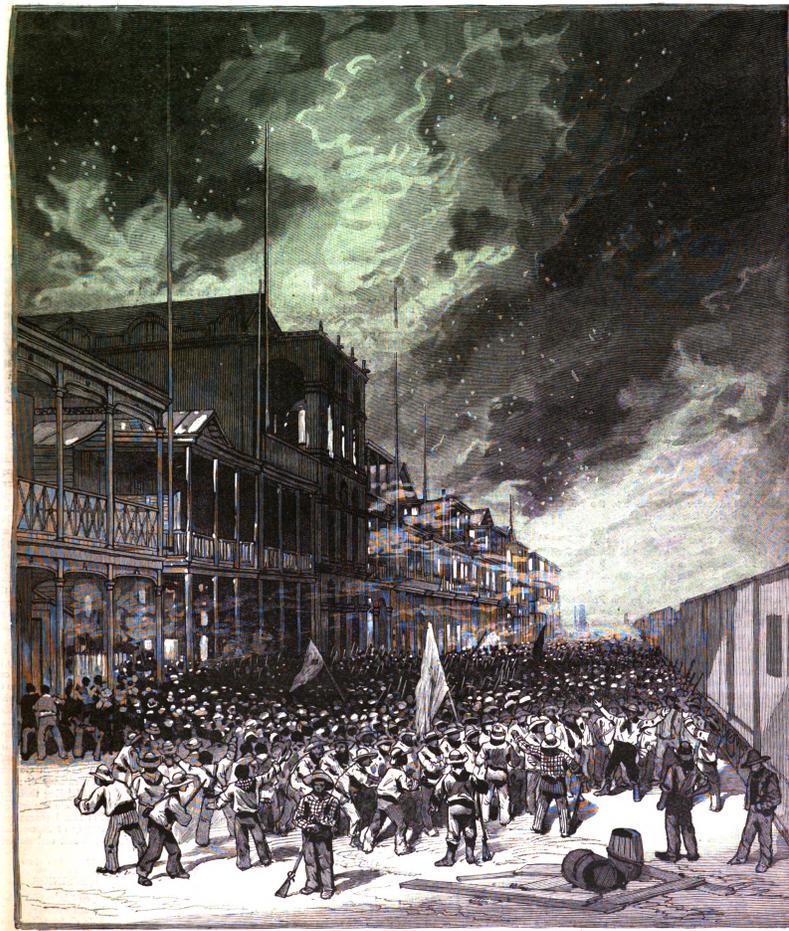


Figure 1: *The Burning of Colón by Revolutionists;* A crowd of men supporting Prestán congregates between the burning city and a Panama Railroad Company train

American commerce and military might, military officers fought to increase their own power. Weak as it was, the U.S. Navy was ultimately aided, both materially and ideologically, by the very businesses it was sent to defend. The intervention also ended Aizpuru's bid for Panamanian independence and Prestán's acts of rebellion against the newly empowered Conservative leader of Colombia.⁷ By employing its resources to fight them, the U.S. took a side in a major political schism.

The Panama Crisis was not by any means the first, last or only time the United States sent its military to intervene in the affairs of foreign nations. Throughout the nineteenth century, the country organized many expeditions to protect the interests of American merchants stationed overseas. The nineteenth century opened with the First Barbary War and saw the second a decade later, both fought in the name of free trade in the Mediterranean. Commodore Matthew Perry's "Opening of Japan" with the help of American gunboats and strategic threats was another show of power for commercial gain.⁸ In Latin America, the nineteenth century was a time of significant overseas military activity. Table One lists only Panamanian-American conflicts, but there were smaller landings in Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Mexico, Nicaragua and Chile throughout the century.⁹ The Panama Crisis of 1885, then, was not necessarily exceptional as a military engagement for the protection of American property in distant lands. It was, however, a

⁷ Renan Vega Cantor et. al. *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista (1848-1903): Reconstruccion Historica a Partir De Las Fuentes Diplomaticas De Francia*. Bogotá: Ediciones Pensamiento Critico, 2003, 123., Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The End of the Alliance*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012, 42-3, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=1389186#>.

⁸ Barbara Salazar Torreon, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2014*, Congressional Research Service, 2014, 1, 2, 4-6, <https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-2014-ksg-0078?accountid=10226>.

⁹ Max Boot. *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*. New York: BasicBooks, 2002, 60.

moment of great confusion and contradiction between several arms of American power, of unexpected alliances among the same, of foreshadowing, and of high stakes due to the value of passage across Panama. It is a moment that should be of particular interest to the study of the history of American capitalism, war and foreign relations.

Table 1: U.S. Armed Interventions in Panama, 1856-1903*

Year	Conflict Name/ Motive	Maximum number of troops	Duration in Days	American President Involved
1856	Watermelon War	160	4	Franklin Pierce
1860	Local Disturbance	100	11	James Buchanan
1861	Political Disturbance	—	—	James Buchanan
1865	Political Disturbance	—	1	Andrew Johnson
1868	Riots	14	1	Andrew Johnson
1873	Civil War	200	13	Ulysses S. Grant
1873	Civil War	190	15	Ulysses S. Grant
1885	Local Disturbance	12	2	Chester A. Arthur
1885	Panama Crisis (Prestán/Aizpuru Revolts)	1,200	57	Grover Cleveland
1895	Bocas del Toro	70	1	Grover Cleveland
1901	Thousand Days War	460	15	Theodore Roosevelt
1902	Bocas del Toro	1 Company	7	Theodore Roosevelt
1902	Thousand Days War	350	63	Theodore Roosevelt
1903	Independence	42	3	Theodore Roosevelt

*Adapted from “U.S. Armed Interventions in Panama” in Michael L. Conniff’s *Panama and the United States: The End of the Alliance*, 32.

Understanding the unique position of the Panama Railroad Company in the world and as a business is central to understanding U.S. actions in 1885. The Panama Railroad was powerful and profitable. That year, the company’s net earnings came to about \$1.6 million. Though no

longer at the height of its profitability— represented by a profit of \$2.3 million in 1869 before the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad— the Panama Railroad was a valuable transit line run by highly respected officials.¹⁰ In conjunction with several steamship companies that transported goods and people to more distant lands from either Colón or Panama, the Panama Railroad was widely perceived as an invaluable resource for global, and especially American, commerce.

At the time of the crisis, Ferdinand de Lesseps' *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique* owned the majority of the stock of the Panama Railroad Company.¹¹ The French canal company depended on the railroad for the canal's excavation and transportation of supplies and workers, living and dead. According to Wolfred Nelson's *Five Years at Panama*, "Funeral trains [were] as much an institution as passenger or goods trains. Since the advent of De Lesseps' canal men on the 28th day of February, 1881, thousands upon thousands have been buried."¹² Control over the Panama Railroad's stocks meant that the canal company could depend on the railroad's cooperation. By the time of the Panama Crisis of 1885, much of the Railroad's income came from its close involvement with the French Canal Company.¹³ Though it was owned by the *Compagnie Universelle* in a financial sense, the Panama Railroad, in Gerstle Mack's words,

¹⁰ Alexander Saunders, "Short History of the Panama Railroad," *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 78 (1949): 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43517551>.

¹¹ The Panama Railroad shareholders had forced the *Compagnie Universelle* to purchase the stocks at an inflated rate; the French company's need for consistent use of the railroad meant that it had no choice but to take the unfavorable deal.

Saunders, "Short History of the Panama Railroad," 26.

¹² Nelson, *Five Years at Panama*, 7.

¹³ Saunders, "Short History of the Panama Railroad," 26.

legally “remained an independent American corporation,” under American directors. The two companies were codependent, but their executives and national loyalties differed.¹⁴

Action proved to be the best determination of national loyalty and responsibility. In 1885, when the company appealed to the American government alongside other American businesses for aid when the conflict escalated, and again in a later effort to recover its losses from the Colombian government.¹⁵ The French government rejected the direct appeal of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the director of the *Compagnie Universelle*, telling him “No, no: Panama must look out for itself. France is firmly resolved never to mix herself up in American affairs. The Americans may burn, destroy, cut each other’s throats—this is no concern whatever of France. If anybody interferes in Panama it must be the United States.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, U.S. warships arrived at Colón within days of the beginning of the crisis for the express purpose of defending U.S. property and Isthmian transit.

The crisis took place in the two cities that served as the Panama Railroad terminals: Colón on the Atlantic coast, Panama on the Pacific. By 1885, both cities were major loci of both trade and human suffering. Wolfred Nelson, a Canadian physician who lived in Panama from 1880 to 1885, described the situation on the Isthmus from the perspective of a foreign observer. Panama, in his opinion, was rundown, too hot and “simply awful.”¹⁷ In 1885, of its population of

¹⁴ Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided: A History of the Panama Canal and Other Isthmian Canal Projects*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994,

¹⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. Claims Against the Government of Colombia. 57th Cong., 1st sess. S. Doc. 264. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902, 14, <https://bit.ly/2M017yy>.

¹⁶ “United States of Colombia.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, Apr 05, 1885. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/173781658?accountid=10226>.

¹⁷ Wolfred Nelson, *Five Years at Panama: The Trans-Isthmian Canal*, Montreal: William Drysdale & Co., 1891, 11, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/aeu.ark:/13960/t8hd89715>.

20,276, disease killed 2,228, putting the average death rate for the year at about 111 per 1,000.¹⁸ Colón had an even worse reputation, described by the same doctor as “death-dealing.”¹⁹ To him, the whole Isthmus was a “disease producing and disease distributing center.”²⁰ The mostly wooden Colón was also the site of frequent incendiary events, with major fires damaging the city in 1863, 1864, 1868, 1881 and 1890, in addition to occasional floods and earthquakes.²¹ In spite of the dangers, control over the Isthmus proved to be highly desirable. The ease of movement between the two seas due to the railroad, the thriving American and European owned businesses in both cities, and the potential for a canal caused the U.S. to see the region as a military and economic asset.

Throughout the century, the U.S. government had, in general, been invested in the idea of a canal through, and dominion over, the Isthmus. President just four years earlier, Rutherford B. Hayes had declared that any Isthmian canal would have to be under American control, as did James Garfield’s Secretary of State James G. Blaine. The idea of an American Isthmian canal dates back to the 1850s and the expansionist Secretary of State William H. Seward. His plan for American expansion foresaw the canal as a sure way to guarantee the country’s economic and military dominance in the Pacific.²² Cleveland’s allegedly isolationist aversion to the idea of foreign protectorates and alliances and his resulting preference for a non-American canal set him

¹⁸ W.C. Gorgas, *Population and Deaths from Various Diseases in the City of Panama, by Months and Years, from November, 1883, to August, 1906*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906, 3.

¹⁹ Nelson , *Five Years at Panama*, 5.

²⁰ *ibid.*, xiv.

²¹ Saunders, “Short History of the Panama Railroad,” 23, 26, 30, 31, 35.

²² Joseph Smith. *Illusions of Conflict: Anglo-American Diplomacy Toward Latin America, 1865-1896*. Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1979, 92.

apart from most other U.S. politicians of the nineteenth century. Still, precedent and the Monroe Doctrine put any European project in South or Central America in a potentially uncomfortable spot while an American enterprise in the same place could count on ready support from the U.S.²³

Close analysis of the Panama Crisis is rare in American scholarship. Many commentators, in studies from 1949 to 2012, have treated the 1885 crisis as a minor curiosity in the greater history of the construction of the Panama Canal.²⁴ They outline the crisis with mostly uncritical summaries of official and popular sources, including Commander McCalla's report on the mission, Congress' compilations of official correspondence and American newspaper articles. Drawing from these American sources, *Savage Wars of Peace*, *The Big Ditch*, *The Path Between the Seas*, *The Land Divided* and *Panama and the United States: The End of the Alliance* tell the same story with small differences. Michael Conniff's *Panama and the United States* is exceptional among them as the only one to cite Colombian and French primary documents.²⁵ None of these fully unpack the impact of the Panama Railroad or develop unique theories about the complexities of the crisis.

²³ Daniel H. Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal: United States Intervention on the Isthmus of Panama, 1885," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 4 (November 1980): 587, accessed October 17, 2018, doi:10.2307/3638968. The Monroe Doctrine was an 1823 declaration that labeled further European colonization of Latin America as a hostile act toward the U.S.

"Monroe Doctrine." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., edited by William A. Darity, Jr., 272. Vol. 5. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed April 8, 2019). <http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/apps/doc/CX3045301616/GVRL?u=columbiau&sid=GVRL&xid=1e3c49fa>.

²⁴ The Panama Canal was built on the Isthmus of Panama, stretching from Colón to Panama City, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, was completed in 1914. Theodore Roosevelt gained power over the canal zone and began the project in 1904.

Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu. *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran, and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, 7, 98.

²⁵ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 28, 144.

Another branch of scholarship focuses on the political, economic, and diplomatic circumstances of the nineteenth century and the environment in which the crisis occurred. Joseph Smith's *Illusions of Conflict* traces U.S.-Latin American diplomatic relations through the latter half of the nineteenth century, outlining American diplomacy toward Latin America in general⁶ and noting the differences and continuities between major political figures over time. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, by Anders Stephanson, is in a similar vein, though more broadly theoretical. This text tells the story of American ideologies of expansion, empire, and land ownership. It also looks into the complexities of then-president Grover Cleveland's views on involvement with, and power over, foreign nations. Another theory of American global military power in the late nineteenth century links the nation's eventual military hegemony to the power of its economy. Fareed Zakaria's *From Wealth to Power* traces America's role in the global economy in the nineteenth century and relates it to the country's rise as a military power, as well as locating Cleveland's role in the project of American power.

Daniel Wicks' essay "Dress Rehearsal: United States Intervention on the Isthmus of Panama, 1885," treats the Panama Crisis as a political intrigue. He presents it a moment in which the executive branch and the Navy struggled for power by insidious means like propaganda campaigns and secret messages. The essay ultimately argues that bureaucratic uncertainty and a military conspiracy drove the occupation, and that it was an opportunity for the Navy to practice for the more open aggression of the near future. Rather than taking every public address and press release at face value, Wicks critically analyzes the sources, building a framework against which to analyze the writings and actions of the individuals involved.²⁶

²⁶Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 581-605.

*El Panama Colombiano en la Repartición Imperialista (The Imperialist Repartition of Colombian Panama)*²⁷, by Renan Vega Cantor and others, offers a complex analysis of the occupation and civil war that is unmatched in American scholarship. The result is a text that emphasizes the harm done to Panama by American incompetence and greed. Cantor analyzes what others do not: Prestán's hanging, the U.S. Navy's choice to collaborate with central government forces, and the political implications of the conflict. Drawing from a unique set of historical documents, this argument relies on the accounts of French and Colombian diplomats. The text has a polemical slant against all and any U.S. interference in Latin America, but offers a perspective that is missing from American scholarship. Considering the opposite but equal slant of many American texts, *The Imperialist Repartition* is a vital counterpoint.²⁸

Alexander Saunders' "Short History of the Panama Railroad" is an essay dedicated solely to the history of the Panama Railroad Company, which is usually neglected in favor of the canal. His writing is also rife with the prejudices that characterize American histories of Panama. Saunders praises the company but glosses over its violent past.²⁹ The document is also peppered with sarcastic jabs at workers who agitated for better pay and comments on the "indolence" of the natives.³⁰ Nonetheless, it offers a clear timeline of the Panama Railroad's various rises to, and falls from, power.

In *American Gunboat Diplomacy and the Old Navy 1877-1889*, Kenneth J. Hagan argues that, for America, the 1880s were not a time of peace but of economically motivated global war.

²⁷ This and other translations from Cantor's text are my own.

²⁸ Cantor et al., *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, dedication, 103-138.

²⁹ Saunders, "Short History of the Panama Railroad," 17, 20.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 18, 30.

In this context, the Panama Crisis was one more moment that proved America's devotion to its financial interests. Hagan's treatment of the Navy-Executive tension is similar to Wicks,' but the text also clarifies the role of the Pacific Mail Steamship and Panama Railroad Companies, highlighting the moments in which their influence was strongest.

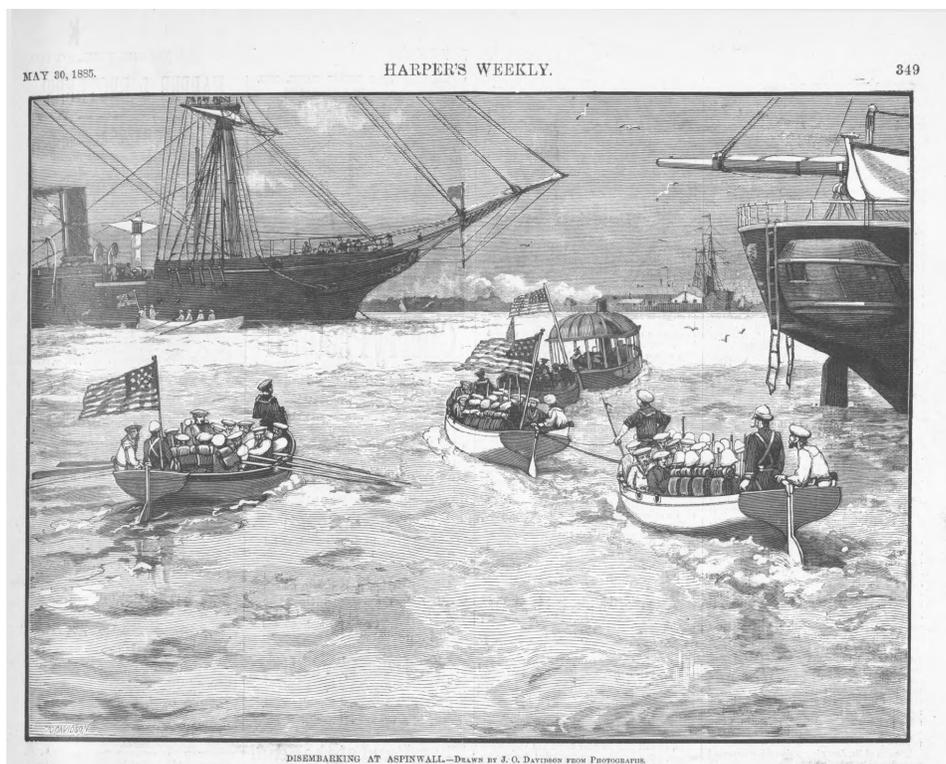


Figure 2: “Disembarking at Aspinwall,” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 30, 1885; The marines row to Colón.

As the nineteenth century closed and a moment of increasing American global power and imperialism approached, the power structures that facilitated American empire were already securely in place and hard at work. The Panama Railroad and, to a lesser extent, several other American-owned companies based in and around Panama and Colón, showed their influence at almost every point in the invasion. In the rhetoric of the President and the State Department, they were abstract entities known only by the names of “commerce,” “progress,” or “transit,”

overshadowing policy decisions and outweighing presidential power. These specters nonetheless had sway. As the expedition began, they took on material forms: the press and the military referred to and praised them under their own names. Their protection would become the top rationale for deploying the nation's navy to a foreign land; their infrastructure would enhance the power of an otherwise inadequate navy; their power on the Isthmus would allow them to take control over land, people, and history. This thesis is not organized chronologically, but in terms of ideas. In the first chapter, I will show how the highest American official announced himself to be powerless in the face of global trade and international war, and therefore promoted both. I will examine how the apparent necessity of military action led Cleveland to represent his platform differently, how this new rhetoric was supported by the idea of global trade, and how it ultimately led to the occupation.

In the second chapter, I will discuss how, at the same time, the military and its supporters clung to any opportunity to display America's might and plead their case to increase it. Martial inferiority, however, was compensated for by the formidable power of overseas American businesses. Though lacking the resources to defend themselves alone, the Panama Railroad Company, Pacific Mail Steamship Company and smaller American proprietors in Colón and Panama became great sources of material and ideological support. In their existence, they constituted a specific American interest. With the presence of valuable American citizens and their property in Panama, those in favor of intervention were provided with a popular and legally justifiable motive to intervene. At the same time, the American companies actively aided the functioning of the then-weak Navy, supplementing their ships and supplies, offering quarter and positions from which to fight.

The third chapter will examine the ways in which the Panama Railroad Company exerted power in its own right, without the immediate support of the United States government or Navy. This becomes particularly clear at the moment of Prestán's hanging, with which both railroad officials and the railroad itself were intimately involved. This moment is notable too because it was not at all outside of the company's repertoire. The railroad's local influence, long history of violence and attempts to expand its reach demonstrate how a semiofficial extension of national power can function in a foreign nation.

I. The Isolationist Intervention

As the first democratic president since before the Civil War, Grover Cleveland had campaigned on promises of limited overseas involvement and a small national navy. His platform featured a disavowal of imperialism and foreign wars and the promise of a solution to domestic problems. In his inaugural address, delivered March 4, 1885, he outlined the policies he would enact as president, “the policy of Monroe and of Washington and Jefferson—‘Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliance with none.’” The plan was one of international neutrality and domestic tranquility, with a focus on economic development. He described a path toward a more stable economy with the maintenance of the “safety and confidence of business” and protection of laborers from competition with a “servile class” of immigrants. The Americans to which Cleveland planned to devote his efforts were identified specifically as the generators of wealth. Cleveland’s “obligation to every patriotic citizen” extended to those “on the farm, in the workshop, in the busy marts of trade, and everywhere.”³¹ The most prominent features of this platform, friendly isolationism and economic prosperity, must not have appeared contradictory when the speech was delivered. That would change within about a month. The plan of the inaugural address would soon prove to be unworkable, forcing Cleveland and his State Department to search for new ways to rationalize their decisions while appearing to stay true to their professed beliefs.

³¹ Grover Cleveland, “First Inaugural Address,” In U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses from Washington to Obama, 287-295, Online: The Floating Press, 2009, 287, 290, 292, Accessed February 2, 2019, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=413193#goto_toc.

i. “The Shock of Foreign Conflicts”³²

Around the same time that the newly inaugurated Cleveland was making lofty promises to the people of the United States of America, a different president was taking power in the United States of Colombia. Controversial conservative Rafael Núñez moved to reduce the autonomy of the Panamanian Isthmus and appointed unelected representatives to positions traditionally determined by popular election.³³ His policies triggered uprisings all over the nation. To quell the revolts, most of the Colombian troops stationed in the city of Panama moved inland. With the central government’s power in the city suddenly weakened, liberal General and former governor of Panama Rafael Aizpuru overpowered the remaining forces with his own and declared Panama’s independence on March 16.³⁴ He expelled the unpopular president of the state of Panama, who had been appointed by the Nuñez’ Constitutional Assembly, and installed himself as the new president.³⁵ He did not hold Panama for long though. Central government troops stationed in Colón traveled to the Pacific side of the Isthmus and quickly retook the city.

This left Colón undefended. Before the end of the month, Pedro Prestán, a liberal lawyer and congressman formerly employed by the *Compagnie Universelle*, raised a militia, ordered some American weapons to be delivered by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and took over Colón. Prestán made some efforts to reform the city’s tax policies and local government, but the arrival of the *Colon* with its weapons, the arrests of the Americans, the contest with Commander

³² Cleveland, “First Inaugural Address,” 289.

³³ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 43., Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 67.

³⁴ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 67., Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 108-9.

³⁵ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations During the Year Ending July 1885*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885, 49-50. Accessed October 16, 2018. <https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/congressional/docview/t66.d71.n1305-4?accountid=10226>.

Kane, the fire in Colón, and the arrival of the American troops resulted in his downfall.³⁶ Ten days after the fire, 1,200 more U.S. troops arrived on the Isthmus.³⁷ Within the first few months of his presidency, Cleveland had not only overseen a foreign martial engagement with political implications, he had overseen one of the largest foreign martial engagements of the late nineteenth century, the largest since the Mexican-American War forty years earlier.³⁸

After the intervention, Cleveland was forced to reckon with the contradictions of his platform. In his preface to a report on U.S. foreign relations, written December of the same year, Cleveland stated his views as to the value and propriety of the military action. Putting the shifts in his philosophy on display, he attempted to reconcile two national identities that now seem incompatible: the nation fully isolated from global conflict, and the nation fully invested in global trade. He invoked commerce as both vital to the future of the nation and as a powerful force beyond any one man's control. Distancing himself from the realities of the occupation, Cleveland presented war and commerce as abstract issues. He claimed to be resigned to his own powerlessness over forces beyond his control. The growth of global trade and transit was the "irresistible tide of commercial expansion which...is being urged onward by those increasing facilities of production, transportation, and communication to which steam and electricity have given birth."³⁹ Compared to his earlier invocation of wage earners, farmers and threatening immigrants, this depiction of progress eliminated the element of individual choice and individual profit. In the Inaugural Address, he ennobled commerce as a vital aspect of American democracy

³⁶ "Peace Probable," *Star and Herald*, 1, March 23, 1885.

³⁷ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 67-8., Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 108-9.

³⁸ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 43.

³⁹ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vi.

and domestic wellbeing, but in his address to Congress he elevated it even further. Commercial development became, not the product of working people, but a force of nature. Cleveland imagined commercial development as a force independent of commercial developers. Instead, it was something that would happen as surely as any other natural phenomenon, like the movement of an ocean. Cleveland imagined a world where human agency, including his own, meant little. Commercial progress, transportation and electricity were themselves the independent agents, too big for one man, even a President, to manage.

Conspicuously absent were the emphatic condemnations of overseas projects and alliances that characterized the first inaugural address. In the later address, Cleveland argued against the acquisition of territory overseas, content with only “the great area committed to our charge,” and against melding American interests with the “complications of distant governments,” but the argument was necessarily less absolute.⁴⁰ America had, after all, entered into one of those “foreign broils” Cleveland denounced when he took office.⁴¹ One promise was broken, but the vow to secure the wellbeing of American business was kept. The December address digressed into a discussion of the value of “the security and neutrality of interoceanic routes.”⁴² Though Cleveland actively disavowed war, the military mission earlier that year had also been carried out under the banner of neutrality, so this statement is not anti-interventionist, but a defense of his administration’s actions. Commercial development, and not expansionism, isolationism or democracy, took a special position as the ineffable American value and the great global mover. The adherence to this value was, understandably, emphasized over the

⁴⁰ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vi, xlvi.

⁴¹ Cleveland, “First Inaugural Address,” 292.

⁴² U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vii.

abandonment of certain other values. Protecting trade for the sake of Americans and the world was, to an American Democrat, a far more honorable pursuit than the acquisition of foreign territory. And if the protection of American moneymakers did result, unavoidably, in a little bit of military policing in faraway lands, it was only for the noble cause of protection.

The Democratic Cleveland administration was certainly opposed to overtly fighting for a global empire, especially in comparison to the Republicans of the same era.⁴³ At the same time, they were strongly in favor of commercial freedom and global trade. This economic agenda took on an ever greater significance as Cleveland attempted to minimize the Panama Crisis. To distract from the quasi-imperial aspects of the crisis, Cleveland's devotion to global trade approached a beatific pitch. He envisioned a system of travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans as "a trust for mankind...open to all nations and subject to the ambitions and warlike necessities of none."⁴⁴ This idealism, in addition to the earlier characterization of commercial development as immensely powerful, elevated commerce to a nearly sacred status, something that could not be corrupted by mere conflicts between regular people or a few gunshots. The treatment of economic power as an abstract in rhetoric could not actually lessen its material significance or global reach, though. In the post-crisis letter to Congress, Cleveland tried to rationalize a foreign military engagement carried out under the leadership of a party that had claimed to be opposed to such things. He did it by turning away from the actualities of foreign war and inventing a purified vision of global capitalism to uphold.

⁴³ Smith, *Illusions of Conflict*, 40-3.

In the 1880s, both major political parties were in favor of expanding international trade, but Republicans were more openly in favor of formal alliances and overseas territorial expansion.

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vii.

ii. “Ambitions and Warlike Necessities”⁴⁵

The President’s real stance on foreign policy was hardly as clear as it appeared in the Inaugural Address. Inconsistencies between Cleveland’s apparent fixation on Washington’s plea to avoid “entangling alliances” and his actual policy decisions were not rare.⁴⁶ While he did block the annexation of Hawaii in 1893 at the start of his second term in office, he also supported the establishment of a permanent U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor during his first.⁴⁷ In the same term, his Democrat-controlled House of Representatives voted to massively strengthen the Navy.⁴⁸ While continuing to openly disavow European-style empire-building, he allowed his second term Secretary of State to argue, in an attempt to keep England from intervening in the affairs of Venezuela, that the United States was “practically sovereign” in South America.⁴⁹ In his second term he also oversaw two more minor military actions in Brazil and Nicaragua.

Cleveland’s terms in office, if he was sincerely morally opposed to power grabs, would appear as incongruous periods of peace or stagnation within the nineteenth century. Instead, both saw a continuation of America’s increasing domination of the Southern Hemisphere, a gradual learning process by which, as Smith puts it, America realized that “an occasional show of force could be used to coerce possible recalcitrants and deter potential adversaries.”⁵⁰ Cleveland’s behavior may point to a man who truly was confused, forced to contend with changing world-

⁴⁵ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vii.

⁴⁶ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” 1796, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015059424567>.

⁴⁷ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, 74-5., Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, 80.

⁴⁸ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 80-1.

⁴⁹ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 73-4.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Illusions of Conflict*, 44.

historical circumstances beyond his control and outside of his moral repertoire. However, his position as the two time holder of the highest office in the land makes that difficult to believe. It is more likely that, having realized the fundamental incompatibility of two of his major platforms in a world where American commercial interests were also international interests, Cleveland found that it would be most effective to present himself not as having changed his mind or chosen to prioritize one of his ideals over another, but as not being able to choose. In the face of global forces, he could be an idealist turning, helplessly, to pragmatism. The language of powerlessness, the claim that “the laws of progress were vital and organic” rather than based on the conscious choices and actions of real people, was a way to dodge culpability while subtly maintaining the nation’s creep toward greater global power.⁵¹

A study of Cleveland’s State Department shows the problems of the Democratic ideology when applied to the case of the Panama Crisis. It is true that Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard and Secretary of the Navy William C. Whitney, like their president, openly disapproved of foreign war for the sake of conquest.⁵² In a statement to the *Washington Post* on April 5, Secretary Whitney claimed, “dispatching marines to Aspinwall has no political significance.”⁵³ He described the actions of the military as a “protest” for the restoration of transit and claimed that they had only been deployed because of America’s “obligation” under a treaty with Colombia from 1846.⁵⁴ This mirrored Cleveland’s minimizing technique. Whitney too was powerless, and the military action was hardly a military action at all. This is not to say that

⁵¹ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vi.

⁵² Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 589.

⁵³ Aspinwall was another name for Colón, after a founder of the Panama Railroad Company.

⁵⁴ “The Burning of Colon.,” *The Washington Post*, Apr 05, 1885.

contemporary observers found such rhetoric convincing. In the following article, a reporter wondered what the military's true intentions were. According to that observer, "It is unknown whether the motive is conquest or the protection of American interests."⁵⁵

The treaty Whitney referenced in his statement to the *Washington Post* proved to be, in addition to the nation's economic welfare, a major aspect of the effort to justify the U.S. intervention in Panama. Its full title was the 1846 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Navigation, and Commerce, but it was more commonly known as known as the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty . Cleveland's address on foreign relations and Bayard's correspondence with the Colombian diplomat Becerra both referred to it, claiming its 35th article justified, or even demanded, the mobilization of the American military to resolve any conflict that threatened Isthmian transit or Panamanian stability.⁵⁶ That article called for the United States to "guarantee positively and efficaciously to New Granada [United States of Colombia in 1885] [...] the perfect neutrality of the beforementioned Isthmus, with the view that the free transit from the one to the other sea, may not be interrupted or embarrassed [and] the United States also guarantee, in the same manner, the rights of sovereignty and property which New Granada has and possesses over the said territory." In exchange, the U.S. would receive "the tranquil and constant enjoyment of these advantages," which included free use of the ports on the Isthmus, the exemption of Americans from any trade restrictions that were not also applied to Colombian citizens, and the bestowal of any special trade-related privileges afforded to Colombians on the Americans as well. At the time of the treaty's writing, both Mallarino and Bidlack conceded that the 35th article would

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, iv, 223.

constitute a form of codependence with a foreign power, a “quasi-alliance” between the two nations. Then-president James K. Polk called it a “concession to the commercial and political interests of the United States.”⁵⁷ Based on precedent and the the treaty’s vague language, it was not totally unreasonable to interpret the treaty as a call to defend Colombia from aggressors.

On the other hand, it was not entirely clear how the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty was meant to be enforced. It did not explicitly demand military action. The call for the U.S. to guarantee the neutrality of the Isthmus could be read as an obligation to actively defend Colombia from those who threatened its sovereignty or commerce, but it could also be read as the U.S. promising not to threaten Colombian sovereignty for its own benefit, or as Colombia vowing not to interrupt global transit by involving itself in international conflicts and blocking passage for some or all merchants. There was also something of a precedent for nonintervention. In an 1869 message concerning the interpretation of the treaty, then Secretary of State William H. Seward had declared that America was absolutely not meant “to become a party to any civil war in [Colombia] by defending the Isthmus against another party.”⁵⁸ The treaty was not written with a civil war between Colombian political factions in mind.⁵⁹ At the time of signing, America and Colombia were most concerned about threats from Europe, especially England. The Americans had originally imagined that other European nations would sign similar treaties with Colombia, making it a universally recognized neutral zone, not a specifically American protectorate.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1885: Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President*, December 8, 1885. 49th Cong., 1st sess. H. Doc. 1. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1886, art. 35 (11), Message from the President of the United States (13), Protocol of a Conference Held in Bogota (16-7), <https://bit.ly/2pY4ydI>.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Illusions of Conflict*, 84.

⁵⁹ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 583.

⁶⁰ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 36.

Through the nineteenth century, the treaty was interpreted as a call for just that, or invoked whenever it was found to be convenient. Ultimately, in one of the most imaginative interpretations of the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty, the Roosevelt administration used it to argue for American sovereignty over the Isthmus and to justify America's role in Panama's secession from Colombia in 1903.⁶¹ In the case of the Panama Crisis, the reading of the treaty was less innovative than it would be in 1903, but it was presented as having forced Cleveland's hand, an unfortunate responsibility that had been established before his time, leaving him powerless. He described the 35th Article as a set of "guarantees" that the U.S. military had no choice but to fulfill.⁶² The treaty allowed for the Cleveland administration's interpretation, but it did not demand it. The choices the Cleveland administration made when faced with the treaty's ambiguities point to something other than helplessness, and motivations other than the need to honor a contract.

iii. The Value of Commerce

U.S. diplomats also mirrored the president in their focus on the economic implications of the rebellion. The State Department of the nineteenth century, under both Democrats and Republicans, consistently prioritized the country's economic interests and maintenance of a market for American exports in its foreign policy.⁶³ Cleveland's diplomats followed the president's own policy as well as an established precedent in their focus on financial issues. In his correspondence with Colombian Minister Ricardo Becerra, Secretary of State Bayard dodged Becerra's hints at American responsibility for resolving the rebellion while revealing the U.S.'s

⁶¹ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 83-4.

⁶² U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, iv.

⁶³ Smith, *Illusions of Conflict*, 40-1.

interests. After discovering the *Colon* was carrying a shipment of arms from New York to the Colombian rebels on March 17, Bayard responded to Becerra's anger and shock in one of a series of increasingly tense letters. In one dated March 27, Bayard chastised the Colombian consul, "I deem it proper to invite your attention to the fact that the existence of a rebellion in Colombia does not authorize the public officials of the United States to obstruct ordinary commerce in arms between citizens of this country and the rebellious or other parts of the territory of the Republic of Colombia." Here, as in Cleveland's December address, commerce for its own sake was presented as the top priority. For Bayard, the free movement of goods superseded any obligation to prevent those goods from being used to harm an ally. Bayard did not hesitate to prioritize the maintenance of commerce over the maintenance of diplomatic amity, either because it was a convenient and plausible excuse for negligence or because it really was the most important aspect of American policy. The ordinary commerce in arms he would not disrupt consisted of several cases of rifles, shells, gunpowder, and "military accouterments," ordered by Prestán sometime in the middle of March, and that would help to trigger the arrests of Americans in Colón.⁶⁴

Bayard and Whitney, and the State Department in general, had initially seemed to resist interference in Panama for the sake of American economic interests, arguing that protection of merchants would be too much of an intervention. In a letter to Whitney, Bayard had argued that American citizens working overseas should understand the risks of their undertaking and should not expect special protections.⁶⁵ After the occupation, the popular opinion on aiding Americans

⁶⁴ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 238.

⁶⁵ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 589.

in Panama shifted. A flood of petitions from Americans who lost property in the uprisings and the fire were enough to motivate the United States to pursue \$3.75 million in damage claims against the uncooperative Colombian government. Cleveland referenced the ongoing struggle with the Colombian Government hopefully in his December address, saying it had “expressed its willingness” to negotiate.⁶⁶ He proved to be too optimistic. The State Department persisted for six years before abandoning the cause.⁶⁷ This case, though it does not offer direct insight into the causes and motives of the invasion, does demonstrate how much sway the welfare of American businessmen abroad could have on American foreign policy when commercial wellbeing was truly at risk. Colombia dodged all responsibility and the U.S. could not force it to pay. The case against Colombia probably failed because it was not legally valid. The recognized government had not perpetrated the acts of destruction, and had in fact tried to stop them. The shakiness of this suit combined with the U.S. Government’s persistence points to an ordering of priorities. Where the laws or precedent aligned with defense of property, they were duties and obligations. Where the laws (or logic) did not align with the defense of property, the American government fought against them.

Some of the awkwardness of the State Department’s position came from the Democratic Party’s policies at the time. Wicks has observed that while Cleveland and his appointees believed in expanding American trade with other nations, “as a rule they did not relate this process to power politics.”⁶⁸ Whether this is truly possible is questionable. Zakaria notes that, because nations generally tend to grow in military power as their economies grow in strength, situations

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, v.

⁶⁷ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 69.

⁶⁸ Wicks, “Dress Rehearsal,” 582.

in which a truly prosperous country is able to remain martially and diplomatically weak are uncommon.⁶⁹ Bayard and Cleveland's praises of free trade and the necessity of Isthmian transit combined with their distaste for foreign wars and alliances read as contradictory in light of the landing of the marines. This might be partly explained by the previously established treaty that had already linked the nation's economic wellbeing to overseas infrastructure, and that certain interpretations of that treaty had the potential to lead to military conflict, but the treaty was vague enough to be followed without military action. A real desire for structural change would have appeared as a more spirited challenge to precedent instead of a fatalistic acceptance of the nation's fate. Rather, Cleveland used the treaty and invoked trade as an excuse for an overseas mission that would solidify American economic and political power overseas.

It has been argued that the Cleveland administration's interest in overseas power was minimal, citing its anti-expansionist policy and rejection of a plan to build an American-controlled canal in Nicaragua.⁷⁰ Wicks, like most others who have analyzed the conflict, downplays the role of the transit companies, considering the abandoned Nicaraguan canal briefly and mentioning the railroad as a thing that was occasionally defended.⁷¹ However, the choice to employ force on the Isthmus for the sake of free transit necessarily was to the benefit of the transit companies. When Cleveland, in his December message to Congress, begged his audience to consider the value of free transit, he argued that "whatever highway may be constructed across the [Isthmus]" was of great value to the world. When he described this potential structure and unstoppable growth of business as it related to the intervention of the Isthmus, he was arguing

⁶⁹ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 5.

⁷⁰ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 582, 586.

⁷¹ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 589.

for the value of the railroad and every American company that depended on it. As real lines of transit between the seas, the Panama Railroad and Pacific Mail Steamship Companies were the closest real entities to the abstracted ones President Cleveland upheld. They were the “increasing facilities of [...] transportation and communication,” powered by steam and new technology. In this vision, the companies represented the commercial progress of a thriving civilization and the vital path across the Isthmus that allowed free trade to flourish. No other route across the Isthmus existed.

When the first ship sailed for Panama on April 3, the Cleveland administration had made its choice. Whatever the style of the arguments in defense of free transit and commerce, the order shifted the domain of the crisis from the rhetorical to the real. Upon arrival in Panama, the Navy would not be able to communicate frequently or clearly with Washington, meaning that those on the Isthmus, though expected to follow orders, would inevitably have more immediate control over operations.⁷² The choice to invade, even if for free transit rather than expansion, devolved control of the situation onto the Navy, in particular Admiral Jouett and Commander McCalla. In the occupation, the abstracted idea of transit came to life, animated by the violence of the Navy and the machinations of the Panama Railroad Company and its fellow American enterprises.

⁷² Wicks, “Dress Rehearsal,” 592-3.

II. An Unexpected Alliance

As the crisis progressed, the Navy and several American businesses found their interests to be increasingly connected. Together, they pooled their resources—manpower, arms, land, and influence—to dominate the Isthmus and ensure the Central Government’s victory over Aizpuru and Prestán. Their shared efforts against the revolutionaries, rather than only protecting American assets, served to intensify the crisis and its destruction, but also, in the end, to establish U.S. power on the Isthmus more firmly. The Navy and an American business, in this case the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, had their first moment of collaboration in an event that greatly worsened the situation in Colón, triggering the fire and the U.S. occupation.

On March 29, the several crates of rifles and shells and 34 barrels of gunpowder that Pedro Prestán had ordered and paid for arrived on the *Colon*.⁷³ When Prestán attempted to claim the cargo, Pacific Mail Steamship Company Superintendent William Connor refused to honor his bill of lading, citing an 1838 Neutrality Act. Prestán’s forces arrested him.⁷⁴ Prestán then arrested Pacific Mail Steamship Company representative John M. Dow, Superintendent of the Panama Railroad George Burt, a U.S. consul, and two naval officers.⁷⁵ Prestán persuaded the consul to order the release of the weapons in exchange for his own release, as well as the freedom of the others. Unbeknownst to them all, Commander Theodore Kane of the *Galena*, a U.S. ship that just happened to be stationed at Colón that day, had decided to step in, towing the *Colon* out of reach to stop the transaction. When Prestán realized that he had been tricked, he retaliated by

⁷³ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 238.

⁷⁴ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 67., “Outrages by Insurgents,” 5.

⁷⁵ “Outrages by Insurgents,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1885.

recapturing Dow and Connor. Kane retaliated by occupying Colón with 100 troops just as the Central Government forces arrived to defeat Prestán's small force.⁷⁶

i. The Old Navy

The affairs of the American military, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and the Panama Railroad were at that moment entwined in a very literal sense. However, the ties between the U.S. Navy and American-Panamanian businesses were stronger than a shared misadventure could account for. These major arms of American power collaborated intimately in the resolution of the crisis, bolstering each other at their respective weak spots. The Navy lent its political legitimacy and martial power to the defense of property while the transportation companies offered their infrastructure and resources to an underfunded, undersized Navy that had landed in a nation with no official American bases.

Between the U.S.'s demilitarization following end of the Civil War and the buildup of the New Navy by the end of the nineteenth century, debate raged over whether the nation should follow a policy of neutrality or arm itself and exert its power over the entire Western Hemisphere. Considering the U.S.'s strong economy and influence, its Navy was proportionately very weak in the 1880s.⁷⁷ In 1883, Congress had approved the addition of three new cruisers to the outmoded wooden Navy, showing some awareness of the Navy's weakness though not remedying it. A major Naval buildup, approved from 1885 to 1889, later added 30 more ships, but the U.S.'s "New Navy" was not equal to those of European powers until the late 1890s.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 5.

⁷⁸ Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, 62-3., Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 80-1.

Americans were well aware that they were invading Panama with an underwhelming fleet. Figure 3, a political cartoon published in response to the occupation of Panama, caricatures the Old Navy. Ragged officers struggle to turn the crank of the ship's pump as Uncle Sam, concerned but inactive, looks on. The illustration represented the nation's discomfort with a perceived inability to defend its interests abroad, but the outmoded Navy was more than just a punchline. Naval officers expressed concern over the inadequacy of the Navy's offensive capacity at the time of the crisis. McCalla concluded his report on the occupation with pages of complaints on Navy's lack of resources in comparison to other global powers. The rifles in use were "shorter than the rifle adopted by all other nations for their infantry," the Navy had no transport ships of its own, and the Marines' tactics were, without training in amphibious landings, "of a by-gone day."⁷⁹

Unsurprisingly, many officers of the U.S. Navy were deeply unhappy with this state of affairs. Much of the coverage of the crisis was intended as pro-military propaganda; the mission was at least partly an attempt to improve the Navy's reputation, budget and power. Commodore Walker, the chief of the Navigation Bureau and an advocate for militarization, secretly directed Commander McCalla to keep the press informed of the Navy's deeds and to gather information on Panamanian islands that might make good permanent bases.⁸⁰ Wicks investigates these intrigues in far greater detail in his own essay. As fascinating as such covert dealings may be, it is equally meaningful that, even without great power, resources, or popularity, the Navy had little

⁷⁹ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 61-2, 67.

⁸⁰ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 591-2.

trouble enforcing its own and America's will on the Isthmus. At almost every point, from before the fire in March to the Navy's departure in May, American companies were there to help.



Figure 3: *The Trouble at Panama*; A caricature of the relative weakness of the American Navy as it prepared to occupy Panama

ii. Defense of Lives and Property

Whenever revolutionary activities on the Isthmus appeared to threaten commerce, especially the workings of the Panama Railroad, the Navy had an opportunity to invade based on precedent. The U.S. had a history of justifying invasions for the protection of private property. The need to defend commerce motivated most of the U.S.'s nineteenth century military actions in

Latin America.⁸¹ This is apparent in older records of similar conflicts. According to a telegram sent by Commander Lewis Clark concerning a smaller intervention in Panama in January 1885, the Colombian government's "inability to protect the property of the Panama Railroad company" necessitated the U.S. intervention, showing that the railroad's welfare might make the difference between deploying American troops and leaving the Colombian forces to deal with unrest alone.⁸²

Commander McCalla, second in command on the Isthmus and first in the city of Panama, characterized the mission as a necessary defense of "the lives and property of American citizens" in his official report.⁸³ On April 5, as the troops approached the Isthmus, Navy Secretary Whitney defined the occupation similarly. Though he did not mention the railroad specifically in his statement, he did state that the mission's purpose was to "guard the interests of citizens" and to restore "transit on the Isthmus," meaning the railroad.⁸⁴ The interests of American citizens in Panama consisted of, in addition to their own personal safety, apartment buildings, legal firms, the holdings of merchants, physicians' offices, an ice company and, most importantly, the Panama Railroad.⁸⁵ Variations on Whitney and McCalla's argument appear in numerous other documents. The repetition of this argument shows that the wellbeing of businesses was a significant factor in the decision to occupy Panama, and that the Panama Railroad was an especially vital interest.

⁸¹ Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, 60.

⁸² U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 203.

⁸³ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 46.

⁸⁴ "The Burning of Colon." *The Washington Post*, Apr 5, 1885.

⁸⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 5-20.

Stationed in Colombia, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and the Panama Railroad Company, along with other minor merchants and property owners, constituted an American interest and military obligation in Latin America. Even if the American government and military had no other goals than to protect their citizens' commercial assets and safety, the military exercise still would have had the effect of gradually destabilizing the Colombian government and sowing mistrust of Americans within the population.⁸⁶ In calling for their own protection and justifying American involvement by their location, the American companies based in Panama, contributed to the conflict in an unavoidable way. The companies' position also provided a justification for the Navy's intelligence gathering and value proving exercise, and allowed for a show of U.S. power overseas.

iii. "Peace Probable"⁸⁷

American writers, both of legal documents and newspaper reports, fixated on the idea of an insurgency characterized by its lack of respect for business and property. This rhetoric pointed to public support for military intervention that defended property for its own sake: for the employment of violent means even when lives were not necessarily at risk. Alleged crimes against property became proof of Prestán's villainous character as an "outlaw," and the leader of a "cut-throat" mob.⁸⁸ A *New York Times* account of his "extortionate demands" for "tribute" from

⁸⁶ Wicks, "Dress Rehearsal," 599.

⁸⁷ "Peace Probable," *Star and Herald*, 1, March 23, 1885.

⁸⁸ "The Situation at the Isthmus: An Explanation of Commander Kane's Action," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1885. <https://nyti.ms/2KyzMVI>.

local merchants and innkeepers depicted him as a dangerous tyrant.⁸⁹ Portrayals of Rafael Aizpuru, Panama's rebel leader were similar. The Panama Railroad Company's appeal listed his acts of violence: "Aizpuru, has been permitted to [...] open and block switches on the Panama Railroad, to continually obstruct the road, to cut wires, to hold employees of the Panama Railroad under guard, and otherwise to render it necessary to close the transit."⁹⁰ Both men were depicted as villainous because of such crimes, but the accounts that became popular after the intervention omitted several important points.

Prestán's own public declarations presented the rebel leader in a different light. Though he led a group labeled criminal and anarchic, his efforts were calculated. He appealed directly to the Panama Railroad, promising to allow its operations to continue as he took control of Colón. In an open letter to Superintendent Burt, reprinted in the *Star and Herald*, Panama's American-owned trilingual newspaper, Prestán assures Burt, "that the interests of that company shall be fully guaranteed by the force at my command, without a single act transpiring which may be considered as an act of violence."⁹¹ In a message addressed to American naval Commander Beardsley, dated March 24 and reproduced in the *New York Times*, Prestán vowed that, as long as the U.S. recognized the revolutionary forces as belligerents rather than treating them as criminals, "the rights of North American citizens [would] be duly respected."⁹² Prestán did attempt to extract money from the businesses of the local elite, something George Burt referred

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 14.

⁹¹ Pedro Prestán, "Letter to the Superintendent of the Panama Railroad," *Star and Herald*, March 16, 1885.

⁹² "The Situation at the Isthmus," *New York Times*, April 29, 1885.

to as “forced loans.”⁹³ Though not totally clear, the term “forced loan” indicates that Prestán intended to repay his creditors. An article in the *Star and Herald* referred to Prestán’s demands as a “double contribution” and a “tax,” mentioning that business owners had the option to pay or to close their shops.⁹⁴ In light of his attempts to communicate with the merchants and to establish legitimacy with U.S. representatives, Prestán’s attempts to fund his revolution had more in common with taxation, though abrupt and aggressive, than anarchic robbery.

Aizpuru took similar measures to establish order and cooperate with the transit companies. He tried to schedule a meeting with representatives of the United States Consulate, the Panama Railroad Company, and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company on April 12, but consul Thomas Adamson, fearing that any communication with Aizpuru would constitute a recognition of his “so-called government,” rejected the invitation. Representatives of the companies then refused to attend without the consul present. Adamson reported that, after this incident, Aizpuru became markedly more belligerent toward the city’s foreign population.⁹⁵ Later histories of the revolts, like Captain Richard S. Collum’s *History of the United States Marine Corps*, repeat some variation on the theme of Prestán and Aizpuru’s intense and unwarranted “dislike to all foreigners on the Isthmus.”⁹⁶ Scenes like the one Adamson described tell a different story, in which animosity only developed after U.S. representatives had rejected attempts to negotiate.

⁹³ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 14.

⁹⁴ “Daily Star and Herald,” *Star and Herald*, 1, March 31, 1885.

⁹⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Use by United States of Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*. 58th Cong., 2nd sess. S. Doc. 143. Washington, D.C., February 3, 1904, 67-8, https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/congressional/docview/t47.d48.4589_s.doc.143?accountid=10226.

⁹⁶ Richard S. Collum, *History of the United States Marine Corps*, Philadelphia: L.R. Hamersly & Co., 1890, 221, <https://bit.ly/2U4ferT>.

Though neither measure was effective, Prestán and Aizpuru proved themselves to be something other than mad rebels with no regard for the value of commerce.

There is a great deal of evidence that the “revolutionists” were nowhere near as violent as many American writers at the time suggested. Writing after the fire in Colón, the *New York Times* criticized Beardsley for accepting Prestán’s vow to meet civility with civility, but Beardsley likely had reason to believe him. On March 24, responding to Prestán’s declaration, Beardsley affirmed that “Colón was in perfect safety, its future secure and prosperous.”⁹⁷ In a March 23 article titled “Peace Probable,” the *Star and Herald* published a similar claim, that Prestán had “maintained the greatest order” after taking control of the city.⁹⁸ This is to say that the attempted revolutions were not a significant threat to the safety of foreign (or specifically American) business owners and that, prior to the conflict between the American Navy and the revolutionaries, transit across the Isthmus was not severely compromised. Letters sent between French consuls stationed in Colón support Beardsley’s perspective. They lack the panicked tone of many of the American documents, one describing how “foreigners and their properties have been respected” and that “the war has not taken on the ferocious character that it often takes in Spanish-American countries.” This correspondence was dated March 28, 1885, only 3 days before the fire in Colón.⁹⁹ Based on this evidence, the American argument for occupation and intervention weakens, as do defenses for Connor and Kane’s conflict escalating actions. Though Prestán and Aizpuru’s claims to power may not have been entirely legitimate, neither was the

⁹⁷ “The Situation at the Isthmus” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1885.

⁹⁸ “Peace Probable,” *Star and Herald*, 1, March 23, 1885.

⁹⁹ Cantor et. al. *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 110-111.

American argument for the right to occupy the land, which depended on the Bidlack-Mallarino treaty and the need to defend the transit that both revolutionaries had been willing to respect.

iv. Attacks on Lives and Property

The real lawlessness began when the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and Commander Kane refused to honor Prestán's purchase of the weapons aboard the *Colon*. After refusing to turn the weapons over to their buyer, the Americans shipped Prestán's weapons to the Colombian General Gomina and sent him a telegram requesting that he come immediately to Colón to fight the rebel forces.¹⁰⁰ This moment is worth noting since the Neutrality Act, and not political allegiance, were argued as the grounds for rejecting Prestán's bill of lading. Here, the Americans actively instigated and supported the Central Government's battle against the revolutionaries. One of the main charges against Prestán's faction, made by Commander McCalla in his official report, George Burt in his appeal to the consul, and the *New York Times*, was that Prestán's rule led to the disruption of transit and the destruction of railroad property.¹⁰¹ The notorious tearing up of the railroad tracks was a response by Prestán's forces to the arrival of Gomina's, a response to the impending threat that the U.S. Navy had facilitated.¹⁰² It follows here that the American forces played a major role in the disruption of the railroad. By escalating the crisis and favoring one side in an armed political controversy, the Navy contributed to the chaotic situation that was ultimately so detrimental to Isthmian transit and trade.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 14., United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 50., "Outrages by Insurgents," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1885, 5.

¹⁰² Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 113-5.

This is not the only error the Navy's policies may have led to. The burning of Colón was the moment at which the crisis went from inconvenient to devastating, and also a moment in which the American response was found severely wanting. The city of mostly wooden buildings was leveled.¹⁰³ Only brick buildings survived, namely those owned by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and the Panama Railroad.¹⁰⁴ One French source condemns the United States marines for "negligence" and "indolence," apparently believing it to be the responsibility of the Americans to stop the fire from destroying the city.¹⁰⁵ The American forces were inconsistently active at the beginning of the Crisis, here and in the matter of the weapons seeming to work against American interests by facilitating destruction and the escalation of conflicts.

The force that neglected the fire was more proactive in the battle that preceded it. Commander Kane's force of 100 entered the city to defend the property of the Panama Railroad and other Americans. Though the troops were ostensibly neutral in the contest between the Central Government and rebels, they also arrested anyone suspected of plundering American possessions and turned them over to Central Government forces. The Colombian troops, French canal guards, and Kane's troops captured 58 men in total, all of whom were summarily executed by the Colombians the next day. A number of those executed, as the *New York Times* later discovered, were actually innocent.¹⁰⁶ The U.S. Navy went beyond the protection of American

¹⁰³ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ McCullough. *The Path Between the Seas*, 177.

¹⁰⁵ Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 116-7.

¹⁰⁶ "Outrages by Insurgents," 5., Estimates of how many of the executed were innocent range from "several" to "many."

property when it made arrests on behalf of the Central Government. It did so again on April 1 when Lieutenant Robert M. Doyle, probably one of Kane's *Galena* crew, arrested George Davis and the Haitian General Pautrizelle, both associates of Prestán. The arresting officer determined their guilt upon noticing that they had "lingered around the scene of their villainous exploits for over 24 hours." They too were executed by Central Government forces within 30 minutes of their trial, this time by hanging. The *New York Times* produced a strange article on the incident, reprinting a "posthumous letter" from Pautrizelle in which he condemns Prestán for misleading him and the Americans for arresting him, but not the Colombians.¹⁰⁷ Both of these incidents betray more comfort with the Central Government than the stated mission implies. It is hard to see exactly how putting suspected revolutionaries into state custody could be apolitical. This is especially true in the case of Pautrizelle and Davis, who were found to be at the scene of a past crime and appeared suspicious, but who were, according to the *New York Times*' account, not actually doing harm at the moment of arrest.

On April 24, on the other side of the Isthmus, the Navy made another aggressive move, again defending its actions as the protection of American assets. Commander McCalla became suspicious when Aizpuru's forces erected barricades in the city in preparation for a potential battle with Central Government troops.¹⁰⁸ A rumor also spread that Aizpuru was planning to burn the city of Panama just as Prestán was thought to have burned Colón. Fearing more destruction, Admiral Jouett directed McCalla to invade the city. In a message dated April 17, Jouett explained his orders to Secretary Whitney, arguing that "the destruction of Panama would involve the

¹⁰⁷ "Two Rebel Leaders Hanged: Prestan Charged by one with the Firing of Colon." *The New York Times*, May 17, 1885. <https://nyti.ms/2VDjzzO>.

¹⁰⁸ "The Situation." *Star and Herald*, 1, April 27, 1885.

destruction of much property belonging to Americans.”¹⁰⁹ In his order to McCalla, he presented a few more problems that the burning of Panama might cause, noting that it would “cause the destruction of much property belonging to Americans, interrupt the transit, besides being an act of vandalism.”¹¹⁰

When McCalla’s forces marched into Panama, Aizpuru knew his bid for independence was at its end. After hearing the news, the former state president wandered through the city, from the main square toward the American consulate, and fainted in the street. McCalla’s forces arrested him. The U.S. Navy’s force of about 1,200, all armed with rifles, rolling gatling guns down the streets, and in possession of a crude bomb, took the city from Aizpuru’s force of 500 without a fight.¹¹¹ Aizpuru agreed to leave the city and McCalla proclaimed himself its protector. Although Navy Secretary Whitney explicitly opposed these acts, a threat from the president of the Panama Railroad Company, John McCullough, kept McCalla in power until Aizpuru promised to keep the railroad safe. McCullough threatened that, if Panama was left undefended, he would withdraw every American railroad employee from the Isthmus, shutting down transit. While the conservative commander in Washington would have had McCalla simply withdraw, McCullough made sure he was more proactive.¹¹² As a result of McCullough and McCalla’s pressure, Aizpuru signed a declaration promising that his forces would prioritize the safety of foreigners and their property, would erect no barricades in the streets, and would not fight within

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 110.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 104.

¹¹¹ “Tanks of powder and a farmer’s dynamo machine, with wire and fuses, had been obtained from the *Shenandoah* to be used if necessary to blow up buildings.”

United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 53-4, 56.

¹¹² Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Gunboat Diplomacy and the Old Navy 1877-1889*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973, 184-5.

the city. The Navy returned Panama to the revolutionary forces and withdrew to their headquarters in a nearby Panama Railroad building.¹¹³

Jouett claimed the U.S. had no political motives, and Aizpuru's promises in exchange for control might seem like an equal compromise, but the effect of the nonviolent occupation was Aizpuru's defeat. Though the contract left Panama nominally in Aizpuru's hands, it stripped him of any power to hold the city against the Central Government. Defensive and offensive measures were forbidden, and McCalla had shown that, as soon as the situation began to look even slightly suspicious, his men could and would rapidly overrun Panama. McCullough's pressure gave McCalla the opportunity to interpret the Navy's defensive mission almost as broadly as possible, to include the elimination of all possible risk to American property. The Navy and Panama Railroad's actions would take their full effect as Central Government forces arrived and easily retook Panama, through negotiation, on April 28.¹¹⁴ Jouett's orders were popularly justified by the need to defend Panama Railroad property, "that the peace of the Isthmus [...] be guaranteed alike to natives and foreigners," but this was all based on only the rumor of a threat.¹¹⁵ Using the presence of American resources in Panama as a justification, the Naval officers on the Isthmus sided with the Central Government and aided the crushing of a political revolution by intimidation.

This was not the only time the Panama Railroad was an active agent in the Navy's mission. The railroad company acted as an advisor throughout the occupation. On April 1, it formally petitioned the American consulate for aid, cataloguing the ways in which the revolts

¹¹³ "The Situation." *Star and Herald*, 1, April 27, 1885.

¹¹⁴ Hagan, *American Gunboat Diplomacy*, 186.

¹¹⁵ "The Situation." *Star and Herald*, 1, April 27, 1885.

had prevented the railway from functioning properly. Based on the later arguments in favor of occupation—the need to restore transit and defend property— this petition and the stoppage of the railroad appear to have been significant motivators for the Navy’s landing on April 10.¹¹⁶ Upon arrival, the Navy continued to take guidance from the Panama Railroad. Admiral Jouett made the decision to occupy the Isthmus based on a conversation with Superintendent George Burt. As he related in a letter to Navy Secretary Whitney, “Mr. Burt told me that he did not dare to open the transit by rail without my protection, and that he had telegraphed to this effect to the directors of the Panama Railroad Company at New York. I therefore determined to land my men at once.” Jouett’s men occupied the Isthmus the next day.¹¹⁷ Burt’s assertion that his business was in danger directly guided the operations of the U.S. Navy.

There were also the less forceful but more numerous complaints of other American proprietors in Panama. The compilation of appeals for aid in the U.S. senate’s *Claims Against the Government of Colombia* shows how much pressure Americans overseas put on their government to defend their property. This collection of letters between American business owners who had lost property in the fire and State Department administrators shows a large body of business owners attempting to pressure the U.S. government. The Boston Ice Company asked that the U.S. Department of State pressure the Colombian government to take responsibility for the fire and their financial losses. They make the request timidly, wondering “whether we can ask our government to present a claim in our behalf.” Others, like the merchant Samuel L. Isaacs are more forceful, announcing they “have reason to expect, that the United States Government will

¹¹⁶ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia.*, 14.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 107.

compel the Colombian Government to restore our property.” These are excerpted from a set of similar demands ranging from 1885 to 1899; over 300 pages worth of landlords, lawyers, and merchants petitioned the American government to take action against Colombia for the restoration of their losses.¹¹⁸ This collection of complaints represents the concentrated anger of a significant group of American citizens. The care with which the U.S. government treated that anger shows how valuable it believed them to be.

v. Empowering the Defender

Companies on the Isthmus deployed more than words to shape the outcome of the crisis. In addition to exerting power over the Navy’s policies, the Panama Railroad, Pacific Mail Steamship Company and various smaller businesses offered their resources to enhance the strength of the Navy’s operations. While it was not unheard of for the government to step in to protect important companies, the U.S. Navy openly depended on the services and infrastructure of the Panama Railroad Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to carry out its mission.¹¹⁹

As Commander McCalla recounted in his report on the expedition, some marines traveled to Colón not on a U.S. Navy vessel, but on the Pacific Mail Steamship *Acapulco*.¹²⁰ The company reduced the cost of passage to \$10 per person, “about the actual cost to the company

¹¹⁸ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 5,6.

¹¹⁹ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 69.

¹²⁰ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations During the Year Ending July 1885*, 46.

for taking them.”¹²¹ It was anomalous for a private company to take on the vital task of transporting troops to battle. McCalla later expressed his discomfort with the situation, arguing that, for future missions, “in common with other maritime nations, the United States should own naval transports.”¹²² When the troops disembarked, the Panama Railroad permitted the Navy to convert trains into makeshift war engines. As he described to Secretary Whitney on April 17, Admiral Jouett arranged for the preparation of “2 flat cars, each carrying 1 Gatling gun, 1 Hotchkiss revolving cannon, and one 12-pounder S.B. howitzer, manned by 30 men and protected by a shield of boiler iron about 4 feet high extending all around the car,” all in about six hours on April 11, one day after landing at Colón.¹²³ The repurposed car in the center-left of Figure 4 looks surprisingly streamlined for something so hastily built. One can imagine the psychological impact of that machine traversing the Isthmus within a day of the landing of a “weak” Navy. The steamship company stepped in to augment a Navy lacking even basic transportation abilities while the railroad essentially loaned it one half of a primitive railway gun, allowing companies allowing the U.S. Navy to exert control from sea to sea in a way it could never have managed alone.

During the occupations of Colón and Panama City, the Navy quartered its troops in buildings belonging to the Panama Railroad and Pacific Mail Steamship Companies for free.¹²⁴ The railroad and steamship companies were not the only ones to offer their land to the military.

¹²¹ “The War on the Isthmus: United States Forces Going to Aspinwall,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1885, 1, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2znBMIn>

¹²² United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 67.

¹²³ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 106-7.

¹²⁴ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 47-8, 54-5.

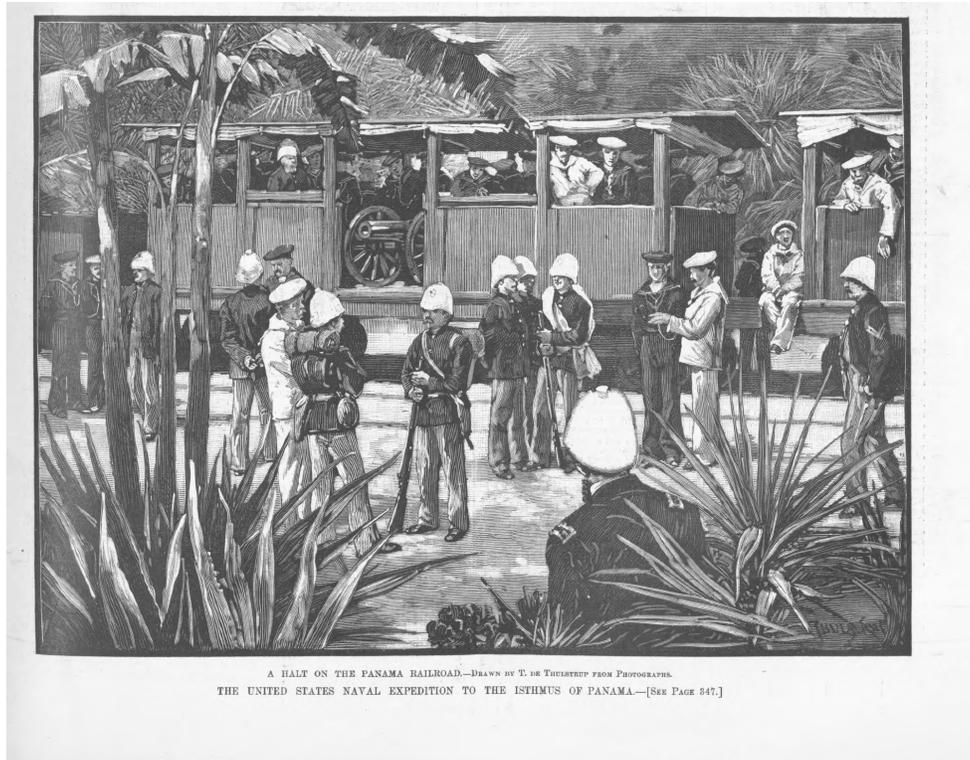


Figure 4: “A Halt on the Panama Railroad,” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 30, 1885; Note the mounted gun and armored car.

Samuel L. Isaacs, an American merchant whose properties were destroyed in the fire, proposes in his appeal for aid that his suddenly empty lots might be used “for camping or for a coal station” by American soldiers.¹²⁵ American businessmen living overseas were willing to convert their private properties into military resources at a moment’s notice. While the Navy lacked permanent bases in Panama, it had a ready network of unofficial quarters and transportation. McCalla’s search for sites for future Naval bases was suspicious and a near violation of U.S. policy, but it was also unnecessary.¹²⁶ The U.S.-owned companies had already given the Navy a permanent site where it could quarter its men and base its operations. The Pacific Mail Steamship and

¹²⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 5.

¹²⁶ Wicks, “Dress Rehearsal,” 592.

Panama Railroad buildings that housed troops in Panama were even referred to, in the press and in McCalla's report, as "Camp Jouett."¹²⁷ When they offered their land to the Navy, the owners of the sites found that they had the ability to invite a foreign military power onto Colombian land for their own benefit.

Acknowledging the importance of the Panama Railroad's contributions to the Navy's effort, Commander McCalla praised Superintendent George Burt enthusiastically in his report on the expedition. The report credited Burt with the low rate of illness among the troops, praised him for his success in improving the railroad, and thanked him for transporting the American forces comfortably and efficiently.¹²⁸ What stands out here is not just that the railroad and steamship companies aided the Navy, but that it was done so voluntarily and openly. Burt, understandably, wanted the railway defended and worked to extend the ability of the Navy to keep his own business safe. As Jouett said in his April 17 report to Secretary Whitney, Burt had "gone out of his way and [had] done everything in his power to facilitate [the Navy's] operations."¹²⁹ The Panama Railroad Company was clearly presented to Congress as an extension of military might overseas, with the opening of private land to the Navy as an affirmation of American power in Panama.

In 1885, the U.S. Navy was large enough to overpower the forces of some Latin American nations, but far smaller than it had been at the time of the Civil war and weak compared to most European navies.¹³⁰ As Wicks notes, the 1,200 man expedition was, at the

¹²⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 121.

¹²⁸ United States. Navy Department. Office of Naval Intelligence. *Papers on Naval Operations*, 65, 67.

¹²⁹ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 109.

¹³⁰ Boot. *The Savage Wars of Peace*, 60, 62.

time, “of unprecedented size.”¹³¹ The U.S. had no permanent military bases or guards for its foreign legations in the nineteenth century.¹³² Taking this into consideration, it could be said that there was nothing surprising about companies acting out of necessary self-interest and the sort of patriotism expected from any public entity, or about the weak Navy looking for help. Both parties worked toward their own interests in fairly predictable ways, but what is exceptional is that a new and more potent combined force appeared. Private enterprises became an unexpected extension of American power overseas. The unified Navy, railroad, and steamship company ensured the escalation of the crisis and easily dominated the Isthmus of Panama.

Regardless of the isolationist leanings of its leaders, U.S. global power was growing and solidifying as a function of commercial power wielded by American agents. The Navy and the transit companies strengthened each other, one by defense of property and the other by amplification of power through efficiency and resources. Both, too, were empowered through violence. While the Panama Railroad lacked the manpower, weaponry, and explicit governmental support of the U.S. Navy, it also was a representative of American power in its own right. Independent of the U.S.’s military resources or diplomatic machine, the company’s representatives exerted their will on the Isthmus with lethal force.

¹³¹ Wicks, “Dress Rehearsal,” 588.

¹³² Boot. *The Savage Wars of Peace.*, 60.

III. “Slowly Strangled to Death”¹³³

Before and after the climax of the crisis, the Panama Railroad Company was powerful in its own right, reshaping the land, culture, economy, and political situation on the Isthmus with little to no outside aid. In the absence of military support, the company carried out projects to increase its reach and influence on the Isthmus as both an established institution and a dynamic force. For much of its lifetime, the railroad infused Panama with characteristically American



Figure 5: A Panama Railroad Company postcard, 1861

¹³³ “Don Pedro Prestan Hanged: The Destroyer of Colon Slowly Strangled to Death,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1885, 3, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2znLbj9>.

forms of violence and exerted distinctly American power. In execution of Pedro Prestán, the final scene of the Panama Crisis, the railroad involved itself in a striking act of symbolic violence that underscored its role on the Isthmus.

i. A Local Hegemon

The two cities in which the crisis took place had risen to prominence as a result of the Panama Railroad. The city of Colón, also called Aspinwall after Panama Railroad Company founder William Henry Aspinwall, was a small American trading post before the construction of the Panama Railroad began. When the town became the Atlantic terminal of the railroad in 1850, it grew rapidly.¹³⁴ As the railroad's terminals, both the older city of Panama and Colón were major sites for international commerce whose demographics reflected the impact of the railroad and canal. The urban population was divided into “working classes [...] of all kinds,—black, white, yellow,—native and foreign,” some wealthier Panamanians, and a tiny minority of wealthy business owners of European and American descent.¹³⁵ Nelson estimated there to be less than 2,000 whites on the Isthmus, while the majority of the population was black and mestizo.¹³⁶ From the 1840s through the 1860s, profiting from land speculation, rentals, and businesses serving other foreigners, the European and American population rose to dominate the state's economy to the extent that the dollar replaced the peso.¹³⁷ By 1885, Panamanian trade was “in the hands of foreigners, with foreign enterprise and foreign capital.”¹³⁸ Many of these foreign

¹³⁴ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 42-3.

¹³⁵ Nelson, *Five Years at Panama*, 6.

¹³⁶ Of combined Indigenous and European (usually Spanish) descent

¹³⁷ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 29, 30.

¹³⁸ Nelson, *Five Years at Panama*, 15.

hands were American, in the form small merchants and professionals, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and the Panama Railroad Company. As an American and French business, the Panama Railroad would have had the benefit of the support of a small but powerful local elite.

Much of the railroad company's power was awarded to it in the original contract with the Colombian government. The United States of Colombia first agreed to allow the Panama Railroad Company to construct a railway across the Isthmus of Panama in 1850. The 1867 contract between the company and the nation, gave the railroad a 99 year lease and a monopoly over Isthmian transportation that entitled it to damages if a competitor arose. It was given the right to seize any Panamanian land deemed necessary to its continued functionality, as long as it compensated the landowner. Due to its perceived value, being "esteemed of public utility," the Panama Railroad was in a position of power in Colombia right from its inception.¹³⁹ This was manifested not only legally, but socially and physically as well.

The railroad worked to increase its power in Panama before and after the events of 1885. Its efforts were simultaneously physical and ideological. A short profile of the work of the Panama Railroad Company, titled "From Aspinwall to Panama," dramatized the significance of the company and the destruction of Colón. The article presented the fire as part of a series of tragedies, "many gloomy memories," that had befallen the civilized in Colombia. The author's imagery betrayed popular views on foreign land and American constructions; Colón was "like a gay colored leaf," the rest of the land surrounding it "thick with graves." Elements of the landscape evoked skeletons, "trickling blood" and murderers. The author finally experienced

¹³⁹ *Contract Between the United States of Colombia and the Panama Railroad Company*, as Modified by the Contracts Made in 1876 and 1880, 1880, 3,4,12,13, New York: Slatk & Janes, Stationers and Printers, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

“relief” when the train crossed a bridge, rising above the pestilent landscape and leaving behind some scattered Indian villages. The developments of the natives were but a limited “token of man’s presence.” It was only as a passenger of the American train that one could truly appreciate the full potential of the country, “the glory of the setting sun.”¹⁴⁰ Americans typically perceived the region as one peopled by an indolent race with no interest in progress.¹⁴¹ The article implies that where the natives had tolerated poor land and an uncivilized lifestyle, the Americans had taken action and worked the land to its full potential, that the place was unwholesome but that hardworking outsiders had brought goodness to it.

This was more than poetic praise for American industry; it echoed the language of American expansionism dating back to the eighteenth century. The article espoused the principle of the “vacuum domicilium,” the sentiment that any land not used to its fullest “productive” potential was a waste and could be treated as empty even if people happened to be living on it. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this was one of the most popular philosophical rationalizations for the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands as the U.S. expanded. Earlier theorists, including John Locke, had defined proper use mainly in agricultural terms, with European style cultivation as the height of land development.¹⁴² “From Aspinwall to Panama” illustrates how this old American theme was refurbished for the industrial world. Americans and Europeans were still the only ones who understood how to correctly extract the land’s full value, and they had become even more efficient than before. Panama minus American development was

¹⁴⁰ “From Aspinwall to Panama,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1885, 4, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2zudSeF>.

¹⁴¹ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 33-4.

¹⁴² Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 24-6.

not just a waste, but evil and full of death. The Panama Railroad Company pursued a mission of expansion, taking measures that, within the American tradition, constituted a claim to sovereignty.

The idea that the Panama Railroad was the true owner of Panama's land was more than a poetic dream or a vague and dated theory. Soon after the rebellion, the Panama Railroad Company sued for the extension of its rights to Colombian land based on this ideology. Arguing for its right to claim ownership of the island of Manzanillo, the railroad company's representatives described how the business's investments and efforts had transformed the island "from an unhealthy swamp to a habitable landing."¹⁴³ Regardless of the actual legal status of the claim (the court ruled against the company because it had violated its agreement with the Colombian government), the railroad treated land improvement as a valid line of reasoning in its argument for possession.¹⁴⁴ By the same logic, the short dramatic piece points to a popular sentiment that, because the American Panama Railroad Company had so drastically reshaped the country, they had become its true owners. These ideological and legal claims to the land represent a drive toward more than just profit; they were both attempts by the company to gain power in Panama. Although Cleveland had tried to imply that commerce could be an apolitical force to the general benefit of all mankind, these commercial agents showed that their interests were not so broad. The railroad aimed for self-interested expansion. Although this particular attempt to gain power over the land failed, it demonstrated that the railroad company believed

¹⁴³ "To the Hon. James G. Blaine," Samuel L.M. Barlow and Frederic R. Coudert to James G. Blaine, May 10, 1889, 5, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

¹⁴⁴ Rafael Reyes and F. Angulo, Exhibit D: Memorial, Resolution, Executive Decree, and Complaint of Reyes, as Commissioner of the Government against the Panama Railroad Company, October 16, 1885, 16, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

itself to be the rightful owner of more land than it truly held. This case shows that the railroad company was engaged in a long term project of local domination.

ii. A History of Violence

Attempts to gain control over land by a land-transit company could be expected, but it may still seem strange that the Panama Railroad was so quick to involve itself with the Navy's operations during the Panama Crisis. Violence was not alien to the company, though. Decades earlier, the railroad had been more directly responsible for another round of local disturbances and summary executions. In the 1850s the company hired former Indian fighter Ran Runnels to eliminate threats and potential threats to the railroad's functioning and profitability. Runnels led his vigilante band, known as the Isthmian Guard, in several mass hangings of suspected bandits and attacks on local leaders who encouraged the railroad's workers to unionize.¹⁴⁵ Violence surrounded the railroad's owner, the French *Compagnie Universelle*, whose laborers were controlled by a military police force, "in many cases repressed in [their] excesses by the soldiery of the [Colombian] garrisons."¹⁴⁶ Violence was written into the company's contract with the Colombian government, which had a clause allowing the company to establish its own armed guard, independent of Colombian forces. While the company would need the nation's permission to establish the guard, the nation could not later force the company to disband it against its will.¹⁴⁷ The railroad saw itself as a potentially militarized institution for much of its life, its

¹⁴⁵ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 28-9.

¹⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Military Force in Internal Affairs of Colombia*, 240.

¹⁴⁷ *Contract Between the United States of Colombia and the Panama Railroad Company*, 13-4.

operations surrounded by violence on a regular basis. When the crisis came, the Panama Railroad was prepared.

iii. “Rendering Justice Unavailable”¹⁴⁸

During the crisis, the railroad company exerted control not only through the allocation of resources, but by representing the events of the revolution in ways meant to display and increase the company’s influence. The Panama Railroad Company’s version of events is the one that persisted while the others were overlooked. This was not only in the press where it made for a more interesting story, but in legal appeals presented to the American State Department, in the official published naval report, and, finally, in contemporary scholarship where it was presented as fact. In his appeal to the U.S. consul, George Burt, superintendent of the Panama Railroad listed Prestán’s crimes against the railroad and the city of Colón, concluding with, “he abolished the courts and drove the judges from the city, rendering justice unavailable, and finally on the thirty-first day of March, 1885, he willfully and maliciously set fire to this city of Colon.”¹⁴⁹ It makes sense that Burt chose to offer a dramatic account of his and the city’s suffering; he was clearly looking to persuade his reader by appealing to a sense of outrage or compassion. The protest’s style does not, at first glance, seem abnormal as an appeal for aid. However, it demands scrutiny for two reasons. First of all, the protest was submitted only one day after the burning of Colón and Prestán was not tried until August of that year. Months before the trial, hours after the crime, and not having witnessed the start of the fire, how could Burt have been so sure of

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Congress. Senate. Claims Against the Government of Colombia, 14.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 15.

Prestán's guilt? Second, this line, word for word, reappears in almost every subsequent official appeal by an American-owned company to the United States government.¹⁵⁰ Here, a powerful individual is seen to have had the ability to create a truth. A declaration that could not have been made with any certainty became a fact, endowed with gravity by its source and then repeated incessantly. Burt's statement could not have been proven at the time he submitted and signed it, but his personal legitimacy seems to have been enough.

By the time of Prestán's trial in August, U.S. forces had not been present on the Isthmus in significant numbers for three months.¹⁵¹ American power, however, was still very much present. Even without the immediate threat of a large force, the demands of the U.S. Navy and the railroad still guided the hand of the Colombian government. Commander Beardsley, in a letter published publicly in the *Anales de la Guerra* and paraphrased in the *Star and Herald*, communicating "the opinion expressed by his government," had called for Prestán and his associates to be "punished as enemies of mankind."¹⁵² This public declaration with the weight of the U.S. government behind it, likely influenced the outcome of the trial.¹⁵³ Statements like this, in addition to Burt's accusations, further indicate that the decision on Prestán's guilt was established long before his trial.

Little evidence existed to counter Burt and Beardsley's statements, but there was also very little to support them. There were no eyewitness accounts of the beginning of the fire save

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵¹ "Marines Back from the Isthmus," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1885, 8, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2zsRkL1>.

¹⁵² "Daily Star and Herald," *Star and Herald*, 1, May 6, 1885.

¹⁵³ Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 129.

General Pautrizelle’s “posthumous confession.” In it, Pautrizelle stated “I had already surrendered to the Government troops at 1 o’clock, when at 2 o’clock you placed fire in the city.” Unless Pautrizelle surrendered and then returned to the city to watch the battle play out, this statement does not make sense as evidence. The *New York Times* reporter who presented the letter was unfazed by its lack of actual proof, claiming the letter was “sufficiently clear to fix the crime of incendiarism on the chief of the rebel party.”¹⁵⁴ The only other evidence against Prestán was that he or his men—the source of the threat is unclear—threatened to burn the city prior to the battle with the Central Government forces.¹⁵⁵ This is incriminating, but also not positive proof of guilt. There are several ways in which the fire could have started: Prestán may have intentionally set the fire himself, a follower of his may have acted on his orders, or without orders. A fire may even have started accidentally during the battle, which took place on a windy night near a wooden city that had experienced five fires from 1863 to 1890.¹⁵⁶ Cantor proposes another possibility, based on correspondence between French consuls, claiming that Prestán had ordered his men to burn one government building, but that the fire had grown and spread too quickly to control.¹⁵⁷ There was also a 1985 declaration by the Municipal Council of Colón, which declared Prestán innocent in the burning of the city and decried his execution as “cruel and unjust.”¹⁵⁸ The available evidence gives no way to positively confirm any of these theories,

¹⁵⁴ “Two Rebel Leaders Hanged: Prestan Charged by one with the Firing of Colon,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 1885.

¹⁵⁵ “The Situation at the Isthmus,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1885.

¹⁵⁶ “Outrages by Insurgents,” 5., Saunders, “Short History of the Panama Railroad,” 23, 26, 30, 31, 35.

¹⁵⁷ Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 116.

¹⁵⁸ “A 125 Años del Ahorcamiento de Pedro Prestán,” *La Estrella de Panama*, August 19, 2010, Accessed April 7, 2019. <http://laestrella.com.pa/opinion/columnistas/125-anos-ahorcamiento-pedro-prestan/23715372>.

but the trial, following months of declarations of Prestán's guilt by Burt, Beardsley, and the press, was not meant to be a measured study of the truth of the incident.

Prestán's trial was hardly more than a show. He protested his innocence throughout the process, which actually consisted of two trials. In the first, a court of law was unable to prove his guilt. A commentator for the *Star and Herald* described, on the day of the second trial, how Prestán's first had gone. The initial verdict was treated as proof of Prestán and the Colombian legal system's corruption. The commentator argued that, while lawyers practiced mere sophistry, the military tribunal would follow "the direct road to truth." Prestán argued in his own defense in both trials, "a task to which he [was] ably fitted by his long experience in defense of murderers and criminals of all classes."¹⁵⁹ A successful defense, a career as a lawyer, and an official declaration of innocence transformed into markers of evil—if he was found guilty, he was certainly guilty; but if innocent, even guiltier. The profound and insurmountable bias against Prestán culminated in his condemnation by a military tribunal on August 17.¹⁶⁰

Both the Panama Railroad Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company are likely to have approved of Prestán's sentence and were instrumental in establishing his guilt ahead of the trial. Association with the Panama Railroad, was, in itself, considered indicative of good character. In his appeal to the State Department after the fire, the American Tracy Robinson, ex-proprietor of eighteen tenements destroyed in the fire, noted that he "was connected from 1861 to 1874 with the Panama Railway." This, alongside other social, political, and career achievements, was meant to demonstrate his respectability.¹⁶¹ If a vague "connection" with the company was

¹⁵⁹ "Daily Star and Herald." *Star and Herald*, 1, August 17, 1885.

¹⁶⁰ "Daily Star and Herald." *Star and Herald*, 1, August 20, 1885.

¹⁶¹ U.S. Congress. Senate. *Claims Against the Government of Colombia*, 9.

enough to make an individual more believable, then Burt's pretrial accusation must have carried great weight. When Acting Superintendent of the Panama Railroad Clement Dupuy and William Connor of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, in addition to an Italian and a German, testified against Prestán, their credibility was assured by their status.¹⁶² According to the *Star and Herald*, the testimony of these four men constituted "public opinion," which was enough for Prestán's conviction without hard evidence.¹⁶³

iv. Railroaded

On August 18, the Panama Railroad involved itself closely with the final, brutal act of the Panama Crisis, participating directly in the hanging of Pedro Prestán. Whatever lofty speeches on the value of free trade and transit President Cleveland had given, the real actions of the Panama Railroad Company reflected another vision for the role of American commercial power in the world. While hangings were common in the United States, the hangings of Pedro Prestán's collaborators, George Davis and General Pautrizelle was, according to a U.S. marine who watched, the first ever hanging on the Isthmus under the Colombian government, making Prestán's the third.¹⁶⁴ The Panama Railroad Company provided both the site and the apparatus. The photograph of Prestán's corpse, Figure 7, displays the railroad tracks, Prestán's body suspended above them, front and center. From this and Figure 6, a photo taken just before the

¹⁶² "Don Pedro Prestan Hanged: The Destroyer of Colon Slowly Strangled to Death," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1885, 3, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2znLbj9>.

¹⁶³ "Daily Star and Herald." *Star and Herald*, 1, August 20, 1885.

¹⁶⁴ "Not a Junketing Tour: Marines Returning From the Isthmus. They had some Hard Work to do—The Two Revolutionists Hanged—Prestan and his Associates," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1885, 2, accessed November 26, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2zsETiB>.

hanging, the method of execution, as described by the unnamed marine officer, can be extrapolated fairly well: the Colombian soldiers “erected a gallows right across the railroad and ran a flat car [visible behind Prestán in Fig. 7] underneath... They didn’t put any caps over the fellows’ heads... There was no drop: the soldiers simply pushed away the flat car.”¹⁶⁵ The railroad became a macabre symbol of American influence in Panama, meant to teach, in the words of the *Star and Herald*, “an exemplary lesson” to those who had “probably never witnessed such a scene before.”¹⁶⁶ The crowd that gathered to watch the hanging would have understood that those who failed to appreciate the benefits conferred by that engine of progress would see it transformed into something monstrous. The Panama Railroad Company had set up a machine that facilitated commerce, but also violence.

Press coverage of the hanging emphasized how it was deliberately drawn out, with one article in the *New York Times* subtitled, “The Destroyer of Colon Slowly Strangled to Death.”¹⁶⁷ The railroad had gone beyond patriotically offering aid to American troops. It was not an attempt to improve the efficiency of executions; according to the same anonymous officer, “they have heretofore shot their offenders. They didn’t even know how to do a hanging.”¹⁶⁸ This may have been because, under the Colombian Constitution of 1863, the death penalty was mostly forbidden. Though hangings were not unheard of in the region, they were all extrajudicial.¹⁶⁹ In America, hangings were a common result of both criminal cases and illegal lynchings. Cantor

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ “Execution of Prestan.” *Star and Herald*, 1, August 19, 1885.

¹⁶⁷ “Don Pedro Prestan Hanged,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1885.

¹⁶⁸ “Not a Junketing Tour,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1885.

¹⁶⁹ Cantor et. al, *El Panama Colombiano En La Reparticion Imperialista*, 117-9.

argues that Davis, Pautrizelle, and Prestán's executions pointed to an exportation of American racism.¹⁷⁰ Though nominally within the legal system, the speed and sloppiness of the trials, the makeshift gallows, and the fact that all three hanged men were black do lend the hangings some similarity to American lynchings. It may be more accurate to say that the Colombian justice system, literally and figuratively, railroaded Prestán, depriving him of a fair trial and inventing a method of execution that bordered on cruel and was definitely unusual.



Figure 6: Moments Before the Execution of Pedro Prestán, August 18, 1885

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 121.

Although the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty and the avowed position of the U.S. State Department allowed only for apolitical military interventions for the sake of securing property, the crisis proved that this was untenable. The roots of the rebellions, as much as the American State department may have tried to pretend otherwise, were largely political and nationalistic. Becerra, for example, tried to persuade Bayard that the upheavals in Panama and Colón were the work of bandits and ne'er-do-wells, "criminals of diverse nationality and origin."¹⁷¹ This characterization became extremely popular as contemporary American newspapers followed suit. In most, Prestán is a mad destroyer, a "mulatto assassin," as one diplomat called him.¹⁷² But the influence of this mischaracterization stretched even further, into mid-to-late-twentieth century histories. Several fixate on Prestán's race and alleged hatred of all Americans while ignoring that he was a lawyer and politician; almost none note Prestán's trials. This misreporting, for the sake of the U.S.'s imagined role as a neutral police force for the Western hemisphere, had to be convincing. A focus on the political implications of the intervention would have delegitimized it.

For the American state department and military, the defense of commercial wellbeing, both abstract and concrete, served as a justification for 1885's naval expedition. At the same time, commercial power served as an extension of the state's political power overseas and offered significant material support to the U.S. Navy during the occupation. In the minds of the nation's president, the representatives of the Department of State and the leaders of the Navy, the protection of transit and trade, and therefore the Panama Railroad Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship company was a major priority. The power of these entities, state, military, and

¹⁷¹ U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 240-1.

¹⁷² "Outrages by Insurgents," 5., "Don Pedro Prestan Hanged," 3., U.S. Congress. House. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 217.

commercial was interwoven; the ways in which the government and military aided the companies are obvious, but the transit companies also served as amplifiers of American state and military power. From complex interactions like this one, a mechanism for American global power begins to take shape.

Conclusion. A Model for American Power

Ultimately, all of America's representatives got, more or less, what they wanted: Cleveland would go on to serve a second, though nonconsecutive, term; the Navy got a chance to prove its worth abroad; commerce between the seas was restored; and the Panama Railroad made a striking show of its power. There were also the less glamorous results of the U.S.'s aggressive actions: Colón's destruction, Prestán's execution, and the Central Government's tightened grip on the Isthmus. In spite of all these effects, the crisis slipped from American memory.

About 20 years later, President Theodore Roosevelt oversaw a more memorable quasi-war. This conflict featured a stronger hero, the American Navy having been hugely expanded since its days of begging aid from Superintendent Burt. It featured, too, a more warlike leader, driven to get what he wanted without ethical distractions. Roosevelt stationed American gunboats off the shore of Panama in a show of support for the cause of Panamanian independence from Colombia. The U.S. had orchestrated the revolution by paying a Panama Railroad physician to lead it. To justify this intervention, the Americans once again looked to the 35th Article of the versatile Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty, arguing that it established the U.S. as the true sovereign of Panama. Transit between the seas was indeed aided, though at the expense of the treaty's other signee. The new Panamanian government agreed to the construction of an American-run canal and the establishment of the Canal Zone, in which the U.S. would freely make and enforce its own laws.¹⁷³

1905, in many ways, was a retreading of the issues of the 1885 crisis. Both involved leaders with questionable ideals, creative interpretations of the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty, the

¹⁷³ Mauer and Yu. *The Big Ditch*, 83-4.

Navy's gunboats looming off the shores of the Isthmus, and a central role for commerce. However, the significance of the Panama Crisis does not end with Roosevelt's canal project. Its core themes go beyond the 1905 division of Panama from Colombia and are relevant even today. They represent the rise of American global power through means beyond, and perhaps more powerful than, pure military coercion. The crisis also represented a moment of instability as the nation worked to determine exactly what role it meant to play in the world. After 1885, the U.S. became an increasingly influential and aggressive force. Beyond Panama, there was the Spanish-American War of 1898, followed the campaign to subdue the Philippines from 1899 to 1901, all made possible by the construction of the New Navy.¹⁷⁴

The relatively weak America of the 1880s seems to have little in common with the nation became in little more than a decade, and even less with the America of today. However, early, limited interventions like the Panama Crisis represent key principles of American power as a continuous project. The reliance on private contractors in modern military actions echoes the 1885 collaboration of the Navy with the Pacific Mail Steamship and Panama Railroad Companies. While the naval officers who directed the earlier engagement saw this alliance as exceptionally altruistic on the part of the businesses and indicative of military inferiority, over time the U.S. military and American businesses have grown more comfortable with each other. This type of cooperation grew from an undesirable necessity into an accepted technique of power maximization, and its roots are apparent in the Panama Crisis.

Cleveland's struggle to represent the military action as something other than a traumatic intervention while still maintaining his own integrity represents a timeless problem. The question

¹⁷⁴ Torreon, *Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad*, 7.

of war and rhetoric, of concealing hypocrisy or violence through euphemism, has appeared at nearly every violent moment in history. From the Crusades of the Middle Ages, to the European colonial projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to modern American police actions that proclaim the defense of freedom or the “American way of life” as their mission, aggressors answerable to the public have almost always endeavored to present their motives in the best possible light. This is certainly not unique to American power, but is nonetheless vital to understanding it.

The power of the Panama Railroad in 1885 may appear totally foreign to the modern observer. It would be surprising to see an American business other than an arms manufacturer involved in a foreign war or public execution today. However, the private company as a proxy for national power overseas or as an independent, self-interested challenger to a foreign government is now commonplace. In the rise of massive, globally influential corporations able to exert their own wills directly on weaker nations, and in the ability of those companies to spread national influence abroad in softer forms, the relationship between the government of Colombia, the United States, and the Panama Railroad finds its modern analogues.

Even before the U.S. government developed its Navy, it was able to impose its will on weaker nations. The Panama Railroad provided a makeshift military base and a plausibly deniable proxy for the American will overseas. Back in Washington, it was also the abstracted symbol of human progress, the embodied “trust for all mankind” Cleveland invoked as his policies drifted from the impossible promise he had made to the American people. With trade at risk, the executive branch found the words that allowed it turn away from noninterference; with companies to support it, the Navy’s weaknesses ceased to limit it; with the American State

Department and Navy fighting so passionately to empower them, American Companies on the Isthmus could exert outside power in Panama. Though passage across Panama played a unique, moment-specific role in global trade and American development, understanding the complex material and ideological interactions between branches of American power that were on display in the Panama Crisis is essential to virtually any study of the United States as a global force.



Figure 7: The Execution of Pedro Prestán, August 18, 1885;
Note the train tracks, flat car and crowd

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