The North American Crisis of the 1860s

*We have no craftier enemy than Louis Napoleon. His operations in Mexico were meant as a powerful flank movement for the rebellion. They were leveled at the United States, and the United States are not likely to forget it.* —Harper’s Weekly, December 9, 1865

*From our point of view, his [Maximilian’s] victory would have been a calamity—not that it would have made the condition of Mexico worse than it is—but because it would have struck a disastrous blow at the cause of Republicanism on this Continent.* —New York Times, July 2, 1867

On June 19, 1867, a squad of Mexican soldiers under the command of Gen. Mariano Escobedo executed Maximilian of Austria on a hillside outside the city of Querétaro, Mexico. Just days before this dramatic event, an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* argued, “Whoever shall write the history of the Great Rebellion will not complete it until he has traced to its final termination the effort of the Austrian Archduke to establish himself on the throne of a Mexican empire.”¹ This influential newspaper’s prediction was based on its belief that when the Imperial troops of the Austrian archduke capitulated to Escobedo “the last rebel army surrendered. The invasion of Mexico by the French and the struggle of Maximilian to build up an Empire on this continent were, in fact, a branch of the Southern rebellion.” This editorial concluded that for future historians of the Civil War era, the “failure of the Southern rebellion and of Napoleon and Maximilian in Mexico will be linked together as events depending on each other, and inseparably connected.”² The following essay will argue that the conflicts waged in Mexico and the United States during the 1860s were, as the *Chicago Tribune* long ago recognized, not discrete historical conflicts bounded by the “skin” of national boundaries.³ Instead, the U.S. Civil War and the attempt by the French emperor to overthrow republican government in Mexico are best understood within a North American framework.

In the last decade, the study of U.S. history has taken a transnational turn.⁴ Historians, such as Thomas Bender, who are calling for their colleagues to examine the movement of peoples, ideas, and technologies across national boundaries are, however, quick to acknowledge that the concept of viewing the history of the United States and its hemispheric neighbors within a transnational framework has a distinguished lineage. Most notably, in 1932 Herbert Bolton argued for a “broader treatment of
American history, to supplement the purely nationalistic presentation to which we are accustomed.” Just as “European history cannot be learned from books dealing alone with England, or France, or Germany, or Italy, or Russia,” Bolton argued, “nor can American history be adequately presented if confined to Brazil, or Chile, or Mexico, or Canada, or the United States.” By insisting on the “essential unity” of “Greater America,” Bolton’s ambitious framework encompassed the territorial expanse of the entire Western Hemisphere. More recently, scholars of the Atlantic World have moved beyond national borders to examine, in Jack Greene’s words, “the larger patterns and processes within which the several societies around the Atlantic functioned and of which they were integral parts.” The concept of the Atlantic World has gained far more traction among historians than Bolton’s notion of a Greater America. Both approaches, however, offer significant corrections to the common historical practice of framing the histories of nation states such as Mexico and the United States within the confines of politically bounded territorial spaces.

Much like Bolton and the contemporary scholars of Atlantic history, this essay attempts to break the “hold of the national frameworks within which history traditionally has been written.” By adopting a continental perspective in examining the U.S. Civil War and French intervention, however, it substitutes the expansive geographical perspective suggested by these scholars—the Western Hemisphere and Atlantic World—in favor of a transnational approach that embeds these events into the history of North America. Expanding the framework of the U.S. Civil War to encompass the simultaneous conflict occurring in Mexico follows the lead offered by the Canadian historian W. L. Morton nearly fifty years ago. Morton argued that the war between the U.S. North and South was “not only an American struggle. It was also the central and decisive feature of the crisis that disturbed the whole continent of North America in 1861.” Morton’s landmark article offered a historical vision of the 1860s that encompassed present-day Canada, the United States, and Mexico. While adhering to Morton’s fundamental point concerning the continental dimensions of the crisis of the 1860s, this study will focus on the events occurring in the southern region of North America during that decade, with a special focus on the Rio Grande borderlands. Based on a synthesis of the scholarship examining the interconnections between the simultaneous wars waged in Mexico and the United States, and buttressed by evidence gathered from government documents and contemporary accounts examining the impact of these conflicts on both sides of the Rio Grande, it will frame the existential crises endured by these neighboring republics during the 1860s from a continental point of view.
For Morton, a fundamental component shared by the U.S. Civil War and the French attempt to restore a monarchy on Mexico was “the antagonism of democratic republicanism, discredited a decade before in Europe, to the monarchical ideal of a permanent executive.” Engaged in a desperate struggle for union, Washington was unable to halt Emperor Napoleon III’s deployment of French troops to Mexico in early 1862. A few months later, the government of the Confederate States of America began its active collaboration with the French emperor’s ill-fated attempt to replace the republican government of Benito Juárez with a European monarchy. Meeting in great secrecy with Napoleon III on July 16, 1862, the Confederate envoy in Paris, John Slidell, declared that as the “Lincoln Government was the ally and protector of his enemy Juárez, we could have no objection to make common cause against a common enemy.” It was the illiberal alliance between the slaveholding Confederate States of America and monarchical France against the sister republics of Mexico and the United States—to make a common cause against a common enemy, in Slidell’s formulation—that transformed the French intervention and the Civil War into an ideological conflict centered in North America’s southern tier.

The threat posed by the Franco-Confederate alliance to the future of republican government in North America was clear to contemporaries in both Mexico and the United States. With the creation of the Paris-Richmond axis, the prominent northern reformer Joshua Leavitt argued, the “upholders of absolutism in Europe and the upholders of slavery in the United States” made “common cause [to] strike a united blow against republican liberty on the American continent, in the hope of rendering arbitrary power more secure in both hemispheres.” Speaking at a banquet in Manhattan’s swank Delmonico’s Restaurant in 1864, the Juarista general Pedro Ogazon, who later served as Mexico’s minister of war, argued the common question facing both the United States and Mexico “is one of life and death for republican institutions. If they triumph here, not only will they be consolidated upon this continent, but they will even invade Europe.” In October 1864, Gen. U. S. Grant met with the Mexican ambassador to the United States, Matías Romero. In this meeting Grant expressed his desire to have the United States Army “directly aid” the struggle to preserve “republican institutions on this continent against European aggressions.”

Grant kept his promise to Romero. In July 1865, soon after he deployed tens of thousands of U.S. troops to the Rio Grande borderlands of South Texas, Grant wrote President Andrew Johnson that he viewed the “French occupation of Mexico as part and parcel of the late rebellion in the United States.” Broadening the territorial framework in which the Civil War
and French intervention into Mexico are traditionally viewed will allow present-day scholars to understand the history of North America during the 1860s as contemporaries understood it: as the decade when the joint threat to the continent’s sister republics posed by the reactionary alliance of France and the Confederate States of America was met and decisively defeated.

The disintegration of the United States in the spring of 1861 posed an existential threat to republican government in Mexico. In the decades prior to the outbreak of war in the United States, the belief had taken hold in European capitals that the Mexican republic was a failed state. This belief was especially strong in France. French officials believed the Republic of Mexico, established in 1821 after the defeat of monarchical Spain, was fated to exist in perpetual anarchy in large part because its people—a majority of whom were mestizos of mixed Indian, European, and African descent—were too degenerate to create a coherent sense of national identity. In 1840, the French envoy in Mexico City complained, “Mexico is not a nation, it is a mixture of races devoid of the meaning of national sentiment.” Believing that a monarchy would create the disciplined rule necessary for the “regeneration” of Mexican society, in 1844 and again in 1856 the French government ordered its ministers plenipotentiary in Mexico to submit “detailed proposals” for the installation of a European prince in Mexico City.

In 1859, seventy émigré opponents of Mexican president Benito Juárez, many based in Paris, petitioned the governments of Europe to restore a monarch on their native land. Even though the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, privately believed that the establishment of “a regular and orderly government” in Mexico “probably could be done only by a monarchy,” Great Britain refused to sanction the use of its powerful military to impose an outside sovereign upon the Mexican people. The French emperor Napoleon III proved far more aggressive. The outbreak of full-scale hostilities between the states of the U.S. North and South in April 1861 offered Napoleon III the opening he needed to implement his Grand Scheme for the restoration of a monarchy in Mexico.

Adolphe Guéroult was the founder and editor of the Paris journal L’Opinion Nationale. He had lived in Mexico for a number of years and was an outspoken opponent of Napoleon III’s Mexican venture. In a speech before the French Corps Législatif, he highlighted the profound consequences to Mexico of the dissolution of its continental neighbor to the north. Guérout maintained that “constituting an empire in Mexico would not have entered into the views of the French government had not a most important event, the civil war in the United States, been inaugurated a few
As the canny French emperor immediately understood, the fight to restore the Union would absorb the military resources of the U.S. government and temporarily nullify Washington’s ability to enforce the Monroe Doctrine, the foreign policy decree that demanded European nations recognize the Western Hemisphere as the U.S. sphere of interest.

Identifying the origins of the French invasion of Mexico, Guéroult noted, “a few months after the first cannon shots were exchanged at Charleston between the south and the north of the United States . . . complaints” against the Liberal government of Benito Juárez government “became urgent on the part of the French legation in Mexico.”26 In June 1861, for instance, the French minister plenipotentiary in Mexico City, Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, argued in a dispatch to Paris that the French needed to “support by force” its interests in Mexico.27 Reflecting the contempt French officials felt for Juárez’s army, a few months later Dubois de Saligny maintained, “With each passing day I am more inclined to believe that nothing could prevent a corps of 4,000 to 5,000 European soldiers from marching right to Mexico City without encountering the slightest resistance.”28 The French envoy’s optimistic prediction proved grossly inaccurate; the French expeditionary force did not enter Mexico City until June 1863, and by then it numbered thirty thousand soldiers.

In the summer of 1861, however, Napoleon III believed that the French army would overthrow the Mexican republic with little difficulty. In July the nearly bankrupt Juárez regime declared a two-year moratorium on the payment of Mexico’s interest on its foreign debts. From then on, events moved quickly. Unfortunately for Juárez, who remained “quite unaware of the designs against” his regime, the announcement of Mexico’s debt moratorium just three months after the dissolution of the United States offered Napoleon III the perfect excuse to put his Mexican venture into motion.29 Paris broke off relations with Mexico City, and Napoleon III secretly offered the putative throne of Mexico to Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, the younger brother of Austrian emperor Franz Joseph.30 In October 1861 Spain, England, and France, Mexico’s principal creditors, signed the Treaty of London, a document that called for the collection of the debt owed each nation via the joint occupation of the Mexican port city of Vera Cruz.

By early 1862 Spanish, British, and French forces had landed in Vera Cruz and seized control of the payments from its customs house.31 In April of that year, however, the Spanish and British governments, who by then had realized that Napoleon III had used European anger over the debt moratorium as a pretext for the overthrow of the Juárez government and the restoration of a monarch in Mexico City, withdrew their troops.
overconfident French army continued to march inland toward Mexico City but on May 5, 1862, suffered a stunning, if temporary, setback at the hands of the Juarista army at Puebla, a city seventy miles southeast of Mexico City. The French defeat at Puebla on Cinco de Mayo had enormous implications for France, Mexico and the United States. Before discussing the transnational impact of this battle, however, it is worth examining the geopolitical motives underlying Napoleon III’s attempt to impose a monarchical form of government on the Mexican people.

The French emperor ordered his army to occupy Mexico for a complex array of economic reasons. Geopolitically, as Harper’s Weekly explained, the rationale underlying the French intervention was the emperor’s desire to “reassert the European equilibrium on American soil” by undermining the institutions of republican government in the continental neighbors of Mexico and the United States. The French intervention and the U.S. Civil War occurred a little over a decade after the defeat of the wave of antimonarchical revolutions that swept Europe in 1848. In France, Louis Napoleon was elected president by popular vote in 1848. In 1851, however, he initiated a coup d’état, and he ascended to the throne of France as Napoleon III the following year. France’s Second Empire, established when Louis Napoleon seized control of the French government, was one of the most powerful of the counterrevolutionary regimes that took power in European capitals after the failed attempts of the continent’s liberals to rid Europe of absolutist government. By 1861 the reactionary governments of the Old Order held the upper hand on the European continent and, with Napoleon III taking the lead, began to eye a move into war-torn North America.

Contemporaries on both sides of the Rio Grande River recognized the danger to republican government posed by the projection of monarchical Europe into North America. An editorial in the Periódico Oficial, the newspaper of the Juárez government in Monterrey, argued that “scarcely had the desolate war in the United States broken out . . . when the governments of old Europe believed the moment had arrived to carry into effect their ambitious views, suffocating the liberty which, from the New World, has risen up as a menace to their corrupt tradition.” U.S. Grant shared this view. He argued that “the act of attempting to establish a monarchy on this continent was an act of known hostility to the Government of the United States . . . and would not have been undertaken but for the great war which was raging and which it was supposed by all the great powers of Europe—except, possibly, Russia—would result in the dismemberment of the country and the overthrow of Republican institutions.” Grant seldom receives much recognition as a geopolitical thinker. His suspicion,
however, that Old World governments anticipated that the French intervention into Mexico and the dissolution of the Union would combine to subvert republican government in North America proved accurate. King Leopold I of Belgium was one of Europe’s most reactionary monarchs and a close ally of Napoleon III. In October 1861 he wrote to Archduke Maximilian, his son-in-law, that the restoration of a monarch in Mexico City would “raise a barrier against the United States” and “provide a support for the monarchical-aristocratic principle in the Southern states.” Even after he withdrew British troops from Mexico, the British prime minister Lord Palmerston argued privately, “If the North and South are definitely disunited and if at the same time Mexico could be turned into a prosperous monarchy I do not know any arrangement that would be more advantageous for us.” Showing its anti-republican hand, the Palmerston government was one of the first to offer Maximilian diplomatic recognition after he assumed the Cactus Throne.

Civil War historians have long understood the devastating implications of the defeat of the Union for the development of republican government around the world. For the contemporary observers, however, the defeat of either one of North America’s democratically elected governments threatened to undermine the global future of republicanism. The diplomatic historian D. P. Crook argued that Napoleon III and other European leaders calculated that the United States’ inability to stop the permanent restoration of a monarchical government in Mexico City would “reduce its charismatic appeal as a democratic model for Latin American peoples, open the way for Europe-sponsored monarchies and, at the same time, remove a disturbing revolutionary influence on Europe’s masses.” “The assent of the Governments of Europe to French participation in our affairs,” Harper’s Weekly concluded in May 1864, was “based upon their natural and earnest wish that a popular government may conspicuously fail; for our success would be an inspiration to the people of Europe too threatening to be calmly contemplated by the aristocratic class.” Viewed from this perspective, the French intervention into Mexico was an ominous expansion into the North American continent of the powerful post-1848 European counterrevolution against the ideals and institutions of republican government shared by Mexico and the United States.

Given France’s counterrevolutionary objectives, it is significant that Napoleon III’s most fervent ally in his effort to place a European monarch in Mexico was a self-proclaimed republic, the Confederate States of America. The leaders of the Confederate nation took great pride in presenting themselves as the heirs of America’s founding generation. Despite pledges of fealty to the principles of America’s Founding Fathers,
during its brief life the Confederate government actively collaborated with France in its attempt to reestablish, by armed force, a monarchy on the people of its southern neighbor. While perhaps logical from a realpolitik strategic perspective, the South’s willingness to sacrifice republican Mexico in favor of French recognition was a clear repudiation of the Founders’ commitment to the core principle of democratic self-government. By focusing on the government-to-government diplomacy of the Civil War, historians have often missed the continental implications of Richmond’s collaboration with the French effort to restore monarchical government in Mexico. Viewed within a continental framework, the Confederate government’s counterrevolutionary support of Maximilian revealed the slaveholding South’s complete indifference to the idea of safeguarding republican government in the entirety of North America.

Given its professed adherence to the republican legacy of America’s Founding Fathers, why did the American South enter into an illiberal alliance with monarchical France? The Confederacy, as is well known, was desperate for recognition as a sovereign state by a major European power. Writing about the importance of foreign recognition, the Confederate secretary of state Judah Benjamin informed Slidell, “In our finances its effect would be magical, and its collateral advantages would be innumerable.”46 Counting on the power of “King Cotton” to force European governments to intervene in the Civil War on the side of the South, during the first two years of the war the Confederate government expected Great Britain and France to offer joint recognition to the Richmond government. After Fort Sumter, the cabinet of Prime Minister Lord Palmerston intermittently considered the possibility of joint intervention in the American Civil War, either by offering the Confederacy diplomatic recognition or, as in the fall of 1862, by suggesting that the North and South agree to subject themselves to a six-month armistice brokered by European governments. Ultimately, however, the British government concluded that the risks to Great Britain of any sort of diplomatic intervention into the American Civil War far outweighed the gains. It was Palmerston’s firm belief that “events on the American battlefield would have to convince the North that the subjection of the South was impossible” and, as that series of events never occurred, London remained neutral throughout the war.47

Deeply frustrated with the inaction of the British government, Richmond would have happily accepted unilateral recognition of the Confederacy’s sovereignty by the government of Napoleon III. By the spring of 1862, in fact, southern diplomats grew increasingly confident that events in Mexico would ultimately force France to offer diplomatic recognition to the South, with or without the cooperation of Great Britain. As Frank Owsley argued,
Richmond believed that Napoleon’s III’s monarchical designs for Mexico would “prove to be the lever by which the French Emperor would be toppled from his neutral perch.” Attempting to curry favor with the French emperor, the Confederate government jettisoned the Monroe Doctrine from its foreign policy objectives and embraced the French attack against the Mexican republic. Early in February 1862, just as French troops were landing in Vera Cruz, George Bagby proclaimed in the *Charleston Mercury* that the “Monroe Doctrine is dead for all time to come.” In its search for recognition, the Confederate nation found itself supporting the first (and last) restoration of a European monarch upon the peoples of a North American republic since the American Revolution of 1776.

The counterrevolutionary willingness of Richmond to sacrifice republican government in Mexico in return for French recognition began after the arrival of the Confederate envoy Slidell in Paris. On June 6, 1862, Slidell articulated the Confederate openness to installation of a French-backed monarchy in Mexico in a letter to James M. Mason, his counterpart in London. Slidell wrote that in his future dealings with the French government he was “inclined . . . to touch upon the Mexican question, saying that while foreign occupation of that country would excite the most violent opposition at the North, we, far from sharing such a feeling, would be pleased to see a steady, respectable, responsible government established there soon.” Signaling the South’s repudiation of the Monroe Doctrine, Slidell wanted French officials to understand that Richmond was willing to work with whatever puppet government Paris installed in Mexico City.

The next month, the French Emperor received the Confederate envoy at the French resort of Vichy. Slidell later reported to Secretary of State Benjamin that the Emperor declared his “sympathies had always been with the South” and that he “considered the reestablishment of the Union impossible and final separation a mere question of time.” Broadening the conversation to include the French conflict in Mexico, the Confederate envoy declared to Napoleon III that as the “Lincoln Government was the ally and protector of his enemy Juárez, we could have no objection to make common cause against a common enemy.” This transparent attempt to leverage Napoleon III’s Mexican scheme as a means of persuading France to recognize the Confederacy failed; Napoleon maintained that he would not recognize the CSA without the cooperation of Great Britain. Despite this setback, during the next year Slidell continued to signal to French officials that the South would support Paris’s effort to replace the constitutionally elected government of Benito Juárez with a European monarch.

One July 21, 1862, Slidell wrote a note to the French foreign minister Thouvenel that candidly revealed that the French restoration of a monarch
in Mexico “will be regarded with no unfriendly eye by the Confederate States.” Echoing the words he had written to Mason, Slidell declared that Richmond was anxious to “see a respectable, responsible, and stable govern-ment established” in Mexico City. The people of the Confederacy, he con-tinued, were “not animated by that spirit of political proselytism which so strongly characterizes the people from whom they have recently separated themselves,” and “confident that his Imperial Majesty has no intention of imposing on Mexico any government not in accordance with the wishes of its inhabitants, they will feel quite indifferent as to its form.” Slidell’s memorandum did not speculate on the means by which the deployment of the French army to Mexico would jibe with the political “wishes” of the Mexican people, but his message to the government of the Second Empire was clear enough: the Confederate States of America would acquiesce to the destruction of republican Mexico.

In October 1862, Slidell met with Napoleon III for a second time. The envoy articulated once again the Confederacy’s embrace of France’s monarchical designs for Mexico. Alluding to a public letter written by King Leopold I of Belgium wishing for the success of the French army in Mexico and the “establishment under their protection of a stable and regular Government” in Mexico, Slidell reminded the emperor of the South’s willingness to join with France in a partnership against the Juárez government. The Confederate envoy also took this opportunity to “hold out the advantages which would result to France of a cordial and close alliance between the countries,” an alliance, he informed the French leader, “not so much depending on treaties and mere paper bonds as resulting from mutual interests and common sympathies.” Discussing the rumors (which proved false) that France hoped to reoccupy Haiti, Slidell “took the occasion to say to the Emperor that however distasteful such a measure might be to the Washington government ours could have no objection to it.” In the Confederacy’s illiberal worldview, both the Haitian and Mexican republics were fair game for the restoration of European rule.

In June 1863, Slidell was granted a final audience with Napoleon III. In this meeting, he stressed one last time that his government backed the French venture in Mexico on both ideological and strategic grounds. This third encounter occurred at a time when the French situation in Mexico looked promising. Most notably, just weeks earlier the reinforced French army had finally captured the city of Puebla and quickly occupied Mexico City. Napoleon III told Slidell that from his readings of American newspapers, he discerned that the news of the fall of Puebla had been received in the North with “disappointment and hostility,” while Richmond had been “illuminated on the occasion.” Slidell replied, “There could be no doubt of
the bitterness of the Northern people at the success of his arms in Mexico, while all our sympathies were with France.” He then “urged” upon the emperor “the importance of securing the lasting gratitude and attachment of a people already so well disposed [as] there could be no doubt that our Confederacy was to be the strongest power of the American Continent, and that our alliance was worth cultivating.” Napoleon III offered a friendly but noncommittal response Slidell’s assertion concerning the continental clout of the Confederacy, but its willingness to support the French occupation of its southern neighbor was welcome news in Paris. The South’s embrace of the French monarchical designs in Mexico was an important reason that Napoleon III continued to tantalize Richmond with the possibility of unilateral French recognition of the Confederacy.

Possessing no other options and never very astute at discerning in what direction the diplomatic winds blew from Paris, southerners continued to hope France’s intervention into Mexico would force Napoleon III to recognize the Confederacy. The desire for recognition increased after the fall of Vicksburg cut off the Confederate Trans-Mississippi from the rest of the Confederacy in July 1863. With the French army firmly established in Mexico City, the southern press argued that France’s strategic situation in North America would force Paris to recognize the Confederacy. An editorial in the Richmond Examiner argued in late July, “France needs an ally as a shield to interpose between her new province of Mexico and the gigantic power of the United States.” As late as March 1864, when Maximilian was making his way to the New World, an editorial in the Houston Daily Telegraph argued, “We shall not be surprised to see European recognition of the Confederacy follow upon Maximilian’s coronation.” The South’s collaboration with the French emperor’s Mexican venture bears further scrutiny. As white southerners began contemplating the idea of defeat and the reality of emancipation, public approval of France’s system of monarchical government increased within the Confederate republic.

By the fall of 1863, with France’s hold in Mexico seemingly secure and the Confederacy split into two parts, the South’s military and political officials insisted with new intensity that the South was ideologically in tune with the actions of the French government in North America. In October 1863, John Bankhead Magruder, commander of Confederate forces in Texas, asked Slidell to share with the government of Napoleon III that “the sentiments . . . of all the Confederate States, are most friendly to France, and the occupation of Mexico has given the greatest satisfaction to all.” Magruder declared that the “people of the Confederate states, and particularly those of Louisiana and Texas, entertaining the most profound respect for the wisdom and enlightened policy of His Imperial Majesty...
the Emperor of the French,” recognized “that the interest of France in Mexico is closely connected, if not, indeed, identified, with the welfare of the Southern Confederacy.” In December, Richmond’s embrace of the restoration of monarchical government in North America was underlined in Davis’s Annual Message to the Confederate Congress. Davis declared: “If the Mexican people prefer a monarchy to a republic, it is our plain duty cheerfully to acquiesce to their decision, and to evince a sincere and friendly interest in their prosperity.” The Confederacy’s anti-republican approval of the French scheme to restore a monarchy in Mexico reflected the white South’s widespread admiration for France’s Second Empire.

As the historian Michael O’Brien has shown, the cosmopolitan elite of the antebellum South traveled widely in Europe and embraced European, especially French, culture. For southern intellectuals, O’Brien argues, “Madame de Staël mattered more than Ralph Waldo Emerson.” The South’s wealthy slaveholders were particularly enamored with Napoleon III’s Paris. Many of the wives and children of Houston’s wealthiest merchants made their way to the French capitol for the duration of the Civil War. Comfortable with the culture and society of the Second Empire, southerners also admired the policies of its crafty leader, including his decision to place Maximilian of Austria on the Cactus Throne. The South’s respect for the government of Napoleon III in turn played a significant role in the “sporadic pleas for monarchy” that arose in the Confederate nation after the beginning of the Civil War.

Robert Bonner argues that enough white southerners participated in the Confederacy’s “haphazard public debate” over monarchical government “to suggest that there was an actual basis for worrying about the masters’ long-term commitment to republicanism.” By the fall of 1863—with the Emancipation Proclamation signed, the Confederacy cut in two, and the French military tightening its control over Mexico—an antidemocratic openness to the monarchical system of Napoleon III deepened among some southern whites. Most importantly, white southerners viewed the Second Empire as sympathetic to the continued existence of southern slavery. From Paris, John Slidell wrote that even though France had abolished the institution in 1848, the “Emperor [is] quite indifferent on the subject of slavery.” A correspondent from Montgomery, Alabama noted with indignation in September 1863, “I have heard more than one [person], in the last few days, say that they would be willing to take their chances—for the safety of their property—under the Government of Louis Napoleon.” In March 1864 Edmund Ruffin cheered the extraordinary public declaration of the governor of Louisiana, Henry Allen, that his state would rather be ruled by a European power than submit to “subjugation by Yankeedom.”
Ruffin wrote, “I speak by authority” when he claimed that many southerners felt the same way, “for they write to me daily that they would rather, by ten thousand times, be the subjects of the Emperor of France, than of Abraham Lincoln.”

As tantalizing as these clues are, it is impossible to state with certainty what portion of southern whites embraced the idea of subjecting themselves to the rule of Napoleon III to protect their way of life, especially the institution of slavery. What can be said is that the Confederate officials welcomed France’s creation of a monarchy in its southern neighbor. This pro-French feeling was especially apparent in the states of the Trans-Mississippi, the region of the Confederacy that bordered French-controlled Mexico. As historians have long realized, the South’s acceptance of Maximilian was due, in part, to the imperatives of diplomatic realpolitik, most notably its desire for foreign recognition. A continental framing of the North American crisis of the 1860s moves beyond diplomatic history to expose internal cracks in the slaveholding South’s allegiance to republican government. By reinforcing the ideological compatibility that already existed between the southern elites and the government of Louis III, the presence of a French-backed emperor in neighboring Mexico increased support for the institutions of monarchical government within the Confederate nation itself.

The great irony of the South’s collaboration with the French intervention in Mexico was that it failed in its primary mission of gaining diplomatic recognition of the Confederate nation from France. To explain why this was so, it is necessary to return to the first week of May 1862. The course of military events in North America that week undermined, perhaps fatally, Paris’s willingness to act alone in recognizing the sovereign status of the Confederacy. The first of these actions was the occupation of New Orleans by Union forces on May 1, 1862. From the point of view of northern diplomacy, the capture of New Orleans came in the nick of time. Just weeks before the Confederate surrender of the Crescent City, William Lindsay—a strongly pro-Confederate Member of Parliament—met with Napoleon III in Paris. Lindsay reported to Slidell that the emperor was on the verge of ordering his navy to lift the Union blockade of southern ports by the use of force, with or without the cooperation of Great Britain. The surrender of New Orleans, a city with deep historical ties to France, halted the emperor in his tracks. According to an observer close to Slidell, “nothing that has occurred since the commencement of the war has made such an impression on the French as the fall of New Orleans.” Shaken by this Confederate defeat, on the question of recognition of the South Napoleon wrote to the British Ambassador in Paris, “I quite agree that nothing is to be done for the moment but to watch events.” Following quickly on
the heels of the news from New Orleans, Paris received far worse news from Mexico.

As noted, on May 5, 1862, the French military suffered a stunning and wholly unexpected defeat on North American soil. At Puebla, Mexico, a forty-five-hundred-man Juarista army under the command of thirty-three-year old Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza trounced a force of six thousand French troops moving inland toward Mexico City. Humiliated by this unexpected setback at the hands of a people he considered degenerate and a government he believed anarchic, Napoleon III regrouped. He sent reinforcements to Mexico, bringing the size of his army there to thirty thousand men, and installed Gen. Elie Frédéric Forey as the new commander of the French troops. The following May, the reinforced French expedition captured Puebla. On June 7, 1863, Forey entered Mexico City and forced the Juárez government to begin its epic hegira into the vast desert regions of the Mexican north.

Mexican historians have long argued that the continental consequences of the famous Cinco de Mayo battle were immense. In his classic *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, published in 1903, the Mexican historian Justo Sierra argued that this defeat “set back Napoleon’s designs in regard to the United States for a full year.” If the French army had defeated the Juarista army at Puebla in May 1862, he maintained, it would have in all likelihood occupied Mexico City within a matter of a few weeks. (This was the sequence of events that occurred in Mexico almost exactly a year later.) At that juncture, Sierra continued, the French emperor, “with an unarmed Republic virtually at his mercy, might have joined forces with the Southern rebels.” With his great victory, Sierra concludes, “Zaragoza defended in Puebla not only the integrity of his country but also that of the United States—an involuntary service, this last, but one of inestimable value, which may have been repaid, but not be surpassed, by any of the services (none of them disinterested) rendered to us by the American Union.” Writing over a century ago, the acerbic Sierra offered a continental interpretation of the significance of the Juarista victory at Puebla.

In the mid-1950s the U.S. historian Kathryn Abbey Hanna offered a similar interpretation about the transnational importance of the Battle of Puebla. Hanna argued that Zaragoza’s unexpected check of the French advance into Mexico City undermined what Confederate officials assumed would be the inevitable result of the French intervention into Mexico: the recognition of the South by the government of the Second Empire. Hanna maintained that the reverse was true. After this setback, she suggested, Napoleon III’s “Mexican situation” developed into “one of the greatest handicaps to recognition faced by the South.” The French emperor, aware
at last that the people of Mexico would not recognize his troops as liberators, sacked his commanding officer and began gathering the men and resources necessary to wage the kind of grueling war in faraway North America that neither he, his army, nor the French public ever expected to fight.

After May 1862, Napoleon III continued to utilize his idiosyncratic brand of personal diplomacy to try to persuade the British government to work with France in recognizing the Confederacy as an independent nation. Chastened by the French army’s suddenly vulnerable situation in Mexico, however, the bureaucrats of France’s foreign ministry arrived at a very different conclusion concerning the recognition of the Confederacy, either unilaterally or with Great Britain. By the summer of 1862 the Emperor’s foreign minister, Edouard Thouvenel, feared that if Paris recognized the Confederacy the United States would retaliate by sending troops into Mexico to harass the troops of the French expeditionary force. In the wake of the Cinco de Mayo debacle at Puebla, Thouvenel worked quietly to throw sand into the gears of Napoleon III’s recognition schemes.

In mid-July 1862, the French foreign minister was greatly relieved when Lord Palmerston derailed a motion in the House of Parliament that called for the diplomatic recognition of the South by Great Britain in conjunction with France. Thouvenel wrote Count Flahault, the French ambassador in London, that he was grateful for Palmerston’s “moderating and delaying tactics which I am trying to have prevail here without being certain of succeeding in it much longer.” The foreign minister stated that France’s “haste in starting a conflict with the United States is unwise and dangerous.” When Flahault wrote that he shared the same concerns about the dangers of French recognition of the South, a relieved Thouvenel wrote him, “I shall perhaps need your help in order to guard us from an adventure even more serious than the Mexican one.” Realizing that the unexpected Juárista victory at Puebla had destabilized the French military situation in Mexico, Thouvenel was in no mood to provoke the United States.

After replacing Thouvenel as foreign minister in October 1862, Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys shared his predecessor’s caution about the dangers of French recognition of the South. He was unable to halt the Emperor’s informal offer of unilateral mediation in January 1863, which Washington immediately rejected. In June 1863, however, Drouyn de Lhuys helped torpedo a much more serious attempt by the French emperor to persuade the British House of Parliament to offer joint recognition to the Confederacy. In a meeting with Slidell that month, the foreign minister bluntly informed the Confederate envoy that while recognition “might not be followed by direct hostilities” by Washington against the French expedition in Mexico,
he feared that it would induce the Lincoln administration to “encourage the departure of bands of volunteers for Mexico, thus aggravate the difficulties already very serious, with which General Forey has to contend; that the encouragement would probably be so open as to compel the Emperor to declare war.” In their study of French diplomacy during the Civil War, Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer concluded that, largely due to the concerns of Paris’s top diplomats, the French intervention into Mexico “did not tend to cause France to pursue a policy favorable to the South.” The reason for this, they argue, is that the French Foreign Office believed that France “needed to avoid a pro-Southern act at least partially because of the difficulties France faced with its Mexican adventure.”

The confusing split between the “personal” diplomacy of the French leader, favoring recognition of the South, and the “official” policy of his foreign ministry, opposed to such a move, resulted in a great deal of confusion, bitterness and anger in the administrations of both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis toward the French government. By November 1863, however, the strategic vision of the French emperor and his foreign ministry for North America aligned. In a discussion that month with the British envoy in Paris, Sir Charles Wyke, Napoleon III indicated that he had recognized the dangerous continental consequences posed by French recognition of the South. Wyke reported that the emperor feared that French intervention in the Civil War would drive the United States into a war against the French army in Mexico, an outcome, he argued to Wyke, that “would spell disaster to the interests of France and would have no possible object.”

The emperor grew so alarmed at the prospect of provoking the Lincoln administration that in March 1864, when Maximilian visited Paris shortly before leaving for Mexico, Napoleon III ordered him to cancel a planned meeting with John Slidell. That same month, A. Dudley Mann, the Confederate envoy in Brussels, reported, “I have heard from a well-informed source that Louis Napoleon has enjoined upon Maximilian to hold no official relationship” with the Confederacy’s newly appointed commissioner to Mexico, William Preston. By the time Maximilian arrived in Mexico in May 1864, Napoleon III had abandoned any idea of joint or unilateral diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, an action that was sure to provoke Washington. Instead, the French government attempted, without success, to persuade the Lincoln administration to accept Maximilian as the legitimate ruler of Mexico.

Finally realizing that the Confederacy’s acquiescence in Maximilian as emperor of Mexico would not lead to recognition, Slidell attempted a new diplomatic approach. He hinted to Paris that the Confederacy would soon make peace with the United States based upon a mutually agreed
The Franco-Confederate alliance, however, was not a complete failure. It proved far more successful in the Rio Grande borderlands that separated the Confederate Trans-Mississippi from the states of northeastern Mexico. The cooperation between the French and Confederacy in this region illustrates how diplomatic and military strategy can be created far from the machinations of high government officials located in national capitals. In early 1863, while John Slidell continued his efforts in Paris to gain recognition for the South, military officials in the Trans-Mississippi secured an informal line of communication between the Confederate army and French forces occupying Mexico. Confederates in Texas were especially anxious for the French military to hasten their occupation of the northeastern border city of Matamoros, located directly across the Rio Grande River from Brownsville, Texas. The occupation of this vital commercial hub by the Imperial army, they believed, would guarantee the smooth functioning of the lucrative cotton trade between Confederate Texas and northeastern Mexico that had blossomed after the beginning of the Civil War.

Hoping to establish an operational relationship with the French, General Magruder sent a secret agent, A. Supervièle, into Mexico to make contact with French officials. Supervièle joined the French army laying siege to Puebla, and in April he met with Dubois de Saligny, the powerful French diplomat to whom Napoleon III had personally granted “full political powers” in Mexico. Signaling the Confederacy’s willingness to assist the French occupation of its continental neighbor, Supervièle informed de Saligny that from “the beginning of our struggle,” the actions of Napoleon III in Mexico “had gained all the sympathies of our Government and people: that we looked upon France as our natural ally.” Supervièle, as he wrote later, also “exposed” to the French envoy “for the first time, in detail, the importance acquired by the port of Matamoros since the blockade, and the resources accruing from it to the Government of Juárez.” What were these advantages? As Supervièle no doubt explained to the French envoy, a large portion of the war matériel sent by foreign nations to assist the Juarista army
entered Mexico via Matamoros. In addition, the customs duties collected by the Juárez government on the massive amount of manufactured goods and cotton coming in and out of Matamoros was a major source of revenue for the beleaguered liberal government of Benito Juárez.

For his part, the French diplomat appeared genuinely interested in working with the Confederacy. He declared that “he himself was a Secessionist, and that his best friends were all engaged in the Southern cause.” More encouragingly, Dubois de Saligny claimed that he had recently received a letter from Napoleon III in which the Emperor had explicitly stated he understood “the importance of that port [Matamoros], and of the great trade carried on through it.” Unfortunately for the Confederacy, the occupation of Matamoros was delayed until almost the end of the Civil War. After occupying Mexico City in June 1863, General Forey, commander of the French expedition, made it clear that until the military and political situation in central Mexico stabilized he would refuse to deploy any portion of his forces to the northeastern corner of Mexico. Ultimately, Imperial troops did not occupy Matamoros until September 1864.

The Confederacy’s experience with the French navy in 1863 proved far more satisfying. Early that year, for instance, the French naval squadron in the Gulf of Mexico instituted a blockade of the ports of Vera Cruz and Tampico but announced that Matamoros would remain a free port. Perhaps due to Supervièle's discussions with French officials in Mexico, the Confederate commander in Brownsville reported to General Magruder in June 1863 that the French consul in Matamoros had officially informed him that the “French blockading fleet will not interfere with any goods or contraband of war intended for our Government.” “Under this declaration,” the Brownsville Flag noted, “Matamoros is peculiarly fortunate, for her commerce just now is necessary to both her and Texas.” Speculating as to why the French refused to blockade Matamoros, the Flag concluded that Napoleon III was “unwilling to do anything prejudicial to the Confederates, and that therefore he declines to close the port of Matamoros so long as we may have use for it.” Over a year before the Imperial army occupied Matamoros, then, the Rio Grande borderlands proved the most important point of operational coordination between French and Confederate forces. Under the umbrella of the French navy, whose ships closely monitored shipping activity in and out of Matamoros, the Rio Grande cotton trade thrived.

The war matériel coming north into Texas from Mexico, a continental flow of weapons facilitated by the efforts of the French navy with the personal knowledge and approval of Napoleon III, played a fundamental role in the ability of the Trans-Mississippi to defend itself, especially after
the fall of Vicksburg isolated this region from the rest of the Confederacy. An illustration of close Franco-Confederate alliance in the Rio Grande borderlands was the willingness of French officials in Paris to allow the flow of military goods from Europe into the Trans-Mississippi via Mexico. Because of the complex and confused military situation along the Rio Grande borderlands, however, the smooth cooperation between the military of France and the Confederacy took months to iron out.

During the summer and fall of 1863 the French naval squadron patrolling off the mouth of the Rio Grande seized two British steamers, the Caroline Goodyear and the Love Bird. These ships carried a total of 17,000 Enfield Rifles and 2,840 Tower muskets bound for Texas via Matamoros; in addition the Love Bird carried 2 million cartridges and 5 million percussion caps.\(^9^4\) Purchased by the Confederate agent Nelson Clemens in England, most of these munitions were captured by French naval commanders who believed, mistakenly, that they had been purchased for use by Juárez’s army. The seizure of the weaponry from these vessels threatened disaster for the Confederate troops deployed in the Trans-Mississippi.

The guns carried aboard the Love Bird and the Caroline Goodyear, according to one Confederate officer, “must be had, as they are the only English Enfield rifles on this side of the Atlantic that can be had.”\(^9^5\) The French seized the Enfield rifles carried aboard the Caroline Goodyear the same month—July 1863—that the Union’s capture of Vicksburg and Port Hudson isolated the Confederacy west of the Mississippi from the rest of the South. One week before the surrender of Vicksburg, Gen. Edmund Kirby-Smith, who commanded southern troops in this enormous theater, conceded to John Slidell that the “interruption of communication with the east” had resulted in the Rio Grande becoming the “only channel” by which the Trans-Mississippi could obtain military supplies.\(^9^6\)

In September 1863, Kirby-Smith offered a report to Jefferson Davis that underlined the importance of the borderlands trade to his department. Kirby-Smith wrote that two thousand of the six thousand Confederate soldiers in Arkansas serving under Gen. Sterling Price were unarmed. Even worse, the governor of Arkansas had recently called into service from five thousand to eight thousand more men, “who cannot be rendered available until we receive arms.” “Could arms be obtained,” Kirby-Smith noted, the number of Confederate soldiers fighting in the Trans-Mississippi “might be doubled.” He complained of “the almost hopeless condition of our affairs in this department.” The region under his command, he wrote, “has, in great measure, been stripped of its shot-guns and rifles, which, early in the struggle, were carried east of the Mississippi.” One result of the lack of weapons—a situation exacerbated by the Union navy’s blockade

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and the mistaken seizure of the rifles from the *Caroline Goodyear*—was that the troops under his command “know that they cannot be armed; despondent and disheartened, they have but little hope of the result.” In October 1863 the *Love Bird* arrived at the mouth of the Rio Grande carrying another load of weapons for the Confederate army from Great Britain. This steamer unloaded 4200 Enfield rifles before being seized by French naval officers who, once again, believed mistakenly these guns were for Mexico’s Liberal forces.

In November 1863, nearly six thousand troops from the Union army’s Thirteenth Corps made an amphibious landing on the southern tip of Texas and quickly occupied Brownsville. Sent to Texas to disrupt the flourishing network of trade between the Trans-Mississippi and Matamoros, Union troops remained along the border until the following spring. From the Confederate point of view, the seizure of the munitions aboard the *Caroline Goodyear* and the *Love Bird* opened the door for the Union occupation of South Texas. Magruder used the good offices of Slidell to bitterly complain to the French government about the continental results of the interdiction of the war matériel on these two vessels. “Had the French army beaten my Texans in a pitched battle,” he argued, “it would not have enacted so alarming and severe an injury upon us as by the seizure of these arms.” “It is not believed,” he continued, “that the policy pursued by the commanding officer of the French squadron at the mouth of the Rio Grande can actually meet with the approval of His Imperial Majesty.”

Writing to John Slidell in Paris, Judah Benjamin also argued that the actions of French naval officers stationed off the mouth of the Rio Grande River directly contravened the wishes of Napoleon III to assist the Confederacy. “Wherever the French officials have had an opportunity of acting without the supervision of the Emperor,” the Confederate secretary of state complained, “there has been a disregard of our rights and interests evincing almost a hostile feeling” toward the Confederacy. “The blow struck at us . . . was much more severe than you or his Government can well appreciate. Every musket then seized was equivalent to capturing a soldier from our ranks.” In late November, Slidell pointedly complained to French foreign minister Drouyn de Lhuys about “disastrous consequences” resulting from the seizure of the munitions aboard the two British steamers. Had they “reached their destination,” he argued, the weapons “would have effectually protected the district of the Rio Grande from any attempted invasion of the enemy.”

Confederate officials argued to Paris that the Union’s occupation of the Rio Grande borderlands posed a serious continental threat to the French effort in Mexico. The Union’s control of this region, Kirby-Smith
warned, would result in the “French protectorate in Mexico [finding] a hostile power established on their frontier of exhaustless resources and great military strength, impelled by revenge and the traditional policy of its Government to overthrow all foreign influences on the American continent.”

Unlike the South’s attempts to gain diplomatic recognition from Paris, which ultimately failed, the Confederate warnings about the threat to the French expedition posed by the seizure of the rifles carried aboard the *Caroline Goodyear* and the *Love Bird* produced a flurry of diplomatic activity in Paris at the very highest levels of the French government.

Slidell reported to Benjamin in November 1863 that during a “long and satisfactory meeting,” the French minister of marine, Comte de Chasseloup-Laubat, had reassured him that the blockade of the Atlantic coast of Mexico “commenced at 12 leagues south of the Rio Grande, and that there was no intention of extending it farther north.” Chasseloup-Laubat also agreed with Slidell’s suggestion that future “mistakes might be prevented by my furnishing the names of vessels carrying supplies destined for my Government, he giving orders to his officers not to molest them.” Slidell’s secret agent in the French foreign ministry assured the Confederate envoy the release of the *Love Bird* and her cargo would be ordered during a meeting of the French cabinet at the Tuileries, with Napoleon III presiding.

In December, Slidell informed Benjamin, “instructions have been given to release the arms by *Goodyear* and *Love Bird* unconditionally, and that no future trouble of that sort need be apprehended.” The next month, Magruder thanked the commander of French forces in Vera Cruz for transferring the arms.

The rifles and ammunition shipped from Mexico into Texas played a key role in allowing the southern army to defeat the Union offensive along the Red River that began in March 1864. The chief of the Texas Cotton Bureau, Col. W. J. Hutchins, later reported that “many of the guns and most of the powder which gained the victories at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill and won the campaigns in Louisiana and Arkansas” were imported via Mexico.

The Red River campaign was a setback to Grant’s 1864 strategy to use the combined movements of Union armies to attack the Confederacy on every front. The campaign drained ten thousand soldiers from William Sherman in Georgia. The defeat along the Red River also prevented Banks from marching on Mobile, his next objective, which in turn freed fifteen thousand Confederate soldiers stationed in Alabama to reinforce Gen. Joe Johnston’s army in Georgia.

The continental impact of the Union army’s botched operations during the Red River campaign was not lost upon observers in neighboring Mexico. Writing from the northeastern Mexican city of Monterrey in May
1864, the liberal Mexican journalist Antonio de Castro y Carrillo noted that the “two bloody battles fought at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, Louisiana” were an inauspicious start to the military operations of the Union army. Upon the “success” of these operations, he argued, “depends the direct and efficacious aid that the neighboring people will endeavor to render us.” For Castro y Carrillo, the Confederate victory along the Red River, aided and abetted by the war matériel flowing into Texas from Mexico, marked a defeat for the struggling government of Juárez.

In September 1864, the Imperial army of Maximilian finally heeded the pleas of Confederate officials and occupied Matamoros. Just as Confederate military officers along the border had hoped, the occupation of this key commercial center deepened the diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation between the Confederacy and the Mexican Empire. As the French prepared to land Imperial troops on the Rio Grande, an Austin newspaper reported, “Large trains, with ‘all goods and merchandise’ for Texas are coming from the interior of Mexico. I understand that the trade will be fostered and protected by the French.” Early in 1865, a Confederate officer reported that an Imperial officer stationed in Matamoros had informed him “that he had secret instructions to permit the introduction of all kinds of arms and munitions of war . . . that might be desired, and that they pass freely for the use of the Confederacy.”

Gen. Tomas Mejía, the conservative Mexican general who sided with Napoleon III against Juárez, commanded Imperial forces in Matamoros. Mejía proved so amenable to the Confederacy that in December 1864 he signed an extradition treaty with Confederate general James E. Slaughter, commander of the Western Sub-District of Texas. This agreement pledged that the “generals commanding the lines of both frontiers . . . agreed . . . mutually to deliver over persons accused of crimes.” (Significantly, in this document Mejía adhered to Mexico’s longstanding opposition to the institution of slavery and insisted on excluding escaped slaves from the treaty’s extradition provisions.) The final clause of the treaty declared that both parties expected that “in due time” the agreement signed by Mejía and Slaughter would be “accepted by their respective Governments, elevating them to solemn treaties.” Upon hearing this news, the New York Times indignantly complained that the Mejía-Slaughter treaty served as “a formal recognition of the Confederacy.” Historian Thomas Schoonover noted that the agreement between the two generals was an international treaty, since it was “enforced equally upon all citizens of both nations.” Schoonover argued that the December 1864 treaty between Mejía and Slaughter offered no less than a “back door recognition” to the Confederate States of America and that it “might well have become the basis for a
political understanding between the Confederacy and imperial Mexico,” had the Confederacy not collapsed a few months later.\textsuperscript{115}

After Imperial troops occupied northeastern Mexico, \textit{Juárista} forces protested their open collaboration with Confederate forces stationed on the Texas side of the Rio Grande River. In May 1865, Gen. Miguel Negrete charged that Confederate troops displayed an “open hostility” to efforts of the Liberal army to kill or capture Imperial troops. Negrete noted that an Imperial garrison station in the border city of Piedras Negras had escaped a Liberal army assault by swimming across the Rio Grande River with the “anticipated consent and protection” of the Confederates. A few weeks later, Negrete’s troops attempted to capture Matamoros but discovered Confederate artillery deployed against them in the city’s main square. After withdrawing his troops from Matamoros, Negrete angrily charged that Confederates troops stationed along the border were “accomplices in the vile attempt of Napoleon III to destroy the sovereignty of Mexico, which is also a threat to the sovereignty of all the republics in the New World.”\textsuperscript{116}

The extraordinary cooperation between French and Confederate officials in the Rio Grande borderlands after the Imperial occupation of Matamoros in September 1864 requires one last discussion of the importance of the French setback at Puebla on May 5, 1862. Contemporary observers as well as subsequent historians in Mexico and France agreed that this defeat delayed France’s occupation of Mexico for a full year. Had the French army gained control of Mexico in the summer of 1862, Napoleon III would have been in an excellent position to pour tremendous material resources into the Trans-Mississippi at a critical juncture in the American Civil War. As the Mejía–Slaughter extradition treaty reveals, an Imperial presence along the Rio Grande border two years earlier than it occurred might well have resulted in a de facto French recognition of the Confederate nation before the Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg. The collaboration between Confederate and Imperial forces after the occupation of Matamoros also underscored the potential for a military alliance between these two powers. Fortunately for the governments of both Lincoln and Juárez, when the occupation of this important port finally occurred in September 1864, it came too late to alter the course of the Civil War. Viewed in a continental framework, the Liberal army’s unexpectedly stubborn resistance against the invading French army proved highly beneficial to the Union’s efforts to defeat the Confederacy.

In July 1865, soon after the Confederate surrender, Romero admitted to U.S. Secretary of State William Seward that the people of Mexico had awaited with anxiety the “termination of the civil war in the United States—since our fate being identified, to a certain extent, with that of the Union,
the success of the latter insured our own, whilst its overthrow would have made our situation more difficult.” Just as the beginning of the U.S. Civil War came as a disaster for the Mexican republic, its conclusion boosted the embattled Juárez regime. The envoy noted to Seward that the French intervention into Mexico, “as is already universally admitted, [was] nothing else than a part of the conspiracy which was planned to subvert” the U.S. government and “break up” the United States. Articulating the continental importance of the Union’s destruction of the Confederacy—France’s great ally in North America—Romero predicted that after Appomattox Washington would be unable to “remain an indifferent spectator of the conquest by a European power of one of the principal regions of this continent in their immediate vicinity.” Romero confidently informed Seward that with the Confederate States defeated and the Union restored, the defeat of the Imperialist government in Mexico was “beyond doubt . . . and it has now become only a question of time.” The ambassador’s words proved prophetic.

After Appomattox, Seward firmly rejected French pleas that the United States recognize the government of Maximilian. Instead, the U.S. government began an aggressive diplomatic effort to persuade Napoleon III to withdraw the French army from Mexico. In the summer of 1865, Washington lifted the arms embargo that had proved so detrimental to the Liberal army; as a result, tens of thousands of surplus rifles poured into Mexico from the United States. Cognizant of the threat posed by the French presence in Mexico, General Grant ordered to Texas General Philip Sheridan and twenty-five thousand U.S. troops, including the African American soldiers of the 25th Army Corps. Sherman later wrote that Grant looked upon the French intervention “as a part of the rebellion itself, because of the encouragement that invasion had received from the Confederacy, and that our success in putting down secession would never be complete till the French and Austrian invaders were compelled to quit the territory of our sister republic.” The restoration of U.S. authority along the Texas side of the Rio Grande River reversed the strategic situation that had favored the Imperial government when the Confederacy had controlled this region. Just as Kirby-Smith had predicted to French authorities in September 1863, the Union victory resulted in the French protectorate in Mexico facing “a hostile power established on their frontier of exhaustless resources and great military strength, impelled by revenge and the traditional policy of its Government to overthrow all foreign influences on the American continent.”

After arriving in Texas, Sheridan sent scouts into Mexico to gather information on the movement of the Imperialist troops, ordered U.S. troops to
make “demonstrations all along the Rio Grande,” opened public communication with officials of the Juárez government, and supplied arms and ammunition to the Liberal army, “which we left at convenient places on our side of the river to fall into their hands.” By the summer of 1866, the well-armed and aggressive army of the Juarez government had placed the Imperial troops of Maximilian on the defensive in the Mexican northeast. No longer able to maintain themselves in Matamoros, on June 23, 1866, the remaining Imperialists forces evacuated by sea to Vera Cruz, and the next day the Juarista army took over control of this vital commercial center. The defeat of the Imperialists and the reoccupation of Matamoros was a major victory for the Mexican republic. By helping drive the Imperialists out of northeastern Mexico, the United States Army repaid, in part, the debt it owed the Liberal army for its victory over the French at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, as well as its subsequent heroic resistance to the French invasion of Mexico. In the spring of 1867, following a string of defeats at the hands of Liberal forces and under intense domestic pressure at home and diplomatic pressure abroad, Napoleon III withdrew his occupying troops from Mexico. Maximilian, who had refused to leave Mexico, was captured and sentenced to death. He was executed, along with his loyal Mexican generals, outside the Mexican city of Querétero on June 19, 1867.

A few months after the Confederate defeat, an anonymous writer for the Journal des Debates, a “sincere monarchist all through life,” reflected on the ideological consequences of the North’s victory over the slaveholding South. “In the present world,” this writer argued, “the door is everywhere open to liberal ideas, and contrary views obtain access but by force. The Americans of the north are the greatest producers of liberal ideas in the world . . . in the noble interchange of them which is going among nations, America seems called to a superiority which it will be easier to balance than to oppose.” Speculating on what the Union victory meant for Europe, the historian Charles Montalembert went even further. He predicted that the “the American federation is, henceforth; replaced among great powers of the world; all eyes will henceforth turn to it; all minds will be taught by the light of its future, for the future shall be more or less our own, and its destiny will perhaps decide ours.”

The course of history during the twentieth century would demonstrate the accuracy of Montalembert’s prediction.

In 1876, George Washington Williams offered his thoughts on what the continental history of the 1860s meant for Mexico. Washington was an African American veteran of the Union army who had crossed the Rio Grande in 1866 to fight with the Juarista army. The day before he left Mexico to return to the United States, Williams witnessed the beginning march of the army that captured and executed Maximilian. He conceded
there would be divided opinions about the shooting of the emperor, but “as far as we are able to judge of the men who shot him . . . we are of the opinion that they knew what they were doing. These men were struggling for liberty—[they] wanted to found a free government, to build a Republic.”

The execution of Maximilian marked the climax of the North American crisis of the 1860s. By ordering the death of the Austrian prince, Benito Juárez pronounced to the world that, however imperfectly, republican government would henceforth reign supreme in the nations located on both sides of the Rio Grande River.

NOTES


2. Schoonover, Dollars over Dominion, 280.


9. Ibid.


11. W. L. Morton, “British North America and a Continent in Dissolution, 1861–71,” History 47 (January 1962): 139–56, esp. 139. Morton’s conception of North American history during the 1860s differs from the chronological and territorial frameworks of recent continental historians. These scholars focus on the colonial and postcolonial histories of the French, Spanish, and Russian as well as British regions of North America that became U.S. territory. Jack Greene notes that the territorial framework of the new continental historians has not “moved beyond the borders of the present United States. . . . Indeed, calls for a continental history often turn out to exclude significant portions of the North American continent to the south of the Rio Grande and to the north of the later boundary between Canada and the United States” (Greene, “Hemispheric and Atlantic History,” 301).


22. Ibid., 61.


31. Hanna and Hanna, Napoleon III and Mexico, esp. 40–46; Schoonover, “French Are Coming!” 101.
34. See Bender, A Nation among Nations, chap. 4; Michael Rapport, 1848: Year of Revolution (New York: Basic, 2009).
37. Editorial from El Nuevo Mundo, reprinted in Periódic Oficial (Monterrey, Mexico), July 12, 1864, quoted in Schoonover, Dollars over Dominion, 150–51.
42. James McPherson, “The Whole Family of Man: Lincoln and the Last Best Hope Abroad,” in May, Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim, 131–58.
43. Crook, Diplomacy during the Civil War, 156.
47. Howard Jones, The Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention during the Civil War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 220.


51. ORN, ser. 2, vol. 3:482. For Slidell’s full report on his meeting with Napoleon, see 481–87.


62. Ibid.


64. *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, October 2, 1863.


69. Napoleon III to Lord Cowley, May 16, 1862, quoted in ibid.
74. Quoted in ibid., 308.
75. Quoted in ibid., 312.
80. Ibid., 509.
81. Sir Charles Wyke to Stefan Herzfeld, November 27, 1863, quoted in Hanna, “Roles of the South,” 11.
88. The U.S. slapped an arms embargo on Mexico in 1862 that was not lifted until after the Civil War. See Jasper Ridley, *Maximilian and Juarez* (London: Constable, 2001), 117–19.
91. Dabbs, *French Army in Mexico*, 84.


110. Austin Weekly State Gazette, September 14, 1864.


112. Dabbs, French Army in Mexico, 136.


115. Schoonover, Dollars over Dominion, 97.


