The Vanguard of the Atlantic World
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For Mexican state builders, the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–48) marked the low point of their project, since after the war Mexico would lose over half of its territory to the United States. The pretext for the war was a boundary dispute between the newly admitted U.S. state of Texas (formerly a Mexican province) and Mexico, but the cause lay in U.S. westward expansion and ideas of Manifest Destiny. With its overtones of racism, nationalism, greed, and imperialism, the war might seem a strange place to look for examples of the universal fraternity that would emerge as a key component of American republican modernity. Yet a small band of mostly Irish soldiers, known as the San Patricios, who deserted from the U.S. Army to join the Mexican Army, belied typical U.S. attitudes toward Latin America. These men challenged the reigning discourse in the United States by casting their lot with people of another race, another nation, and a supposedly inferior civilization. The war itself helped lead to a reconception of civilization and international affairs, leading many Mexicans and Colombians to embrace a vision based on fraternity instead of one based on state power. Finally, the war also allows us to examine how Spanish Americans thought of the United States, the New World as a whole, and their shared but troubled destiny as citizens of sister republics.
The San Patricio Battalion

As the United States maneuvered for war with its southern neighbor in 1846, General (later President) Zachary Taylor marched his army through Texas toward the border. Although the war would stoke U.S. nationalism, almost half of Taylor’s soldiers were foreign born. Irish, many fleeing their homeland’s great famine, made up the largest foreign component. Even before the war officially began, some of these disgruntled enlisted men stole across the border into Mexico to join the enemy’s forces. One of these deserters was John Riley, born in County Galway, Ireland. He would become the leader of the San Patricio Battalion, eventually commanding over two hundred men—both fellow deserters and foreigners who were already living in Mexico when war broke out. The San Patricios would participate in the most important engagements of the war. The battalion saw action in the north, before leaving Monterrey, and fought in the bloody battle of Buenavista. When the U.S. forces shifted their focus from an attempt to drive overland and instead followed Hernán Cortés’s path to Mexico City from Veracruz, the San Patricios also marched south. They would meet their former compatriots at the ferocious battle of Churubusco, on the outskirts of Mexico City. Observers agreed that the battalion “fought heroically” in its various engagements, especially in the U.S. campaign against Mexico City.

During the battle of Churubusco, the San Patricios manned cannons, refusing to yield since they knew that doing so would mean their deaths; three times they pulled down white flags hoisted by other soldiers who wished to surrender. In 1849 N. C. Brooks, a U.S. historian, declared that Riley had shown “undaunted courage” in the battle, and that he and his men had succumbed only after exhausting their ammunition. The battalion suffered devastating casualties defending the approach to the capital, losing 60 percent of its men to death or capture. U.S. soldiers immediately massacred a number of San Patricios who had surrendered, but most were bound for later execution.

Why did these men choose desertion to a largely unknown enemy and finally sacrifice their lives in service to Mexico? The historian Robert Miller, focusing on testimony of the men during their trials, concludes that there were a combination of causes: the desire to flee brutal military life and discrimination against foreign-born soldiers or Catholics; the lure of women and enticements of cash, promotions, or land; and even drunkenness. Certainly, these factors played some role. A U.S. newspaper reported that after the battle of Buena Vista, Riley visited some captured American soldiers,
promising them land and money if they would switch sides. Potential monetary rewards played a part as well, and the Mexican government made many claims about the amleness of future compensation: officials and the Congress proposed land, cash, and freedom for runaway slaves, for example. No doubt some San Patricios hoped to obtain land by deserting; some had enlisted in the U.S. Army believing they would receive property for their service. The brutal discipline meted out in the U.S. Army pushed others to desert. William (Guillermo) McLaughlin and John (Juan) Davis had deserted the U.S. forces outside of Veracruz and enlisted with the Mexicans. They claimed that all the Irish soldiers “are very discontented and desire the opportunity to desert, due to their officials who mistreat them.” The two San Patricios claimed most of the Irish were recent emigrants, who had arrived in the United States to find themselves with “the alternative to die of hunger or take up arms.” Many men had initially signed up with the U.S. Army after recruiters had gotten them drunk.

Did the soldiers have any ideological motivation, however? Certainly Mexicans believed the converts fought for the reasons above, but also because the U.S. invasion was one of the “most unjust of causes.” Mexicans thought the men fought for their republic. The battalion’s flag bore the legend “Long Live the Mexican Republic.” Riley himself emphasized that he fought due to “the advice of my conscience for the liberty of a people which had had war brought on them by the most unjust aggression.” A broadside written (perhaps in part by Riley) to entice other Irish deserters argued that Irishmen should join the Mexicans “for that love of liberty for which our common country is so long contending, for the sake of that holy religion which we have for ages professed. I conjure you to abandon a slavish hiring’s life with a nation who in even the moment of victory treats you with contumely & disgrace.” In this vision, Mexico did not just represent Catholicism, but it was also the true land of liberty and opportunity, where the Irish would not face the discrimination and humiliations they had endured in the United States. As we will see below, race played a critical role in the war for Irish, Mexicans, and Anglos. The San Patricios also spoke through their actions. Americans would claim that the “dastardly deserters” fought desperately at Churubusco, taking “deliberate aim at their former officers.” If true, the attacks on officers suggest the San Patricios’ bitterness at the harsh discipline they had escaped and their hostility toward the officers (who were of a different social class than the deserters). We should also not casually dismiss motivations for land or property as strictly mercenary. As for other subalterns, for these soldiers the political and the economic were
not independent fields; both were tied to notions of personal liberty and equality. It is difficult to know what the San Patricios were thinking, but it should not surprise us that their decision to fight for Mexico involved multifaceted and complex motivations. We should also be careful not to dismiss political concerns simply because the San Patricios (reasonably) chose not to emphasize these while being court-martialed. Although we have a small window into the San Patricios’ mind-set—especially their ideological motivations—much clearer are the critical debates that their desertion and ultimate fate opened in the public sphere over questions of race, nationalism, and civilization.

After the battle of Churubusco, General Winfield Scott would show the captured men no mercy. As U.S. forces assembled for the final assault on Mexico City and the Castle Chapultepec guarding its approach, Colonel William Harney, a sadist and butcher from the Florida Seminole Wars, took responsibility for hanging thirty of the San Patricios. The prisoners included a wounded man who was already dying; Harney insisted on hanging him anyway. Harney constructed the gallows with a view of Chapultepec. He forced the condemned to stand on wagons, nooses already around their necks, and watch as the battle commenced; hours later, only after the U.S. flag over the castle signaled victory, did he order the wagons moved, leaving the men to hang.17

Mexico City observed in horror both the execution of some San Patricios and the branding and scourging of others. A group of priests, including the archbishop, joined by a number of society ladies from San Angel and Tacubaya, tried unsuccessfully to intercede on the doomed men’s behalf.18 Later, other Mexicans would plead for and eventually secure the release of the San Patricio prisoners of war who had been spared execution; subscriptions would be taken up to aid the foreign veterans.19 The historian and poet José María Roa Bárdena remembered the hangings’ effect on the besieged Mexico City: “The execution of the enemy’s deserters who formed our San Patricio Company, who fought like lions, increased the sadness and horror of those unforgettable hours.”20

“Improper in a Civilized Age”
The executions opened a debate between the invaders and the invaded over the nature and locus of civilization. Ramón Alcaraz, a Mexican officer and a chronicler of the war, condemned the executions, noting that although many of the San Patricios had fallen in battle, “those who survived, more unfortunate than their companions, suffered soon after a cruel death or hor-
rible torments, improper in a civilized age, and from a people who aspire to
the title of illustrious and humane.” Alcaraz’s translator, Albert Ramsey,
stung by implications that the United States was not nearly as civilized as
it claimed, tried to defend General Scott in 1850 by asserting that the Mex-
ican army also punished deserters harshly. Scott attempted to place the
blame on the Mexicans for enticing the deserters, and thus necessitating
such severe chastisement. Other U.S. historians, beginning with Brooks,
have followed suit, blaming the Mexicans or asserting that although harsh,
such punishments were the norm. Their arguments, quite unconvincing
given the strangeness and brutality of the executions, reveal the power of
discourses of civilization. According to one definition, the United States was
more civilized than Mexico, as it had won the war—proving its potency as a
society. According to another, however, by behaving in a manner appropriate
to a republican and rights-bearing people, the Mexicans had greater claims
to civilization.

Even years later, questions concerning the civilized behavior or lack
thereof appears still to smart some U.S. historians, but for men like Ramsey
it was a critical affair, this question of who was civilized and who barba-
rours. In 1849 Brooks claimed the war would benefit Mexico by bringing it
into closer contact with the United States, so that Mexico might learn from
her conqueror and thus “diffuse knowledge and virtue among her ignorant
and half-civilized multitudes.” Sergeant Thomas Barclay thought Mexico
had to fail in its contest with the “Anglo Saxons,” who formed the “civilized
countries” that “strive to keep up with the spirit of the age.” Mexico, in con-
trast, showed no signs of progress: “Everything betokens ruin and decay.”
The war correspondent George Kendall bragged in 1847 that the U.S. con-
quest of Mexico ranked as one of the greatest of “modern achievements.”
In the United States, power (be it state, military, or industrial) was emerging
as the benchmark of modernity.

The Mexican public sphere contested the assumption that power proved
civilization. Remembering the executions and tortures of the San Patricio
prisoners of war, El Monitor Republicano asked how such brutality was possi-
ble, casting doubt on U.S. claims to be the standard-bearers of civilization:
“These are the citizens of a republic that calls itself free, and that pretends to
be the most enlightened in the New World?” In general, the Mexican public
sphere questioned how a people who boasted of being “the apostles of civiliza-
tion” could justify attacking another country, raping women, desecrating
churches, and generally spreading destruction. After the war, Mexicans
and Spanish Americans in general would craft a new definition of civiliza-
tion in international affairs that would contest the dominant vision coming from Europe: power proved civilization. Incipient now, Spanish Americans’ rejection of power as civilizing would flower during the next foreign invasion that Mexico would endure.

In the contest to define civilization, Mexicans—perhaps surprisingly, given elites’ own racism—turned to race and racial equality. In the previous chapter, we saw that many Spanish American letrados fretted about their society’s racial composition, assuming that the European civilization they desired required European races. However, the harsh reality of U.S. racism forced a sea change in racial thought in Spanish America, especially the relationship between equality and modernity. The experience of the San Patricios is illustrative. A New York newspaper described the scene after the 1847 surrender of Monterrey, in which Mexican forces were allowed to withdraw. As the American soldiers watched their enemies march out of the city, a group noticed the “renegade Riley” seated on a gun carriage: “‘Riley, ye desartin’ thafe, ain’t ye ashamed of yerself?’ said one of his former messmates, an Irishman and one of the best soldiers in the company. The color entirely forsook the face of the runaway. ‘Whin ye desarted why didn’t ye go among dacent white people, and not be helpin’ these bloody nagers pack off their vermin?’ continued the speaker, his comrades keeping up a running accompaniment of groans and hisses.” The paper went on to note that among the ranks were other deserters as well, including “runaway negroes.”

Even if apocryphal, the story reveals the intense efforts to racialize republicanism in the United States while simultaneously justifying the war. In this case, Mexicans are cast with blacks as the racially suspect, while the Irish who fought in the war could become white (but only if they differentiated and separated themselves from a Mexican and black racial other). The soldiers’ racism, or the U.S. newspaper’s presentation of such racism, played three important roles. The first was to police the lines of republicanism in the United States. The demands for equality promoted by popular republicanism, drawing on the Declaration of Independence, were incompatible with both the slaveholding South and the Manifest Destiny West. Race excluded Indians and African Americans, thus making republicanism much more suitable to the U.S. economic system and continued expansion. Second, race divided subalterns (separating the Irish from “nagers”) and helped define a slippery nationality for both sides. We have already explored Mexicans’ uncertainty regarding their nation, but the United States, with an army of immigrants, faced similar issues. Third, as we will explore below, race justified a war that to many citizens of the United States seemed pa-
tently unjust. How could one invade a sister republic? Casting Mexicans as a race of “nagers” and “vermin” made such a question irrelevant. No ties of kinship, no sister republics, could exist in such a racial typography.

The need to racially “other” Mexicans pervaded U.S. interpretations of the war and its relation to civilization. Many in the United States thought their civilization was due to the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race, while Mexico’s mixed-race population doomed it to degradation. For Private Samuel Chamberlain, Mexicans were simply “greasers.” Columbus Delano, a U.S. congressman from Ohio, opposed the war because he worried that the annexation of Mexico would lead to racial mixing with a mongrel people that “embrace all shades of color,” resulting in a “slothful, ignorant race of beings.” The journalist Thomas Thorpe declared the Mexican soldier to be a “degraded being” who had inherited the worst attributes of the various races. The miscegenation evident in the Mexican wounded whom he encountered shocked and dismayed him; such diversity should not exist “in one people.” Thus, the San Patricios were doubly threatening; first as Irish to the Anglo-Saxon purity of America, then as traitors who joined an even more questionable and multiracial people, breaking down carefully monitored racial borders.

After Mexico City’s capitulation, the treatment of the remaining San Patricio prisoners of war raised such questions anew. A debate broke out between El Monitor Republican and the occupiers’ English-language newspaper, the American Star, over the fate of the remaining San Patricios who had not been executed at the Battle of Chapultepec (including John Riley, who was sentenced to lashing and branding instead, since he had deserted before the declaration of war, and thus was technically just a deserter, not a traitor). On 2 October 1847 El Monitor Republican published a very mild request for leniency for the remaining San Patricios, some of whom still faced a death sentence. This request provoked a furious reaction from the American Star, which accused the Mexican paper of meddling in U.S. affairs and for encouraging an attack against a U.S. wagon train. The American Star further demanded why Mexican women were so concerned with bringing food to the San Patricios, while ignoring their own beggars who filled the streets. El Monitor Republican refused to cede ground, castigating the United States for behaving barbarously. The paper described the prisoners as being chained and forced to wear iron collars studded with barbs and hooks that prevented the men from moving their heads. The men bore the marks of whippings and beatings and had been branded on the face with the letter D for deserter. As it had after the executions at Chapultepec, the paper ac-
cused the United States of barbarity, and it claimed that the “civilized world” had rejected such tortures, “the most inhuman example of cruelty and barbarism.”

Of course, terror and horror were not unfortunate side effects of the punishments, but their goal. The San Patricios’ actions risked breaking down both racial and national barriers between the United States and Mexico. The state employed such horrific violence to restore and cement a certain racial and national order that drew sharp divisions between whites and “nagers” and between North Americans and Mexicans. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker noted for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, power’s great fear was the union of the lower classes against its designs: race and nationality worked to undermine any such union. By the nineteenth century, such divisions seemed deeply ingrained in American life, but the San Patricios showed that these divisions were not natural or eternal but could be overcome. Although the scattering of foreign men who joined the Mexican army posed little military threat to the United States, despite their bravery, their symbolic meaning was much more dangerous. The U.S. press eagerly categorized the San Patricios as un-American. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle decried the deserters: “These men are not of American birth, we believe almost to a man they are not.” Discourse, brandings, whippings, iron collars, and executions all served as bulwarks for a racial and national order.

While U.S. power brokers erected increasingly rigid racial divides, the war encouraged some Mexicans to enunciate the differences between the two warring societies’ visions of equality and race. Politicians regularly warned that Mexicans in general, but especially Afro-Mexicans, faced enslavement if the United States triumphed—which, given the establishment of slavery in Texas, would not have seemed unreasonable. The state of México’s Legislature warned that one would soon hear in “our fields the snap of the whip and the brutal yelling of the slave overseer.” Due to the U.S. horror of racial mixing, castas (those of mixed racial ancestry) risked the worst treatment, and even “the extermination of the men of color” was a possibility. Given the racism of the United States, Mexicans wondered how U.S. society could be truly republican; instead, it was a “hybrid republic, with popular institutions and a refined aristocracy of blood” that constantly abused and degraded its “people of color.”

These encounters accelerated the long process by which many in Spanish America began to define racial equality as key to both republicanism and civilization, a foundation of American republican modernity. El Monitoreo Republicano argued that Mexico enjoyed the “sympathies of the civilized
nations” due to U.S. aggression and its modernity based only on “fire and blood.” Mexico stood for the “cause of human liberty,” in contrast to a nation that profited from slavery and “exploits a man and marks him with a brand of servitude as if he were a beast.” Mexico supported “equality,” while the United States was “a nation in which only one race dominates, humiliates and degrades all the others.” The paper warned that if the U.S. conquest succeeded, anyone not of “European origin” would lose their “political rights” and be subjected to a situation little different from slavery. Therefore, Mexico’s cause was the “cause of civilization.” Now, shockingly, it was not European life or military power that defined civilization, but equality. And this equality was not simply a legal equality; it extended at least into the social realm of race. Mexicans also tried to gain the moral upper hand during peace negotiations: Alcaraz stated that the Mexican negotiators attempted to ensure that slavery would not be allowed in any ceded territory. Although U.S. power was undeniable, its place in civilization remained doubtful, as its embrace of slavery violated the “principles of equality and manumission,” earning it the “censure of humanity.” U.S. journalists and politicians bragged that they were bringing civilization to an inferior and racially suspect people, but Mexicans reacted by questioning the invader’s claims to modernity. As universalism and equality cemented their prestige in American republican modernity in the coming years, the Spanish American public would increasingly employ U.S. racism as a mark of Latin America’s superior progress. However, the contest within republicanism between racial nationalism and universalism would endure throughout the nineteenth century. For a moment universalism triumphed. However, by the 1880s racism, in both the North and South Atlantics, would renew its hold over visions of modernity.

The New Russians of the Americas

The transformation of Mexicans’ thinking about civilization to include a republicanism marked by universalism and equality initiated American republican modernity’s ascension in the public sphere. The position of the United States in such a schema was intensely problematic, since most Latin Americans recognized the aggressive northern giant as the most successful republican nation. For those letrados beholden to Europe, this mattered little, but if civilization was redefined by republicanism, where did that leave the United States and Latin American relations with it? In spite of Mexicans’ suffering under U.S. invasion, surprisingly quickly that action came to be seen as exceptional in most of Latin America: it marked a divergence from
the proper behavior of the United States as a New World sister republic. Most of the discourse of American republican modernity presented Latin America and the United States as kindred spirits, opposed to European monarchy, aristocracy, and colonialism. Instead of a competitor, the United States was seen as a fellow traveler, with many Latin Americans acknowledging U.S. political and economic success. Yet time and again, the United States would betray Latin Americans’ expectations—never more so than during the U.S.-Mexican war, at least until the Spanish-American War destroyed the sister republic ideal. The terms best suited to describe Latin Americans’ contradictory views on the United States are “expectation” and “disappointment.” Disappointment with the United States over the invasion of Mexico was so bitter precisely because expectations were so high. Under Europhile modernity, letrados might admire the United States for its incipient economic growth and relative stability, but they still tended to think that only Europe could provide the “elements of culture and civilization” necessary for modernity. However, around midcentury, as American republican modernity began to challenge Europhile modernity for dominance in the public sphere, the importance placed on the United States as a republican model increased. In fact, newspapers were much more likely to see the United States as a positive “model” than Europe, especially since the former had both political success in republicanism and economic success in its commercial, agricultural, and increasingly industrial growth. Politically, a Uruguayan paper applauded the “unlimited democracy” in the United States that ensured “rights” and “social privileges” to all and “to each citizen consciousness that no one is superior to himself.” Although eventually it would be U.S. economic power that fascinated the Latin American public sphere, before the U.S.-Mexican War if the public sphere discussed the United States it was mostly as a political model. Around midcentury, politicians such as the Colombian Tomás Mosquera, urged Latin Americans to look to the United States, instead of Europe, as a political or legal guide. He declared: “The republican principles of North America are, for me, social perfection and the most sound.” Of course, even Domingo Faustino Sarmiento had urged his compatriots to imitate U.S. education policies. As politics became the definition of civilization, the importance of the United States increased and that of Europe decreased. In the 1870s, Colombian politicians crafting a new state constitution would note that they looked to the United States—which, since the independence of Spain’s colonies, “has served as a guide along the path of the Republic and liberty.”

The U.S. invasion thus shocked and deeply disappointed those who
viewed the New World, save Brazil, as a joint project of “sister republics.” As the war loomed, *El Republicano* warned that dissension among American republics was the secret plan of European thrones, who would use the instability both to discredit the republican system and to reestablish monarchies in the New World. Instead of waging a fratricidal war, the United States should join Mexico in “common cause” against Europe. Feeling bewildered and betrayed by the U.S. violation of the republican spirit, the paper pleaded with its neighbor to follow the better angels of her nature and once again act as a sister republic. A Uruguayan paper lamented that “the model for democratic governments” had now adopted “the principle of military conquest.”

Although American republican modernity was still only developing as a strand of thought in the public sphere, already a sense that republics should behave differently from monarchies as a sign of their progress and modernity had emerged. As the war began, the *Boletín de la División del Norte* referred to the bombardment of Matamoros, noting this was not how “civilized peoples” behaved; indeed, the war as whole was not the work of a modern republic, but an act from the “time of feudalism.” Similarly, after Veracruz endured artillery barrages, a letter from “Los Nuevo-Leoneses” lamented that the United States had “forgotten the republican principles that it had feigned to profess.” The United States risked abandoning its claims to civilization in its pursuit of conquest; perhaps it was not at republicanism’s vanguard after all? A writer from Morelia argued that the United States had too many “contradictions” to be a republic—slavery, its severe penal code, racism, and the pervasiveness of “monetary interest”; republicanism could not accept such “contradictions,” and even “one could cause the entire system to die.”

While a few writers questioned U.S. republican credentials, more bitterly predicted that the war would destroy the proud North American political system. In a speech in Mexico City, the entrepreneur José María Godoy lamented the passing of a United States that once had “demonstrated to the world that it is practical to govern great human associations by means of those principles of Democracy” that Europeans had mocked as utopian. Now the United States had started down “the baneful road of Conquest driven by a mad greed that some day it will lament with tears of blood.” El *Corresponsal del Ejército* warned that the war would cause the U.S. economy and institutions to collapse, as its people’s “industrious hands will not want to put down the rifle, once habituated to a life of adventure.” El *Monitor Republicano* predicted that, “drunk on a bloody and diabolical glory,” the militarization of U.S. society would lead to a “Republic corrupted by conquest
and gold.” If the United States persisted in its belligerence, its army would overwhelm its political institutions and “bury the liberties of the American republic,” as had happened in Mexico (thus underlining the essential similarity of the two sister republics).

Of course, across Latin America people followed news of the war, most sympathizing with the Mexican defense; even the San Patricios’ fate attracted attention. In Uruguay, El Nacional predicted that the war would ruin the “present greatness” of the United States, as it would be tempted to invade other nations and would descend into sectional division over the gains of the conquest and the question of slavery. Mexicans struggled to interpret their neighbor’s behavior, turning to the Atlantic to reframe the United States: no longer the model republic, it now resembled the stereotypical barbarous power in the Atlantic world, Russia. Enrique Stolz, a Pole, expressed his solidarity with Mexicans given his nation’s oppression by Russia, exhorting the Mexicans to fight against “the new Russians of the American Continent.”

Stolz’s speech echoed existing Mexicans’ fears that their country would be the Poland of the New World. The sister republic ideal seemed to be yet another casualty of the U.S. invasion.

The open wound of the war would endure for the rest of the century in U.S.–Latin American relations, continually aggrieved by filibusters (unauthorized invasions of Latin America by U.S. citizens) or gunboat diplomacy, and encouraging a defensive nationalism and racism to fester that would dominate the public sphere by century’s end. Indeed, the war and subsequent U.S. interventions may have created the idea of a “Latin America,” confronting a rapacious Yankee or Anglo-Saxon North America. Yet, in spite of the war’s long reach and even before the U.S. withdrawal, both North and South Americans worked to resuscitate the sister republic ideal. They would succeed, in the short term creating a sense of a collective destiny for the New World, but a future imperial adventure, the Spanish-American war, would finally sunder that ideal.

Even as the war raged, Mexicans hoped the vision of “two sister republics” would encourage the United States to demand only Texas and not additional territory; weakening Mexico too much would only encourage European aggression and monarchical projects, which would be in neither country’s interest. During the fighting’s height, some Mexicans seized on rumors that England, Spain, and France planned to use the war as an excuse to intervene in Mexico. La Opinión Nacional hoped that such an invasion would cause the United States to end the war and unite with “all the continent” against an attempt to impose a New World monarchy. As the United
States pursued its vision of Manifest Destiny and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, Spanish Americans desperately tried to revive a sense of American fraternity against European imperialism.

Spanish Americans were heartened by the opposition in the United States for its failure to follow republican principles. The public sphere in Latin America seized on U.S. opposition to the war as a way to revive the sister republic ideal. News of dissent within the United States was eagerly reported, from the Southern Cone to Mexico. As we have seen, many North Americans assumed that their race and superior civilization allowed them to conquer a barbaric, inferior foe. Others struggled to justify a war that so obviously clashed with a public discourse based on republicanism, liberty, and fraternity. Some claimed that the war was not an invasion of one republic by another, but a republican crusade against incipient monarchism, inspired by a rumor a European prince would take the Mexican throne. Subsequent events would show that this was not a complete fantasy, but more importantly it allowed republicanism, and republican fraternity, to remain central to U.S. visions of civilization. Of course, many U.S. politicians realized how atrociously their country had behaved and that the war had thoroughly transgressed the country’s founding ethos. In his memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant—who, like so many Civil War veterans, had first tasted battle in Mexico—condemned the war as unfitting to a republic: “To this day [I] regard the war which resulted as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory.” Grant echoed the Spanish Americans who had predicted the war would weaken if not destroy U.S. institutions: “The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican war. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.” Not just Spanish Americans, but North Americans as well, expressed intense disappointment in the model republic’s failure. The U.S.-Mexican war reveals that nation-states can violate and ignore their own discourses of civilization, yet such disruptions are not easy or free, and, as is the case of the U.S. Civil War, may carry unbearable costs.

While the United States struggled to justify its behavior, another strategy that Spanish Americans employed to overcome the war’s taint was to emphasize the basic commonalities between American societies, which would become another trope of American republican modernity. Europhile modernity often stressed the differences between the United States and the new
nations to its south; letrados, such as Juan Bautista Alberdi, would maintain this bias, focusing on religion, different colonial histories, and the distinct natures of their populations (especially the working classes). He argued that, unlike the United States, Argentina was not ready for unrestricted liberty and equality, because most of the population was not prepared for citizenship. However, by midcentury under republican modernity, more and more thinkers stressed that American societies seemed fundamentally the same. Thus, if Latin America lagged behind the United States, that was due to the region’s later entrance into the race to civilization or to the backwardness of Spanish colonialism. In 1848 El Monitor Republicano again emphasized how unjust and unnecessary the war was, since Mexico and the United States should enjoy a neighborly fraternity, as both had identical systems of government, similar interests in preventing the reestablishment of European monarchies in the New World, and similar histories of struggles for independence.

After the war, Mexicans hoped a renewed sense of the sister republic ideal would transform the way civilized nations interacted, thus preventing future disasters. “Modern civilization” had rejected the right of force, championed by kings. Instead, republics should respect and treat each other as “sisters.” El Monitor Republicano hoped that the 1848 Pan-American Congress would provide a forum for republican nations to peacefully resolve their disputes. Yet this dream quickly died, as the United States moved into Panama to construct the transisthmus railroad. Commenting on this latest intervention in 1856, Francisco Bilbao celebrated the U.S. political system while lamenting the U.S. desire for domination and lack of New World fraternity: “The Yankee replaces the American.” The United States had elevated patriotism, industry, and riches over morality, charity, and justice. Bilbao lambasted the United States for still allowing slavery and for its treatment of Indians. North Americans had abandoned “the universal cause” to pursue “individualism.” The threat of U.S. imperialism and filibusters was particularly disappointing because it originated from “that nation that should have been our star, our model, our force.” Once again, the United States betrayed the sister republic ideal. Expectation and disappointment orbited one another as the twin poles of Latin American relations with the United States.

The contradictory roles played by the United States—sister republic, model, and imperial aggressor—raised the issues of the Monroe Doctrine, foreign interventions, and the relationship between American societies. Although filibusters and U.S. interventions threatened the American community of sister republics, the specter of European intervention revived it.
Indeed, the 1862 French invasion of Mexico (called the French Intervention; see chapter 4) caused some to imagine the Monroe Doctrine not as a U.S. policy of imperial expansion, but the shared responsibility of the New World sister republics. Some Mexicans urged “Tio Samuel” (Uncle Sam) to intervene directly, citing the long-standing U.S. pledge to resist European “monarchical” intrusions into the New World. Other Mexicans claimed a hemisphere-wide sentiment to repel European imperial advances, transforming the Monroe Doctrine from a nationalist, singular tool of expansion to a fraternal, multifocal element of New World solidarity. Indeed, after the French Intervention, the famed Mexican writer, teacher, and politician Ignacio Altamirano asked why the United States had not done more to enforce the “celebrated Monroe Doctrine” that “your wise President proclaimed.” U.S. politicians credited Mexico for defending the doctrine as they had not, praising the “action of President Juárez to vindicate the honor of the Republic and the Monroe Doctrine on this continent.”

Some Spanish Americans even proposed a much more aggressive version of the Monroe Doctrine. In 1862 a writer in Morelia proposed that the Americas unite in “a general alliance, offensive and defensive, established in a treaty, committing the united American continent to take the initiative against the Old World.” La Bandera Nacional pushed the doctrine much further in 1864, claiming North Americans had a duty to intervene in Mexico as Mexico’s allies against the French. The paper interpreted the doctrine as “the establishment of an alliance among the American Republics under the banner of liberty and justice in opposition to the tyranny of kings and emperors.” The fate of the hemisphere, if not the entire Atlantic world, hung in the balance: “The question of the establishment of a throne and crown for Maximilian will be decided by the French and Austrian armies on the side of monarchy, and those of Mexico and the United States on the side of democracy and republicanism.” Under American republican modernity, the Monroe Doctrine was not necessarily seen as promoting nefarious U.S. ambition. Indeed, the provincial paper in Matamoros quoted above could celebrate it as part of a panhemispheric commitment of sister republics to protect democracy against European imperialism, involving but not dominated by the United States. In Peru, a letter from the townspeople of Pisco celebrated the arrival of U.S. warships as marking the “American Union” of “the young Republics of Columbus’s World” who stood together as “sisters” against “European despots.” Many Latin Americans did not reject the Monroe Doctrine out of hand, instead hoping they could reconceptualize it as a truly American union. Of course, that would not happen. U.S. imperial
adventures regularly tested this New World fraternity, eventually giving rise to a patriotic nationalism that replaced republican universalism.

Thus, one reaction to U.S. aggression was the attempt in both the United States and Latin America to revive the sister republic ideal of pan-American unity and common purpose. However, countering this thrust was the desire to differentiate Latin America from an aggressive United States, using the schema of race. Mexican President José Mariano Salas, alarmed by U.S. imperialism, asserted that the “Hispanic-American race” would be supplanted by “the Anglo-Saxons.” The state of México’s legislature went so far as to call it a “race war” between people whose ancestors came from the northern part of Europe and those whose ancestors were from the southern part. The focus on Europe is revealing, as it excluded all the other peoples who inhabited both the United States and Mexico. As we have seen, others did try to widen the threat that the “Anglo-Saxon race” posed not just to the “Spanish,” but also to Indians and Afro-Mexicans. Mostly, however, letrados focused on the Spanish race. In 1847 President Pedro María Anaya urged Mexicans to fight the invaders, claiming that if they met with a stout defense, “never again will they say that the Spanish race, heroic in the Old World, has degenerated in Columbus’s Continent.” By employing the concept of the Spanish, Anaya excluded the vast majority of his countrymen.

While this discourse’s anti-imperialist nature arouses sympathy, this should not disguise the language’s deeply conservative nature. Lucas Alamán approvingly cited President Salas’s rhetoric on the threat of Anglo-Saxons to Hispanic Americans in his 1852 Historia de México. Again, Alamán focused on European peoples, their origins, and their descendants in the New World. Tellingly, he generally thought of both Indians and castas as marked by their total ignorance and debasement, with a propensity to thieving and drunkenness—especially those castas of African descent. As Aims McGuinness has shown, even Liberals who championed the unity of “the Latin race”—in the words of Justo Arosemena—against Yankee imperialism could not include “upstart blacks” in their essentially European “Latin” vision. This was an elite discourse—Hispanic-Americans were just that, wealthy Americans of Spanish descent. Such Hispanophilia and Anglophobia cast the wealthiest and most powerful Latin Americans as subaltern, thus occluding the violence and exclusions the dominant class practiced against the poor, mestizo, black, or Indian, focusing instead on the relative humiliations suffered by elites at U.S. hands. The celebration of such discourse is not just anti-imperialistic, it is also a celebration of patriotic nationalism, racism, and elite privilege that would eventually triumph over universalism.
by century’s end. The conservative nature of the discourse of division is even clearer when we consider the United States, where by the 1820s Jacksonians had already promoted a racial difference between North and South America as a way of protecting slavery from republican critique and uniting regional divisions of the United States under a shared whiteness.¹¹¹

Generally, the Hispanophilia inspired by U.S. racism and the U.S.-Mexican War was not particularly strong around midcentury, except in moments of direct imperial intervention. However, over time it would grow more and more powerful. Yes, it served as a response to U.S. imperialism and racism, but it also converted a feeling of universal nationhood into a patriotic nationalism that would eventually lead Latin Americans to look to Europe; abandon the idea of a New World community; openly embrace racism; and exclude the vast, subaltern majority from national belonging because they were not of the Spanish race. History would show that universalism, inclusive nationhood, and republican fraternity were always fragile, easily overcome by calls for patriotic nationalism and racial exceptionalism in both the United States and Latin America. Indeed, the argument I would like to make here and in chapter 7 is that U.S. imperialism undermined universalism and fostered racial thinking in Latin America by reinforcing an elite, racist patriotic nationalism.

Patriotic nationalism and racism would be countered by incipient ideas of universalism, however. The inclusionary nationhood and international solidarity of American republican modernity, reflected in the relations between Mexicans and the San Patricios, would dominate the public sphere after 1850. The U.S. invasion of Mexico did establish a pattern of disappointment with the United States that would play out time and again in the nineteenth century, culminating with the U.S. seizure of Cuba and Puerto Rico. However, before 1898, as we will explore in the next chapter, the public sphere viewed the United States not as a distant and distinct society to be imitated (as was the case with Europe under cultural modernity), but as an essentially similar sister republic. Certainly the United States enjoyed certain advantages and successes, but a fundamentally American republican modernity saw the whole New World as sharing a destiny and a project of civilization. The New World would create a new civilization—a new path to modernity—based not on imperialism, racism, and aristocratic privilege, but on liberty, equality, and fraternity as the bedrock of society, accomplishing what Europe had failed to do. The Americas, North and South, would remake and redeem the world.