

Gideon Nye and the Formosa Annexation Scheme

HAROLD D. LANGLEY

The author is associate professor of history in the Catholic University of America.

HISTORIANS HAVE LONG been aware of the main outlines of a proposal by certain Americans in China that the United States seize the island of Formosa in 1857.¹ Manuscript records of the United States Department of State and the documents published by Congress have been the basis for most of the work on this topic. The major characters in the Formosa drama are Dr. Peter Parker, the United States Commissioner and Plenipotentiary to China, Gideon Nye, Jr., an American merchant at Canton, and his friend and associate, William M. Robinet. Within recent years, scattered letters of Nye have come to light which give additional details about the conspiracy and about the large role that he played in it. Working through personal contacts to gain the attention of high United States government officials, Nye spared no effort to try to win their support for the scheme. His letters tell us of his exertions, but they are particularly important for the insights they provide into his thoughts. Nye was a splendid example of the type of individual often associated with the British Empire in its period of greatness—men who welcomed the challenge of “the white man’s burden” in Asia. In an American context we associate his type with the most flamboyant forms of Manifest Destiny. Firm in his own convictions, he advocated a policy for his government which contained a blend of arguments for the advancement of civilization, the spread of Christianity, the expansion of commerce and national interest, and a bold

¹ Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia* (New York, 1922), 279-291; James W. Davidson, *The Island of Formosa, Past and Present* (London and New York, 1903), 111, 171-172, 400-402; Eldon Griffin, *Clippers and Consuls* (Ann Arbor, 1938), 306, and n. 5; Leonard Gordon, “Early American Relations With Formosa, 1849-1870,” *Historian*, XIX, 272-277; Te-kong Tong, *United States Diplomacy in China, 1844-60* (Seattle, 1964), 204-209.

XXXXIV, No. 4 Nov 65

move in the game of power politics. How could such a policy fail to win the approval of those in authority? This is the story of Nye's dream.

Gideon Nye, Jr., was a native of Achushnet, Massachusetts, who, in 1833 at the age of twenty-one, went to China to work for his cousin, Francis S. Hathaway of New Bedford. Nye's father and the Hathaways had been interested in the China trade since 1817, but it was the specific invitation of Francis to Gideon Jr., which brought the latter to Canton.² Young Gideon learned the ways of the China trader and gradually built himself a fortune. He was one of eight merchants who petitioned Congress in 1839 to send out an agent to negotiate a commercial treaty with China.³

The long-awaited American emissary arrived in 1844 in the person of Caleb Cushing, of Newburyport, Massachusetts, who held the rank of Minister Plenipotentiary. By this time Commodore Lawrence Kearney, U.S.N., had already taken the initiative with the Chinese officials to secure for the United States the trading privileges already won by Great Britain in 1843 under the Treaty of Nanking.⁴ The treaty of commerce negotiated by Cushing secured the gains won by Kearney. The prompt action of a navy officer acting on his own initiative contrasted sharply with the slow pace of the president, the state department, and the Congress.

While Cushing was in China, he met Nye and apparently they became good friends. After Cushing returned to the United States, Nye wrote him from time to time to call his attention to some matter of public interest.⁵

Meanwhile, Nye continued to prosper in trade. His younger brother, Thomas S. Hathaway Nye, joined him in China. The growth of his business led to the establishment of the firm of Nye, Parkin, and Company in 1843. At the height of his career he was reported to have amassed a fortune of six million dollars.⁶

Within a few years his luck changed. Nye's brother, Thomas, was

² Gideon Nye, Jr., *The Morning of My Life in China* (Canton, 1873), [2]-9.

³ "Memorial of R. B. Forbes and Others, American Citizens, Merchants in Canton," *House Doc. 40*, 26 Cong., 1 sess.

⁴ Dennett, *op. cit.*, 108-111; Tong, *op. cit.*, 29. Dennett points out that the credit for the most-favored-nation clause belongs not to the British or Americans but to the Chinese themselves.

⁵ Letter of Gideon Nye, Jr., to Caleb Cushing, March 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*, Correspondence, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as *Cushing Papers*.

⁶ See Nye's obituary in *New York Times*, March 4, 1888; *New York Tribune*, Feb. 26, 1888.

lost in 1848 when the clipper ship *Kelpie* disappeared near the southern coast of Formosa. Nye's other partner, W. W. Parkin of Shanghai, retired from the firm in 1851, and two years later he withdrew his capital from the enterprise. Then Isaac Bull was associated with Gideon under the name Bull, Nye, and Company for a few years. By late 1854 the firm was known as Nye Brothers with Gideon carrying on the business. Over the years he had experienced the thrill of gambling and winning. Success made him bolder. Then, in 1856, he overreached himself with large shipments of tea to London and was caught in a falling market. The firm of Nye Brothers was caught without cash reserves and collapsed. Two other American firms in China, Russell and Company and James Purdon and Company, acted as assignees for the obligations of their colleague. With his fortune gone, Nye moved from Canton to Macao. Here he did some commission work for other people and probably worked for Purdon and Company.⁷

In July, 1856, Nye wrote to Attorney General Cushing that his future movements were uncertain, but if Cushing knew of any employment which Nye could accept he would be glad to hear about it. With his twenty-two years in China, considerable acquaintance with English and French politics and trade, as well as twelve years service as the consul for Chile in China, Nye thought that he might be of use to the state department.⁸ But nothing came of this suggestion.

About this time the island of Formosa seemed to offer possibilities for rebuilding his fortune. The American firm of Williams, Anthon, and Company, at Canton, established a few trading stations on Formosa. The most important of these was at Ape's Hill, on the western coast of the island near the present port of Kaohsiung. The Ape's Hill establishment was in the charge of William M. Robinet, a young man with an interesting background and important connections. The son of a British father and an American mother, he had lived in the

⁷ *Ibid.*; Extract from *The Friend of China*, June 18, 1856, with letter of Nye to Cushing, July 9, 1856, *Cushing Papers*; Nye to Augustine Heard and Co., March 11, 1856; Russell & Co., and James Purdon & Co., to Augustine Heard and Co., April 10, 1856, *Heard Papers*, Baker Library, Harvard University. The Heard Papers contain several items relating to Nye's financial obligations. There are various references to Bull, Nye, and Co., and to Nye Brothers & Co., in *Senate Exec. Doc.*, 35 Cong., 2 sess., VIII, 369-370, 377-378, 387-400, 460-462, 480, 491-495, 525. Nye refers to the loss of his brother in a letter to Peter Parker, Feb. 10, 1857, *ibid.*, IX, 1203-1205. Volume IX of *Senate Doc.* is hereafter cited as *Parker Correspondence*.

⁸ Nye to Cushing, July 9, 1856, *Cushing Papers*.

United States, in South America, and in China. For a time he had served as a lieutenant in the Peruvian Navy. When Nye resigned his position as consul of Chile in China, Robinet took over those duties. A sister of Robinet's was married to a Mr. Conroy, the head of the firm of Naylor, Conroy, and Cathar of Lima, Peru. The Chilean consul at Hong Kong, T. Lambarri, was Robinet's brother-in-law. Now a naturalized American citizen, Robinet was well known to merchants in New York and California, as well as to Commodore Matthew C. Perry, U.S.N. Nye had known Robinet since his boyhood days and for many years they had had large business transactions in China. Between March and December 1855, Nye had had a third interest in the operations of the Ape's Hill station.⁹ Robinet's stake in Formosa was threatened by the outbreak of fighting between Great Britain and China over a conflict of jurisdiction in Canton. The crisis originated when Chinese authorities seized the Chinese-owned vessel *Lorcha Arrow* when she was flying an English flag and under the command of an English master. The dispute over this matter led to fighting in Canton in 1856 and the partial occupation of the city in 1857.

France also harbored a resentment against China over the killing of a French missionary. The French government sought in vain for reparation.

Through a misunderstanding, the Chinese fired on the U.S. frigate *San Jacinto* in November, 1856, while it was en route to Canton. In retaliation the Americans attacked and captured five Chinese forts along the river. A fire of mysterious origin that destroyed the foreign factories in Canton caused the British, French, and Americans to seek indemnities for their losses. There was talk of a joint effort to achieve this goal.¹⁰

To Nye it seemed as though China would be involved in both a foreign war and a revolution. The outcome might be quite disadvantageous to American interests on Formosa. The present Chinese government was unable to exercise effective jurisdiction over the island, but this would probably not be the case with a European

⁹ Nye to Cushing, March 10, 1857, *ibid.* The group secured a monopoly of the trade in camphor, but they also traded in a variety of other products including rice, sugar, peas, and beans. Nye and Williams, Anthon & Co., disposed of their interests on Formosa to Robinet's firm. See Robinet to Parker, March 2, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1212-1216.

¹⁰ Dennett, *op. cit.*, 282, 311, Tong, *op. cit.*, 184-194.

power. The war also threatened the jurisdiction of the Chinese government over its own coastal areas. If England and France were about to seize portions of China for themselves, Nye wanted to make sure that the United States would not lose any advantages.

Nye's concern about Formosa was not entirely related to commercial opportunity. The loss of his brother off the southern coast had stimulated his interest in it. There was always the possibility that his brother had reached those shores and was either killed or held captive by the primitive and ferocious inhabitants of that area. His concern over this possibility and for the fate of others wrecked off that coast in more recent years led him to bring the matter to the attention of Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1854, after the latter had opened Japan to American commerce. Perry sent the frigate *Macedonian* to Formosa to make some searches and inquiries, but the navy men found no evidence of shipwrecked mariners on the island. From Nye's point of view, it was noteworthy that they did not search the southeastern part of the island—the part most likely to be involved in cases of shipwreck. The remote possibility that his brother or others might still be alive in that portion of the island continued to interest him. If only a thorough search could be made! For some time he had pondered the possibility of taking Formosa for the United States.¹¹ Now, in the beginning of 1857, it seemed like the ideal time to move. Nye acted and tried to arouse others to do the same.

In February, 1857, he wrote to Dr. Peter Parker, the American Commissioner and Plenipotentiary to China, to call his attention to a report on the loss of the American clipper ship *High Flyer* off the coast of Formosa. Nye reminded Parker of his earlier efforts to interest the American authorities in the problem of shipwrecks off the Formosan coast. He wrote of his own recent interest in the operations of the Ape's Hill station. Reports received there indicated that the southeastern part of the island was held by "a mongrel race of great ferocity, between whom and the Chinese who inhabit only the Western side of the island there is constant hostility." To do something about the shipwreck problem Nye wanted it brought to the attention of Commodore James Armstrong, the commander of the United States Navy's East Indian Squadron. Nye assured Parker

¹¹ Nye to Parker, Feb. 10, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1203-1205; Nye to Cushing, March 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*.

that the commodore would only have "to deal with the residents of that part of the Coast where the Chinese have *never* exercised jurisdiction . . ." Furthermore, "these residents or inhabitants are simply cruel, blood-thirsty savages,—as little regardful of mercy as they are from their brutal ignorance of the power of civilized Governments. . . ." It was therefore "a duty to humanity and civilization to make an example of such of them" as the commodore could get at, after making them aware of the reason for his action.

Nye then brought Parker's attention to the heart of the question.

I would be glad if he [Commodore Armstrong] took possession of that part of the Island and held it, in the interests of humanity and commerce for the benefit, as well of China, in respect to the only portion now subject to her, as of all other Nations having intercourse with this part of the World.

Formosa's Eastern shores & southern point with the contiguous Island of Botel-Tobago Xima in the direct *route* of Commerce between China and California & Japan and between Shanghae (*sic*) & Canton, should be protected by the United States of America; and I willingly assist in its colonization, if I receive the assurance of the Government of the United States that I shall therein be recognized and protected.

I am quite aware of the willingness of some other persons to aid in this, under a similar assurance; as I am clear that *at this time* a commencement might be made without objection from any Power.¹²

Parker was already aware of the problem. His concern over developments in China had prompted him to suggest to Secretary of State William L. Marcy on December 12, 1856, that as a last resort, the French should seize Korea; the British, the Chusan Archipelago; and the United States, the island of Formosa, and hold them until a satisfactory settlement with China had been reached. Parker had not yet received his government's reaction to this proposal when he forwarded a copy of Nye's letter with his own endorsement. Since Formosa was becoming the subject of great interest to a number of Americans, and since that island deserved more consideration from the West than it had heretofore received, Parker hoped that his government would "not *shrink* from the *action* which the interests of humanity, civilization, navigation and commerce impose upon it. . . ." Of particular concern was the southeastern portion of the island

¹² Nye to Parker, Feb. 10, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1203-1205.

which was inhabited by cruel savages into whose hands Europeans and Americans were believed to have fallen.¹³

Parker wrote to Nye on February 10 that he had "long been impressed with the force of all your arguments, drawn from consideration of humanity, commerce, and navigation in relation to Formosa." Nevertheless, with regard to Nye's reference to the wreck of an American ship off the coast of that island, Parker observed that since this had taken place in 1855, the demand for an investigation by Commodore Armstrong was not so pressing as it would be if there were grounds for believing that the survivors were still alive and in captivity. He added that he was confident that the whole subject of Formosa would receive "a wise consideration," from the United States government as well as from its civil and naval officers in China, and that "all *legitimate* measures will be adopted" to promote the interests of humanity and commerce and remedy the evils of which Nye spoke. Meanwhile, if Nye had any information on Formosa and its adjacent islands, including their inhabitants, mineral and agricultural productions, and manufacturers which he could send to the legation, it would be useful to the government.¹⁴

Having expressed himself to Nye, Parker next wrote to President-elect James Buchanan. He recalled his meeting with Buchanan in London in 1855 while the latter was serving as minister to Great Britain. At that time, and during his earlier service as secretary of state, Buchanan had shown a "deep interest in China." Because of that interest Parker now sought to acquaint Buchanan with the current situation there, and to impress upon him the immediate need to increase the American naval force in Chinese waters. He told the President-elect that the United States must act in co-operation with France and Great Britain to settle the problems with China. At stake were not just the questions of social and political rights, but the "very existence of foreigners" in China.¹⁵

Impressed by the need for prompt action, Parker sent a message on February 24 to Commodore Armstrong at Hong Kong to come to Macao as soon as possible for a conference on Formosa. He said that "information of a reliable and important character" on the island had been sent to the legation. "I have unquestionable evidence that

¹³ Parker to W. L. Marcy, Dec. 12, 1856, *ibid*, 1081-1084.

¹⁴ Parker to Nye, Feb. 10, 1857, *ibid*, 1205.

¹⁵ Parker to Buchanan, Feb. 13, 1857, *ibid*, 1205-1208.

this very valuable island, rich in mineral and agricultural wealth, is attracting the serious attention of other powers," said Parker. He added: "I am not without reason to fear that if anything is to be done by the United States it must be done quickly, or the opportunity may be lost."¹⁶

The commodore promptly came to Macao and conferred with Parker. The precise proposals of Parker at this meeting are not known, but some clues may be gleaned from his memoranda. This document made reference to a meeting with Armstrong the previous November during which Parker set forth "the expediency and legitimacy, under given circumstances, of hoisting the flag of the United States on the island of Formosa, by way of reprisal for claims upon the government of China." The two agreed that such a flag raising was justifiable under the principles of international law, and as a reprisal for the claims and grievances pending against China. Formosa was a desirable island that would be valuable to the United States. But it was impracticable to seize it with the present naval force and still protect American citizens and interests at the mainland ports. This would be especially true if the Chinese chose to fight in retaliation for such a seizure.

Parker then read to Armstrong a portion of his despatch to the department of state of the previous December in which he proposed concerted action by France, Great Britain, and the United States. Armstrong's reaction was that Parker had done his duty in regard to Formosa and that if it passed into the hands of other powers it would not be the fault of the minister. After the conference the commodore returned to Hong Kong with his flagship.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Nye was apparently encouraged by Parker's reply, and promised to supply the requested information on Formosa. On March 2, Nye's co-conspirator, Robinet, in Hong Kong, sent to Parker a report that described the beginnings of American trade with the island. A few days later, he sent Parker an elaborate report on the exports from the island and the possibilities for further development. In acknowledging receipt of these materials, Parker said that they would be sent as soon as possible to the secretary of state. In the meantime, it would be useful if Robinet would furnish him with a copy of the agreement setting forth the grant of trading "privileges" on which

¹⁶ Parker to Armstrong, Feb. 24, 1857, *ibid.*, 1210.

¹⁷ Memoranda of Parker, Feb. 27, 1857, *ibid.*, 1210-1211.

the current commerce with the island was based. Robinet responded promptly by sending an extract of an agreement between his agent and the governor of Formosa.¹⁸

By this time, Nye was growing increasingly apprehensive about the passage of time. His proposals, and the supporting information by Robinet, were en route to Washington by diplomatic channels. He was undoubtedly aware of the conference between Parker and Armstrong and may possibly have guessed or been informed of the results. But whatever the state of his information, he knew that there was no time to be lost and that he could not afford to let everything depend on one move or one decision. His friend Cushing was an influential man in Washington who could greatly assist the cause. The Pierce administration went out of office on March 4, and Cushing was now free of his responsibilities as attorney general. On March 10, Nye wrote Cushing a long private letter setting forth his views on that island and asking for Cushing's advice. Since this letter is more detailed than that sent to Parker and other previously published information, the present writer believes that some long extracts may be justifiable. With regard to the interest of Robinet and himself in Formosa, Nye said that "it is nothing less than sovereign (*sic*) control of it that he and myself aspire to" but not in any sordid or selfish spirit.

We seek first, the solution of the great questions of humanity and civilization which are pending with regard to this *nominal* possession of China; and secondly, the development of the resources of this rich Island—whose magnitude few persons can comprehend: In short, we propose to *reclaim* it from Nature and from barbarism, on the East and Central and Southern portions, and from the lapsed, demoralized, rule of China on the West, which differs but little from a semi-barbarous state.

We are convinced that this is our "mission", that we are the instruments to bring into the Family of civilized Countries this neglected, this rude but priceless gem of the sea, whose condition, when we consider the proximity of Hong Kong & Manilla (*sic*), two possessions of European Powers, and the Current of Commerce and civilization constantly flowing around it can only be viewed as a remarkable anomaly.

We seek power solely to consolidate good government and to render available our own knowledge of the people of these Countries and of the Commerce and material wants of the World,—, in order that the moral

¹⁸ Robinet to Parker, March 2; Parker to Robinet, March 7; Robinet to Parker, March 10, 1857, *ibid*, 1211-1215, 1217, 1217-1218.

and material good of the people may receive its greatest practicable development. These ends we deem worthy of our ambition; and as practical men we now seek to *combine* with our own superior advantages such other means as may be available. Your advise and Counsel is one of these; and without a pretense of *personal* claim upon you, I am so confident of my correct interpretation of your devotion to the interests of our Common Country, that I do not hesitate to appeal to you *in its interest* on this occasion, for such guidance as you consider we require in undertaking our proposed great enterprise.¹⁹

Nye told Cushing something of the background of Robinet and of his extensive commercial interest in Formosa. He enclosed copies of the letters of Robinet and himself to Parker, and alluded to the loss of his brother. He added that:

In going to Formosa, therefore my first incentive is the hope to rescue my Brother or others of our Countrymen who may be in slavery there, or at least, to find some trace of him or others; and in so doing provide against a like fate to others who may be cast on shore there.²⁰

With regard to Cushing's role in the project, Nye was equally direct. He desired "such hints for guidance as will best serve our purposes, and especially conduce most to our *support* by our own Government, whilst most effectively disarming or conciliating England and France, the only Powers whose opposition we stand in dread of." Nye added that Cushing's recent position in the cabinet undoubtedly made him aware of the political positions of the three powers in China and their relationships to each other on all questions such as the one now pending so that "you will be able to intimate to me, in reply, how *far*, and in *what respects*, I can, count upon the aid of my Country's Government in a direct form, as well as how much of moral support its officers will be able to afford Mr. Robinet & myself in our Enterprise." The former attorney general would see from the material being presented that Nye and Robinet were not restricted to one course of policy. Several distinct issues could be used for the initial steps. The hints that Cushing could give them would aid them in making a choice. But the initiative should be left to Nye and Robinet. American officers might then "intervene to support our movement as of right toward American Citizens, or by way of *Reprisal*, so far as the Chinese Government may be concerned."²¹

¹⁹ Nye to Cushing, March 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

If it became necessary to abandon the plan for seizing the whole island, then an alternative plan could be implemented whereby only the eastern and southern parts would be occupied and the barbarous inhabitants subdued. Such a policy ran the risk of considerable delay before it was fully developed as well as the possibility of interference by England, France, or China. The loss of the northern and western parts of the island to a European power would deprive the United States of an area of considerable economic potential, and might lead to the loss of what had already been started. From the information on exports that was enclosed, Cushing could see that "since Mr. Robinet began business with the Island he and myself & our Associates loaded 78 vessels thence with cargoes of the value of \$400,000," as well as a large interest in buildings, vessels, and other items.²²

In addition to everything else, Nye told Cushing that he had "digested" schemes of government, emigration, foreign policy, revenue, etc., but had not yet been able to put them all into form. Also, he had installed a printing press in his home and was in the midst of printing his collection of notes on Formosa. A preliminary version of his efforts, consisting of twelve printed pages, was sent to Cushing for private circulation.²³

The reaction of Cushing to Nye's long and frank letter and enclosures is not a matter of record. He may well have been a bit surprised. If he made any effort to sound out the attitude of the Pierce or of the new Buchanan administration toward the Formosa scheme, he soon learned that Nye's cause was hopeless.²⁴

If ignorance of his government's intention gave Nye hope, it made Parker wildly optimistic. Writing to the secretary of state on March 10 (the same day that Nye wrote to Cushing), Parker again urged prompt action by the United States government. Gone was his earlier suggestion for seizing Formosa temporarily to win concessions from China. He looked forward to the time when a line of steamships would be established between California and China and Japan. At that time the deposits of coal on Formosa would be advantageous.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Secretary Marcy sent instructions to Parker on Feb. 2 and 27, 1857, stating his disapproval of Parker's proposal for military ventures or for the seizure of Chinese territory. There are no references to Nye and/or the Formosa project in Claude M. Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (New York, 1923); Sister M. Michael Catherine Hodgson, O.P., *Caleb Cushing: Attorney General of the United States, 1853-1857* (Washington, 1955); or in Ivor D. Spencer's *The Victor and the Spoils: A Life of William L. Marcy* (Providence, 1959).

He thought it possible that the previously mentioned islands would not long remain the possessions of China, and in that event the United States should control Formosa in the interests of the principle of balance of power. Parker felt that England would not object to this outcome, and he cited the long years of trouble with China as a justification for the action.²⁵

The interest of Americans in Formosa attracted the attention of the British officials in China. Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong, sent for Robinet, who was in that city, and questioned him about Formosa. He also requested Robinet to explain the state of affairs there to Sir Michael Seymour, the British admiral on the China station. Robinet restricted his communications as much as he could and avoided the admiral. But during the course of a visit to Hong Kong in February, 1857, Admiral Seymour sought out Robinet at a race track and told him that he understood from Bowring that Robinet had information to give him about Formosa. Robinet made a brief reply to the admiral and thereafter tried to stay out of his way. He was successful for more than a month. Then, on March 20, Admiral Seymour and two British naval officers called on Robinet and asked him to give them all the information he had about Formosa, such as its products and resources, and charts of its ports. Robinet replied that his trade was limited to the Ape's Hill area and showed him a chart. As for the resources of the island, Robinet said that he knew little except that he traded in rice, sugar and a few other articles. When the British asked him about the loss of any ships off the island, he replied that he knew nothing positive on that subject. During the course of the conversation, Admiral Seymour turned to one of his officers and said: "This island ought not to be allowed to exist in the hands of such a people, which cannot control even the cannibals of the eastern part, who murder our wrecked seamen." The admiral then asked Robinet if he had any objection to a British officer residing at the post on Formosa for a short time in order to gather information. To this proposal Robinet replied that he must think over the matter, whereupon the admiral asked him to keep the pending request to himself.

Robinet promptly reported the incident to Commodore Armstrong. The commodore regretted that he could do nothing at present

²⁵ Parker to the Secretary of State, No. 6, March 10, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1208-1210.

and urged Robinet to see or write to Parker. The pressure of work prevented Robinet from going to Macao, but he wrote a report of his meeting with Seymour and asked Parker whether he should take a British officer to the island. Parker was of little help. He promised to write more fully on the question raised, and in the meantime urged Robinet to use the utmost discretion and reserve in replying to any inquiries about Formosa.²⁶

Convinced that the British were up to something, Parker decided that the best defense was an offensive. On the same day he answered Robinet, he wrote to Sir John Bowring that he had reliable information that high-ranking British officers were directing their attention to Formosa. Parker protested that any seizure of Formosa was a violation of the assurances previously given by the British government that it did not contemplate the acquisition of any exclusive rights or privileges in China. If Formosa was taken from China, Parker felt that the United States had a prior claim to it based upon contracts between Americans and the Chinese authorities on the island, as well as by their settlement on it for over a year with the consent of the Chinese.²⁷

Three days later Bowring replied that Parker's information about British intentions was not reliable. He did not think it was "necessary or opportune to enter upon the question as to the priority of claims on the part of the United States should the island of Formosa be severed politically from the empire of China." He added that Parker's despatch was the first official notice he had received that the United States' flag had been hoisted for more than a year on that island, and that American citizens had entered into contracts with the authorities there. Bowring assured Parker that he saw "without jealousy or annoyance the extension of American commerce in these regions, and will cordially support your excellency in the attempts to give it strength and security of *legality*."²⁸

Meanwhile, Commodore Armstrong wrote to Parker from Hong Kong of a report he had received (presumably from Robinet or Nye) that there was reason to believe that the crew of an American ship had been imprisoned or murdered by the inhabitants of Formosa. If Parker wished to make an inquiry on the subject, Armstrong would

²⁶ Nye to Cushing, March 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*; Robinet to Parker, March 21; Parker to Robinet, March 21, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1246-1247.

²⁷ Parker to Bowring, March 21, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1247-1248.

²⁸ Bowring to Parker, March 24, 1857, *ibid.*, 1248-1249.

detail an officer from his naval squadron for the purpose "with instructions to keep his headquarters and flag at the premises of our countrymen," if Parker approved. "Such a step may be necessary to legitimate a prior American foothold in case our government should look to future reprisals and occupancy."²⁹

Parker answered Armstrong before he had received a reply from Bowring. He told the commodore about the British interest in Formosa. As such attention was "unmistakable" in its intention, Parker had felt it his duty to protest any attempt by the British to assume control. With regard to Armstrong's proposal to send an officer to Formosa, Parker fully approved. He considered the American establishment there as offering the best facilities for an investigation, and the presence of a navy officer there "may have an important bearing on the future."³⁰

A day after he wrote the above letter Parker received an answer from Bowring. Whereupon he wrote again to the commodore and quoted the Britisher's comment that he would support efforts to make legal the American trade with Formosa. As Parker saw it, Bowring's reply established "the wisdom and seasonableness" of his own inquiry. Parker asked the commodore to pass on to Robinet in confidence the news of the British reply.³¹

The American minister now faced another problem. In the despatch that disavowed British intentions in regard to Formosa, Bowring proposed to Parker that "for the settlement of the local question, Canton shall be taken and held under the joint military occupation of the forces of France, the United States and Great Britain." When he answered Bowring on March 27, Parker spoke of the importance and desirability of concurrent but independent action by the powers in China, but that he was in no position to entertain a proposal for the joint military occupation of Canton. Since the past October he had received no instructions from Washington. He had faithfully reported the developments in China but was unaware of his government's views on them.³²

Like his American colleague, Bowring was prompt in reporting developments to his government. In the case of American activity on Formosa, he could twit Parker about legality, but to his own govern-

²⁹ Armstrong to Parker, March 23, 1857, *ibid.*, 1249.

³⁰ Parker to Armstrong, March 24, 1857, *ibid.*, 1250.

³¹ Parker to Armstrong, March 25, 1857, *ibid.*, 1250-1251.

³² Parker to Bowring, March 27, 1857, *ibid.*, 1251-1252.

ment he admitted that the subjects of various nations were engaged in an irregular commerce with Formosa, and it was probably desirable to legalize such trade.³³

After he had received Parker's answer to his proposal for a joint military occupation, Bowring again wrote to his government. He reported that this time Parker's tone was quite different. And as for Formosa, Bowring said: "Pray let that subject *now rest*, and, save to our Governments be Confidential." ³⁴

Now that the Formosa problem seemed to be resolving itself in Bowring's eyes, he turned his attention to the despatches received from his government one to two months previously regarding British subjects allegedly held in captivity on Formosa. Bowring told his government that, in his judgment, there was no reason to believe such reports. The American authorities had made great but fruitless efforts to determine the fate of wrecked passengers. Rewards had been offered. He noted that in addition to the official inquiries, he had received several private letters from Great Britain and the United States asking for his help in obtaining information about the fate of persons shipwrecked off that island. But Bowring believed that if there were any survivors on the island they would have been discovered.³⁵

Time was passing and Nye, Robinet, and Parker all waited for news from Washington. Events in China increased their apprehension that American interests in the area would be compromised unless something was done soon. Parker met with the British and French diplomatic representatives at the American and French legations on April 1 and 2. Here the British minister, Sir John Bowring, proposed that the military and naval forces of the three treaty powers give mutual support to enforce their demands on the Chinese for a redress of local grievances. Parker was sympathetic, but pointed out that he was awaiting instructions from Washington. Monsieur A. de Bourboulon, the French minister plenipotentiary, said that France's minister at Washington had made inquiries of the United States government regarding the latter's policy in China. While he had no information on any replies, he felt sure that the United States would be willing to join with the other powers. As for his own govern-

³³ Bowring to Earl of Clarendon, No. 143, March 24, 1857, *F.O. 17*, Vol. 266, Public Record Office, London.

³⁴ Bowring to the Earl of Clarendon, No. 147, March 28, 1857, *ibid.*

³⁵ Bowring to the Earl of Clarendon, No. 155, March 31, 1857, *ibid.*

ment, Bourboulon said that the deadline for China's reply to France's formal demand for satisfaction was April 21. When it expired France would be willing to co-operate in the manner suggested by Bowring. Meanwhile, the interval would give Parker time to hear from his government.³⁶

Bowring hinted that if the United States did not join with the others in enforcing its claims, it might be left to fight alone. According to Bowring, the Russian government had formally proposed that the English and French join with them to secure a revision of the treaties with China. Neither the French nor the British favored this suggestion as it would put the Russians in possession of all that they had gained. Bowring told Parker that the Russians had concluded a treaty with China, and that he thought they might get possession of Chusan. He understood that a Russian plenipotentiary was now at Honolulu and en route to China.³⁷

On top of everything else Parker learned that Bowring had received several letters urging him to send a search party to Formosa to look for shipwrecked persons. The British minister added that the firm of Messrs. Dent & Company had long offered a reward of \$5000 to any Chinese who would bring in a live foreigner from Formosa, and Bowring himself was also offering large rewards.³⁸

The results of these meetings undoubtedly gave Parker some concern that a new power play was about to begin. Also, any search of Formosa by the British would greatly complicate the pending plans of Robinet and Nye. What could be done?

As the early days of April dawned, Gideon Nye's feeling of apprehension grew. Something had to be done soon. On April 10, he wrote an earnest appeal to Commodore Matthew C. Perry at Washington regarding American affairs in the Far East. The letter itself has not been located by the present writer, but some clues to its contents can be gleaned from Nye's references to it in his correspondence with Caleb Cushing. Nye intimated to Perry some of the purposes of Robinet and himself, but did not go into the particulars of the scheme as he had done with Cushing. Perry was advised that Cushing might show him the letter and papers previously sent to the ex-attorney

³⁶ Parker, "Minutes of a meeting..." April 1; Bowring, "Memoranda of agreement..." April 2; "Observations of the Minister plenipotentiary of France," April 2, 1857, *Parker Correspondence*, 1280-1285.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1281.

general. The commodore was already on record as favoring the establishment of American commercial establishments on the Bonin Islands, the Great Lew Chew Island, and on Formosa. Furthermore, Perry knew Robinet, and Nye knew that the commodore had friends and influence in Government circles. It is probable that Nye asked him to lend his support to the propositions that Cushing might discuss with him for improving the American position in the Far East.³⁹

After finishing his letter to Perry, Nye wrote again to Cushing on April 10. He said that soon after he had written to Cushing on March 10, regarding the plans of Robinet and himself for Formosa, Nye "was made aware of some important interchanges of communications between the Government Authorities of the United States and England. . . ." The nature of these exchanges was such that Robinet believed that Nye and himself should "preserve the *status quo* in respect to immediate movements. . . ." Nye did, however, send a printed copy of his incomplete "Notes Upon Formosa" in order "to prepare public opinion for the proposed subsequent movements" intimated to Cushing. Knowing the confusion that would surround the departure of an outgoing administration, Nye sent his notes in care of ex-President Pierce. Now, in early April, two complete sets of the printed notes were sent to Pierce by way of Southampton. Cushing was asked to show them "to such members of the Government (Executive Congressional) as you judge favorably disposed to such a project,—or rather, those upon whom reliance may be placed for aid, in some form, for I suppose *no* American will be unfavorably affected to the project."⁴⁰

Nye also suggested that Cushing might wish to show Commodore Matthew C. Perry the letter and papers sent to the former attorney general the previous month. He added: "I assure you that you will find in the Commodore a zealous coadjutor if you do confer with him. . . ." Furthermore, Nye said that he would not be surprised if Perry "expressed a willingness to come out here if a large squadron and ample powers were given to him to act in concert" with Parker. The commissioner's local and personal knowledge was invaluable,

³⁹ Nye to Cushing, April 10, 1857, Cushing Papers; Dennett, *op. cit.*, 270-276.

⁴⁰ Nye to Cushing, April 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*. The cover on Nye's printed notes bears the following title in his handwriting: "Notes upon Formosa[;] Historical, Religious, Political, & Statistical, including observations made during a visit and tour of the Island in 1855: with a Glance at the private inducements and public considerations for its colonization by the *United States of America*. By Gideon Nye, Jr., Macao 1857. (For private circulation)."

and if supported by an officer like Perry, Parker "would not hesitate to act promptly and efficiently in any emergency." To emphasize the danger of delay in acquiring Formosa, Nye said that Sir John Bowring and Admiral Seymour had received orders by the last mail to send steamers over to that island "*ostensibly* to search for missing English merchants & Seamen." ⁴¹

Nye continued that he was "apprehensive that our Officers will yet be *distanced* . . ." in some form or another in regard to Formosa. "We have a force far too small, and as I wrote you three or four years ago, want several Steamers of about 1,000 tons Reg^{tr} and light draft of water for Service in this station." A line of steamships giving service from California to Shanghai and Canton was also needed at once to help keep up American interests in that part of the world. Nye warned that England was making "vast strides" in the area now, and France was concentrating a large force there as well. He suggested that if England, France, and the United States took Chusan, Korea, and Formosa, respectively, the best results would follow for China and for Christendom. He urged that the United States not hesitate to pay as much as ten million dollars to facilitate the relinquishment of Formosa. This sum would allow China to pay her claims to England in the event that Chusan did not suffice. "*China* requires practical lessons," said Nye, ". . . and we can make them effectual by taking and holding territory for security of person and property in the still more precarious future, as of redress for the unsatisfactory past."

Nye told Cushing that the matter of Formosa pressed for instant solution. He begged Cushing to "hasten to communicate with the President and his Cabinet and all others of influence, impressing upon them the value in a pecuniary view and thus all but inestimable value in all respects—moral, religious, commercial . . ." of the island.

After again urging that the United States consider buying the island, Nye gave further indications of his concern for prompt action.

Excuse my rambling Style, for I am somewhat hurried, but cannot let the mail leave without begging you to arouse the President and his Cabinet to immediate action. Let Comm^{dr} Perry come out overland to complete this matter and his Steamers & Ships follow as soon as possible, detaching some from the West Coast of America Station if possible quickly.⁴²

⁴¹ Nye to Cushing, April 10, 1857, *Cushing Papers*.

⁴² *Ibid.*

While in the midst of his letter to Cushing, Nye received news that a steamer or two had left Macao, and the circumstances surrounding their departure made him think that they were bound for Formosa. This news evidently disturbed Nye and his tone of exhortation increased.

Language fails me to give expression to the importance of prompt—immediate action by our Government for the acquisition of this Island. If more time is lost in Communications between the home Govt (*sic*) ours will be distanced—in some way or other; but if Perry is sent overland and full power given H.E. Dr. Parker to take and adjust subsequently, the Value with the Chinese Gv'mt (*sic*) for its share or title to the Western portion & Northern End, the acquisition may be completed which Mr. Robinet and myself have so long devoted our thoughts and not inconsiderable exertions and means to the accomplishment of the several years. It is worth a dozen Chusans and Hong Kongs and Coreas! especially to us Americans.⁴³

With this letter Nye enclosed a list of exports from Formosa during 1856 along with his indications of other products which could be exported and mineral deposits which might be worked.⁴⁴

It would be interesting to know the precise reactions of Cushing and Pierce to Nye's letters and printed material. From other information it is known that neither man supported Nye. Within the period of a few weeks, President Pierce and Secretary Marcy received a series of disturbing reports indicating a deterioration of American relations with China. The news of the capture of Canton's barrier forts and the hostile activities of the consul at Hong Kong was followed by overtures from the French and diplomatic representatives at Washington who urged that the United States join with their countries in a co-operative military effort to secure their rights in China. These proposals came in advance of Parker's recommendations for just such a course of action. Then, on February 27, the department of state received Parker's despatch of the previous December suggesting that Formosa be seized as a "last resort."⁴⁵

Support for Parker's arguments on the need for a show of force

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* The statistics are the same as those sent by Robinet to Parker on March 2, and published in the *Parker Correspondence*, 1216, but the remarks are slightly different.

⁴⁵ Tong, *op. cit.*, 194-196; Dennett, *op. cit.*, 283.

came from Boston merchants engaged in the China trade. Many of these people were friends or acquaintances of Nye or his family, and it is probable that he wrote to some of them asking for their help. It is also interesting to note that these merchants directed their attention to Attorney General Cushing in a vain effort to win him over.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Marcy sent instructions to Parker on February 2 and 27, 1857, disapproving the commissioner's proposals for any military intervention in China and any seizure of Formosa. The first of these instructions reached Parker on April 30, and the second early in May. Marcy's reaction put Parker on the defensive, and it marked the beginning of the end of the commissioner's service in China.⁴⁷

The new administration, headed by President James Buchanan, was also not interested in encouraging annexationist activities in the Far East. In May, 1857, William B. Reed, a professor of American history at the University of Pennsylvania, was appointed to replace Parker in China. He was to go out, not as a commissioner, but as an envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. Reed's instructions left him with no doubts about American policy in regard to China and Formosa.

Reed was to maintain friendly relations and free communications with the diplomatic representatives of France, England, and Russia. He was to make known to the Chinese that the United States government considered the objects of the allied powers "just and expedient." He should see that American claims were satisfied in accordance with the existing treaty, and that American lives and property were pro-

⁴⁶ Tong, *op. cit.*, 196-197. In January, George Barstow of New York wrote to Cushing asking if he could not "open the rivers of China to American trade" and "unlock the Chinese Empire" to American commerce. If he could, it would put Cushing "on the track for the Presidency." Twice in February, Robert B. Forbes, an ex-China merchant who had retired from Russell and Company, wrote to Cushing from Boston to urge that something be done soon about getting a permanent treaty with China. In the second letter he said that he did not "like to *intrude* on the present or the coming administration, but, if I can be permitted to speak I should like to know from you *who would be likely to listen without considering what I shall say as intrusive.*" George Barstow to Cushing, Jan. 22; R. B. Forbes to Cushing, Feb. 5, 11, 1857, *Cushing Papers*. Ex-President Pierce wrote to Marcy on April 5, to say that he was glad to know from Marcy that there would be no change in the American policy toward China. "You have of course seen Mr. [William] Appleton [a Boston Congressman] who visits Washington at the request of the Merchants of Boston, who are specially interested in the China trade. He doubtless found it vain to urge their views in reference to our friend Gen^l Cushing altho' the eminent fitness of the selection [of William Reed, the new Minister of China?] w^d not be questioned by any intelligent man in the United States." Pierce to Marcy, April 5, 1857, *Marcy Papers*, Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ Tong, *op. cit.*, 208-209.

tected. At the same time, Reed was to remember that the United States was not at war with China. If his representations proved fruitless, he was to leave the next step to his government. He was to assure the Chinese authorities that the United States wanted to increase their trading opportunities, but did not desire territory or to interfere in the domestic affairs of China.⁴⁸

Secretary of State Cass and Minister Reed had clear views about American policy in regard to China, but others did not. Parker was still waiting for word from Washington. Nye and Robinet were also anxious for news.

If Parker and Nye could not get a prompt answer to their proposals from American officials, a foreigner could. The French minister at Washington raised with President Pierce the proposal that the three western powers in China take temporary possession of Korea, Chusan, and Formosa as a step toward settling their problems with China. The president replied that in his view the relations with China did not justify such an action. Furthermore, the use of the military and naval forces of the United States in such a way would undoubtedly lead to war, and war was declared by the Congress, not by the Executive. In the interest of protecting the lives and property of Americans in China, it might be expedient to increase our naval forces in that area, but the president was opposed to any aggressive action.⁴⁹

A similar inquiry was made by Lord Napier, the British minister at Washington, in the early days of the Buchanan administration. Napier asked John Appleton, the acting secretary of state, if he was familiar with Parker's proposal that Korea, Chusan, and Formosa be taken over by France, Great Britain, and the United States, respectively. Appleton replied that he knew only of the scheme in regard to Formosa and he thought this was not in keeping with the American system of government. A coaling station would be useful in connection with our trade, but not territorial acquisition. The acting secretary told Napier that the department of state's instructions to William B. Reed, Parker's successor, ruled out any seizures of Chinese territory. Nevertheless, Napier reported to his government that Appleton did not "express himself very positively or definitively."⁵⁰

Hope died hard with Nye, but each passing month brought a

⁴⁸ Dennett, *op. cit.*, 306.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵⁰ Napier to the Earl of Clarendon, No. 112, June 24, 1857, *F.O. 5/672*, Vol. 112, Public Record Office; Griffin, *op. cit.*, 306.

greater realization that nothing would be done about Formosa. The Buchanan administration, already plagued with the problems of establishing peace and order in Kansas and with the growing abolitionist and secessionist attitudes at home, had no desire for further adventures in Asia. Nye must have been disappointed by the absence of news from those on whom he relied. Six months had passed before he received a reply from Commodore Perry. This letter, dated June 25, 1857, has not been found by the present writer, but Perry was undoubtedly sympathetic to the idea that American interests in the Far East should be protected and extended. Replying to Perry on September 23, Nye said: "it seems to me lamentable that opportunities to extend *permanent protection* to our Flag in these seas should be lost by inaction." He begged Perry to exert his "earnest influence with the President," with Joseph Gales, Jr.,⁵¹ the editor of the Washington newspaper, *The National Intelligencer*, and with "others who can assist in forming a proper opinion upon the existing and rapidly growing wants of our Country here," and trade between California and China.⁵²

Nye told Perry that England's declaration that she did not intend to acquire territory in China made no difference, for England would acquire control in spite of herself. As Nye saw it, England and France were in a dilemma and were ready to acquiesce in any policy that gave security to trade and religion. As for the United States, Nye felt there was "no other mode of indemnity for the past and Security for the future but for *us* to take control of Formosa. . . ." Such a step would help to pay for the claims of England, and would check piracy, "that growing evil for our Merchant Marine and for the Chinese people."⁵³

Any remaining hopes that Nye and Robinet still had for acquiring Formosa must have been dashed soon after Minister Reed arrived in Hong Kong in November 1857. A new phase of American relations with China began.

Drawing upon his own diplomatic service and his experience as secretary of state, President Buchanan maintained a tighter control over foreign policy. Reed was not given the wide discretionary pow-

⁵¹ Joseph Gales (1786-1860). Nye met Gales in 1848 at a dinner at the Washington home of Robert C. Winthrop, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

⁵² Nye to Perry, Sept. 23, 1857, *Hawks Papers*, box 4, The Church Historical Society, Austin, Texas.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

ers that his predecessors had enjoyed. His instructions were detailed and firm. The United States desired peace with China and the maintenance of its territorial integrity. At the same time, the United States pursued a policy of "peaceful cooperation" with the European powers active in China. In keeping with this policy, the United States remained a peaceful bystander while the forces of France and Great Britain attacked and captured Canton and Tientsin between December, 1857, and May, 1858. Yet it won important diplomatic gains from these actions. The Chinese authorities signed the Treaty of Tientsin on June 18, 1858, which guaranteed all the old rights of Americans in China and gave them some important new ones. Later in June, France and Great Britain forced the Chinese to agree to new treaties with them that gave them additional privileges. As a result of these treaties the western powers enjoyed free trade and the right to travel anywhere in China. When the treaties were signed, the French and British forces withdrew. The seizure and permanent occupation of Chinese territory by the allies such as Nye envisioned failed to materialize.⁵⁴

After the failure of the annexation scheme, Robinet sold his concession on Formosa to a British firm. By 1861 two English firms were sharing the monopoly of the camphor trade. Within the next two or three years other foreign firms established trading centers on the island.⁵⁵

As for Nye, his finances gradually improved as a result of his efforts in the conventional aspects of trade. He was soon called upon to serve his government in an important but unglamorous role. The American consul at Macao was Samuel B. Rawle, a man long associated with China. Rawle was one of the merchants who signed the petition to Congress in 1839 which led to the negotiation of a commercial treaty with China. He was now over 70 years old and he needed help with the details of the consulate. In July, 1858, Rawle appointed Nye as deputy consul at Macao. Two months later Rawle died. Nye carried on in the emergency, and on October 13, Minister Reed appointed him vice consul at Macao. He served in that capacity until 1863 and claimed that he never received any compensation for his efforts. As a long-time resident of China and as a publicist of sorts, Nye was active in the affairs of the American community in

⁵⁴ Tong, *op. cit.*, 210-234, 244-254; Dennett, *op. cit.*, 311-331.

⁵⁵ Davidson, *op. cit.*, 402; Gordon, *op. cit.*, 277-289.

China until his death in 1888.⁵⁶ While the subject of Formosa dropped out of his correspondence and public writings, it is probable that to the end of his life he regretted that America did not acquire that island during the troubled times of the late 1850's.

⁵⁶ S. B. Rawle to Lewis Cass, July 2, 1858; Nye to Cass, No. 1, Sept. 3, 1858, *Despatches-Macao*, I, National Archives; Nye to Sec. of State Thomas F. Bayard, Sept. 8, 1887, *Appointment Papers*, Department of State, National Archives; *New York Times*, March 4, 1888; *New York Tribune*, Feb. 26, 1888.