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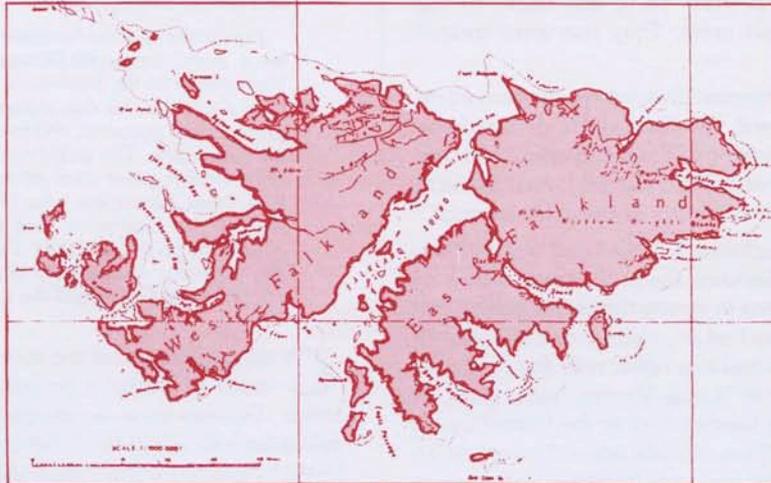
RESEARCH NOTE

Gunboat Diplomacy in the South Atlantic The United States and the Falkland Islands Crises 1824-1832

By Jordan D. Fiore

When Argentine forces attacked the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982, few Americans, excepting probably those philatelists who collect British colonial stamps, were aware of the islands' existence. Only a few historians, particularly those whose interest is in diplomatic relations, were aware that for a short time the islands played an important role in American foreign policy.

The Falkland Islands, an archipelago of more than one-hundred islands, lie about 250 miles off the coast of South America. There are two main islands, the East Falkland, about 3,000 square miles in area, and the West Falkland, about 2,300 miles in area.



In the mid-eighteenth century vessels from British North America, and especially from New England, visited the islands and used them extensively. After the American Revolution the number of ships from the United States in the Falklands increased dramatically. Captain Robert Gray, the discoverer of the Columbia River, stopped there on two of his voyages to take on water. American fishing vessels interested in pelagic fishing, sealing, and whaling made regular trips there. British ships were there in great numbers, and a few Spanish and Portuguese vessels as well.¹

For some years after achieving independence from Spain the government of Buenos Aires was beset by problems at home and did nothing about annexing the Malvinas. Finally in 1820 they commissioned an American, David Jewett of Connecticut, a colonel in their provisional army, gave him an old frigate, the *Heroína*, and ordered him to occupy the islands. Most historians agree that Jewett was mainly a pirate, and he spent several months harassing and capturing foreign ships before he reached the Malvinas. There he found ten American and six British ships, and, hopelessly outnumbered, he limited his activity to raising the flag of Buenos Aires. For several years little attention was paid to the islands by that government.

Then on the scene came Luis Vernet, a sharp businessman of French-German background, who had lived in the United States,

England, France, Germany, and Brazil, and had extensive business connections in these countries. He was given permission in 1826 to send an expedition to the islands and to make a settlement there. In the following years he asked the Buenos Aires government for the exclusive grant of the fisheries around the Falklands for the benefit of his new colony. The government approved his request on January 28, 1828, and in 1829, Vernet

was given a commission as the Military and Civil Governor with the right to residence and fortification on the islands and the duty to "cause the inhabitants of said island to observe the Laws of the Republic and shall see to the execution of the Regulations of the Fishing on all Coasts of the same."² The British *charge d'affaires* in Buenos Aires protested the appointment, for his country still claimed the islands, but the leaders in Buenos Aires disregarded his protest.

In June, 1829, armed with this proclamation, Vernet moved with his wife, much furniture, including a piano, and a number of colonists to Port Soledad on the islands where he established a home. He immediately issued a circular letter "to all masters engaged in fisheries on any part of the coast under his jurisdiction" ordering them to desist from fishing under penalty of confiscation and ordered ship masters not to shoot cattle on the East Falkland Islands.³

The American and British captains there, having become accustomed to carrying out their work without interference, ignored Vernet's letter. American whalers did experience harassment, but Vernet, probably fearing British retaliation, treated the British ships with care.

The American *charge d'affaire* was John Murray Forbes. He protested Vernet's actions, but, since there was no actual damage to American vessels, it was difficult to bring formal charges. Forbes, who had a long history of ill health and desired to return home, died on June 14, 1831.⁴ A little more than a month later,

²The decree is published in William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1880*, Volume I. *Argentina*. An English translation appears in J. D. Fiore, *Francis Baylies' Apologia: The Falkland Island Crises of 1829-1833* (Taunton: Old Colony Historical Society, 1982), 33.

³For an English translation of the circular letter see Fiore, *Francis Baylies' Apologia*, . . . 34.

⁴Charles L. Chandler, "The First Three Yankee consuls in B.A.," *The American Weekly of Buenos Aires*, (July 14, 1923), 5-7, and Watt Stewart, "The Diplomatic Service of John Murray Forbes at Buenos Aires," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 14 (May, 1938), 20.

¹There are a number of books which cover the early history of the Falkland Islands. Especially valuable are V. G. Boyson, *The Falkland Islands* (Oxford University Press, 1924) and E. M. Cawkell, *The Falkland Islands* (London, 1960). Jules Goebel has covered the question of *The Struggle for the Falkland Islands: A Study in Legal and Diplomatic History*, (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1927). The Goebel book displays a strong anti-British bias.

Gunboat Diplomacy . . .continued

Vernet made his first aggressive move against American vessels.

Late in July, Vernet seized the American Schooner *Harriet* of Stonington, Connecticut, her captain, John Davison of Stonington, and the ship's crew; on August 17, he captured the American Schooner *Breakwater*, also of Stonington, but her master, a Captain Carew, recaptured the vessel and sailed to the United States, where the captain and crew protested loudly to American authorities. Also, on Aug. 19, 1831, Vernet seized a third schooner, the *Superior* of New York, and captured the master Stephen Cogan and his crew. They too were treated shabbily.

Vernet took the *Harriet* to Buenos Aires, where she arrived on November 19. Shortly afterward, the local court declared the *Harriet* to be a legal prize. According to Francis Baylies, who was *charge d'affaires* in Buenos Aires in 1832, Vernet forced Davison and his crew to use the *Harriet* to capture seals on his account.⁵

Since Forbes, the *charge d'affaires*, had died and had not been replaced, George Slocum (or Slacum), the U. S. consul in Buenos Aires, protested Vernet's actions in strong terms. He denied that the government of Buenos Aires had any claim over the Falklands and especially that that nation had any rights over the American ships there. He demanded that "Louis Vernet, being guilty of piracy and robbery, should be handed over to the United States for judgement." The Buenos Aires officials refused to act on his protest, citing among other factors, his limited authority as a consul.

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In the United States President Andrew Jackson responded strongly to Vernet's actions. In his message to Congress on Dec. 6, 1831, he referred to Vernet's men as "a band acting, as they pretend under the authority of the government of Buenos Aires." He announced that he would send an armed vessel to provide "all lawful protection to our trade which shall be necessary," and he recommended the adoption of measures "for providing a force adequate to complete protection of our fellow-citizens fishing and trading in those seas."⁶

Six months earlier, in June 1831, Levi Woodbury, the United States Secretary of the Navy, ordered Captain Silas Duncan, master of the U. S. ship *Lexington*, to leave Norfolk, Va., with his vessel and to proceed to the coast of Brazil.⁷ Upon his arrival in Buenos Aires Duncan asked that government for redress for the *Harriet* and the *Superior*, but, pleading that the case was under adjudication, the government would not act.

⁵There is an excellent unpublished article, "The Falklands Story," by T. Bentley Duncan of the University of Chicago, which covers the incident in detail.

⁶James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, (New York 1897), III, 1116.

⁷Silas Duncan to Levi Woodbury, Secretary of the Navy, June 15, 1831, written on board the *Lexington* in Norfolk Harbor. (National Archives).

The *Lexington* sailed from Buenos Aires late in December 1831, and arrived in Berkley Sound in East Falkland on Dec. 28, 1831. The American action was brief and concise. A summary of the log of the *Lexington* explains the action:

Early in the morning of the first day of the year he stood for the port of St. Louis and came to anchor at 11:30 a.m. Just prior to anchoring, he sent a landing party of two officers and fifteen men ashore in the commandeered schooner to confer with the authorities, and at 11:45 another party, well armed, in two boats to augment the first. The three schooners were finally liberated and permitted to proceed.

Practically all of the American citizens in the islands desired to leave, and Commander Duncan agreed to give them passage to Montevideo in the *Lexington*. While they were preparing for their departure, he met a guard of twelve Mariners ashore to protect their property, and to assist them in their preparations for the voyage. The guard returned at noon the following day, but a smaller guard went ashore each day until the 5th. On the 21st those Americans who wished to leave the Island came aboard the *Lexington*, and were made as comfortable as conditions on board a man of war would permit. The following day the party, consisting of twenty men, eight women, and ten children sailed on board the *Lexington* for their native land.⁸

Captain Davison of the *Harriet*, who was on the island, took much of Vernet's property, thus recouping some of his losses. Duncan now in complete control, issued a statement calling for free use of the fishing and hunting rights. Among those carried away from the Falklands were Vernet's agent Matthew Brisbane and several other employees whom he took as prisoners to Montevideo, Uruguay. Duncan also submitted a detailed report to Washington.⁹

Naturally the government of Buenos Aires complained vehemently, but the United States government rejected Argentinian claims. Shortly afterward, President Jackson sent Francis Baylies of Massachusetts to Buenos Aires as *charge d'affaires*, with instructions to obtain reparations for losses sustained by American vessels, to secure a guarantee of free use of the islands and surrounding waters, and to justify the suppression of Vernet's establishment by Silas Duncan. If he should succeed in this mission, he was then empowered to negotiate a treaty of amity and commerce.¹⁰

Baylies spent the entire summer in Buenos Aires, but he could reach no agreement, and so he returned home in the fall of 1832.¹¹ A few months later the British moved in and took over the islands, and the United States raised no objections. Thus began a century and a half of protest which culminated with the war that broke out in the spring of 1982. Several times in the nineteenth century Argentina tried to reopen the question of Duncan's brief incursion with the United States, but that nation refused to consider any action.

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⁸The summary is contained in a typewritten manuscript, "One Hundred-Eighty Landings of United States Marines," by Captain Harry Alanson, U. S. Marine Corps, Officer in Charge. Historical Section, p. 70. The account is based largely on the log of the *Lexington*.

⁹Letter from Silas Duncan to Levi Woodbury, from the U. S. S. *Lexington*, off Montevideo, River Plate, Uruguay, February 3, 1832, in the National Archives.

¹⁰J. D. Fiore *Francis Baylies' Apologia*, 12.

¹¹Baylies wrote a detailed account of his experience in Buenos Aires to the Secretary of State. He also wrote a strong defense of his actions, but it was not published in his lifetime. The manuscript was recently discovered in the Old Colony Historical Society and published.