THE SLIDELL MISSION TO MEXICO

1845-1846

by

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INTRODUCTION

Although many of the men who played a prominent part in shaping United States history have been fully treated in biographic materials, there are numerous gaps yet to be filled. As is natural, the outstanding leaders such as Lincoln and Washington have been analyzed from every conceivable angle, and as regards Lincoln especially, an entire school has evolved devoted to a study of his life and work. Many men, however, who played lesser parts have been almost entirely neglected. One of these men is John Slidell, known primarily, if at all, as one of the participants in the "Trent Affair", which almost forced the United States into war with Great Britain. More advanced students also recognize Slidell as being involved in the negotiations with Mexico preceeding the Mexican War, and it is with this phase of his career that this narrative is concerned.

Not that John Slidell was the dominant figure in determining the United States attitude toward Mexico during the period from the middle of 1845 until the outbreak of hostilities but in fact, he was of slight importance in shaping the events that occured. Nevertheless, as he is attached completely to the mission upon which he was sent, it is necessary to understand why he was chosen by the Polk administration before the causes and results of the mission itself can be analyzed.

John Slidell was born in New York City in 1793. The Slidell family was considered well-to-do, John's father being a merchant, and John therefore lacked none of the advantages of good education. Of his

youth the additional fact is recorded that he was graduated from Columbia College in 1810, at the early age of seventeen. He served his father until 1819, and also studied law to prepare himself for a legal career. The Slidell business failed in 1819 and John left New York, taking up residence in NewOrleans. He completed his law studies, passed the bar examinations, and by 1825 his appearances before the courts were frequent and his clients were both numerous and distinguished.

In 1828, Slidell made the union of law and politics so common to America and ran for Congress on the Democratic ticket, taking the stump for Jackson as well as for himself. Jackson became president but Slidell lost the election, due primarily to the dominance of the Whig party in Louisiana. The new president, however, acknowledged his appreciation of Slidell's labors and appointed him in 1829 to be United States District Attorney at New Orleans, a position he held for one year, resigning due to his inability to care for his law practice. Not deterred by his previous defeat he again entered politics and ran for Senator in 1834 and again was defeated. He attributed his defeat to his divided interests and the next year disposed of much of his law practice and prepared himself for a life of politics. He was again defeated for the Senate in 1836, but by this time he had become the undisputed leader of his party in the state, and his defeat was by a comparatively few votes.

Slidell's first appearance upon the national scene was as a representative from Louisiana in the 28th Congress in the troubled days of

President Tyler's war with the Whigs. As a freshman member of a minority group in a Congress dominated by the Whig party, Slidell had very little opportunity to display his talents and his speeches were few and insignificant. He did, however, increase in stature within the Democratic party and played a prominent part in swinging Louisiana into line for Polk in the campaign of 1844. He was also a personal friend of James Buchanan, destined to be Secretary of State in the Polk administration, and it is due to these two factors: his work for the party and his friendship with Buchanan that resulted in his being recommended for the mission to Mexico.

From his background, it would appear that Slidell had qualities of breeding, a good education, a knowledge of the Spanish language and the Mexican mind from his work in New Orleans, and while not possessed of extraordinary abilities, gave promise of being competent to transact business with the dignity and prudence that were essential to the success of the mission.

CHAPTER I

THE MEXICAN MUDDLE

On June 4, 1845, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, former president of the Mexican Republic, sailed out of the harbor of Vera Cruz, jeered by his countrymen and forever exiled by a government fearful of his proven ability to foment disorder. With his leaving, the Mexican people looked forward to a period of, if not prosperity, at least peace, under the provisional government that had been established by General Jose Herrera, one of the leaders in the revolution that had seen Santa Anna deposed.

The Herrera administration was beset by numerous difficulties from its beginning. The national debt was enormous and the tottering economic structure of the country seemed almost beyond hope of restoration. In addition, the somewhat chauvinistic Mexican people were demanding concerted action against the United States for the annexation of Texas and for fomenting trouble in California. However, the main problem of the Herrera government was one of bare existence.

The aspect of domestic affairs was indeed calculated to dismay even the stoutest of hearts. The Herrera government possessed no organized following throughout the country. Herrera himself was more or less the accident of an hour, and was completely lacking in the qualities of personal strength and leadership which had enabled Santa Anna to retain for so long his hold on the governing classes of Mexico.

Every important man in the country was openly plotting to seize power, but as yet there seemed to be no one with sufficient courage and prestige to establish a government. The condition of the treasury went continually from bad to worse, and the ordinary revenues were not sufficient to meet expenses in time or peace, even though not a dollar of interest was paid on the foreign debt and the payment of the installments due by treaty to the United States had been suspended. The army had become completely unmanageable, partly because there was not enough money to pay, feed or clothe it, and partly because the revolutions of the past four years, which had began by bringing Santa Anna to power and had ended by deposing him, had proven that the army had sufficient power to make or unmake the government of Mexico. Both of these revolutions had been led by General Mariano Paredon y Arillaga, who had failed to receive any reward which he considered adequate for his efforts, and he now was engaged in schemes to put himself in Herrera's place....

The regulation of the unruly army and the establishment of the public credit on a firm basis, would necessarily have meant a sharp revision in tariff practices and a radical curtailing of expenses, but these were tasks that a purely provisional government such as Herrera headed could hardly be expected to carry through. The Mexican Congress, had, however, during its regular session in the forepart of 1846, taken steps to improve the financial situation. By a law of March 1, 1846, a part of the customs receipts was set aside toward paying debts accrued prior to December 2, 1844;[1] the property belonging to

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[1] Dublan, Manuel, y Lozano, Jose Maria, "Legislacion o Coleccion Completa de las Disposiciones Legislativas Expedidad desde la Independencia de la Republica", Mexico City, 1876, V, 32. Hereinafter cited as Dublan, Legislacion.

the church, or which was intended for the support of charitable and educational institutions, was to be restored, and the government was authorized to settle definitely the foreign debt.[2] But as it was forbidden to dispose of any property of the republic in payment of the public debt, the measures seemed hardly likely to prove fruitful.[3]

Measures were also taken to increase the military force by raising volunteers. The statute providing for this proclaimed:[4]

> The Mexican nation summons all her sons to the defence of national independence, threatened by the usurpation of the territory of Texas which it is attempted to accomplish by a decree of annexation, passed by the Congress and approved by the President of the United States of the North. The Government shall, therefore, put the whole force of the army in the field, pursuant to the authority conferred by existing laws, both for the preservation of public order, and the support of our institutions, and in case of necessity to act as a reserve; and under the authority of the law of December 9, 1844, it may raise bodies to be known as Defenders of Independence and the Laws.

As Congress had provided no money for putting the sons of Mexico in the field, this law served no other purpose than arousing the patriotism of the nation. It was so regarded by the government, which issued regulations for enlisting volunteers, who were to receive no pay and who could not be government employees, day-laborers, or in the enjoyment of ecclesiastical privileges. The volunteers were

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[2] Ibid., 32

[3] Ibid., 33

[4] Ibid., 34

to pay for their own uniforms, and were to be armed by the departments, who might, however, if they had no weapons or ammunition for the purpose, apply to the federal government for assistance in their regard.[5]

It is apparent that these measures were far from being sufficient to remedy the evils and ills of the nation, but President Herrera, due to this fear he had of being removed from office, might have hesitated to call a special session of Congress if he had not learned, by the Middle of June, of the proclamation issued by President Anson Jones of Texas, summoning a convention of the people of Texas for the fourth of July. It had been known in Mexico for some days before that the Texas Congress was to meet in special session on June 16, 1845, and it was now feared that the action of both the Congress and the convention might be in favor of annexation to the United States rather than of Negotiation with Mexico.[6]

President Herrera therefore issued a proclamation, summoning the Mexican Congress to meet on the first day of July, and specified as the subjects to be considered: Constitutional reforms, revision of the acts of the provisional government, and matters pending for the final action of Congress, and especially those relative to the United States and the department of Texas.[7]

Congress met accordingly, and on July 16, 1845, Luis Cuevas, the Minister of Foreign Relations, reported to the assembled representatives the failure of the plan of Capt. Charles Elliot, British charge in Texas, for the settlement by negotiation of the Texas question.

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[5] Ibid., 35

[6] Ltr. W.S. Parrott to James Buchanan, May 22, 1845; June 17, 1845, State Dept MSS.

[7] Dublan, Legislacion, V, 36

Cuevas also laid before Congress the information received from Jose Arrangoiz, the Mexican consul at NewOrleans, that the Texas Congress had approved the proposal of annexation to the United States, that the Texas convention which was to meet on July 4 would undoubtedly ratify the action of Congress, and that the American troops which had been stationed at Fort Jessup would embark at NewOrleans for Galveston, and would advance as far as the Rio Grande.[8]

The information of the Mexican consul Arrangoiz as to the future movements of American troops was correct; for the occupation of Texas by United States forces had been carefully arranged beforehand, so that there might be no delay the moment the Texas convention ratified the action of the Texas Congress in favor of annexation. Over a year before, President John Tyler had given orders for the concentration of troops on the Texan frontier. In the official army returns of November, 1844, General Zachary Taylor, whose headquarters were at Fort Jessup, near Natchitoches, Louisiana, had as many as twelve-hundred men under his command, and on the Arkansas River, under General Arbuckle, Seven hundred seventy-four more were encamped. There they remained throughout the winter of 1844-1845, but in the spring of 1845, A.J. Donelson, the American charge in Texas, was authorized to arrange for their future movements.

Donelson had been instructed by the State Department that no United States troops could be used to resist a Mexican invasion of

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[8]Rives, George L., "The United States and Mexico 1821-1848," New York, 1913, Vol II, 56. Hereinafter cited as Rives, Mexico.

Texas until after Texas had accepted the terms of annexation; but he continued earnestly to urge the importance of sending troops. "Would the United States", he asked, "stand still and see the country invaded by Mexico before the convention could ratify the American Proposals?" He believed that the Mexicans, at the instigation of Elliot, were taking steps to drive the Texans from the Rio Grande;[9] although, as a matter of fact, Elliot, who had not yet quite given up the idea of defeating the plan of annexation, was doing his level best to keep Mexico quiet, for the breaking out of hostilities would have ruined any possible chance for an agreement between Texas and Mexico.[10]

Answering Donelson's urgent requests, James Buchanan, Secretary of State during Polk's administration, wrote that if there were a unanimous or nearly unanimous vote of the Texas Congress in favor of annexation, it would be regarded as conclusive evidence that the people of Texas were anxious for the reunion of the two republics, and that the President of the United States would then feel himself bound to repel a Mexican invasion. There were, however, he added, many reasons why it was preferable for Texas herself, until after the convention had acted, to drive the intruders from her territory.[11]

The same day that Buchanan wrote to Donelson, orders were sent from the War Department to Taylor, at Fort Jessup, directing him to

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[9] Ltr, James Buchanan to Donelson, May 23, 1845; Donelson to Buchanan, June 4, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 40,66.

[10] Smith, Justin H., "The War With Mexico", New York, 1919, Vol I, 123. Hereinafter cited as Smith, Mexican War.

[11] Ltr. Buchanan to Donelson, June 15, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 42.

march the troops under his command to the Sabine River in preparation for an advance to the Rio Grande, but he was not to cross the Texas Border of the United States until he received information that the Texas convention had accepted the proposal for annexation.[12] Captain Robert F. Stockton, commander of the warship Princeton, was ordered to go with that ship and a small squadron under his command to the mouth of the Sabine, for the purpose of transporting the American troops to whatever positions Donelson and the Texas authorities should deem most expedient.[13]

It was evidently impracticable for Taylor to embark his troops at the mouth of the Sabine, and he therefore made his arrangements, late in June, 1845, to move his infantry regiments by way of the Red River to New Orleans, and to embark there, together with his artillery, for such point on the coast of Texas as Donelson might indicate. The cavalry he proposed to send overland.[14]

Donelson, in consultation with the Texas authorities, had no difficulty in reaching the conclusion that the most suitable point for Taylor's infantry to occupy would be Corpus Christi. The cavalry, he thought, should proceed to San Antonio and occupy that point, and possibly it would be advantageous to establish a third post between Corpus Christi and San Antonio.[15]

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[12]Ltr. Bancroft to Taylor, June 15, 1845; H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 81.

[13]Stockton for some time had been cruising off the Texas coast. In May, 1845 he tried to get Texans to seize Matamoros, and Donelson, in June, warned Stockton against any premature action. Ltr. Donelson to Stockton, June 22, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 86.

[14]Ltr. Taylor to the Adjutant General, June 18 and 30, 1845; July 8, 1845; H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 800-803.

[15]Ltr. Donelson to Taylor, June 28, 1845; Ibid., 804.

The end of July, 1845 found Taylor's infantry and artillery encamped at Corpus Christi, on a bluff which overlooked the bay, into which enters the Nueces River, and from that time on the United States occupied in force this post lying between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. The cavalry soon afterward completed its long march, and joined the rest of the army, and before the summer 1845 was past, more than half the regular army of the United States was in Texas. This force consisted of one regiment of dragoons, sixteen companies of artillery, and five regiments of infantry; numbering in all Thirty-five hundred and ninety-three men.[16]

It was now too late but the Mexican government seems to have passed up a golden opportunity, for as has been stated before, they had information relative to the movements of American troops and probably knew the attitude of the American government towards protection of Texas prior to Texan acceptance of the terms of annexation. Somewhat due to the conciliatory tactics of Elliot but probably due much more to the chaotic condition of Mexican political affairs, the government of Herrera was unable to do anything more than appear as an interested spectator. In addition, the news that the American troops were on the point of embarking in July, 1845 for the purpose of occupying Texas, seems to have come as a surprise to the Mexican government. However, it was quite evident, in view of its repeated declaration that the mere act of annexation would "ipso facto" amount to a declaration of war, that it would do no less on the present occasion than propose vigorous action to Congress. The Minister of Foreign

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[16] "Return of the Army of Occupation in Texas"; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 220f.

Relations, Cuevas, therefore, on July 21, 1845, proposed the following resolutions:[17]

> As soon as the government ascertains that the department of Texas has united itself to the American union, or that the troops of the latter have invaded it, it shall declare that the nation is at war with the United States of North America. This war shall be conducted for the purpose of saving the integrity of the Mexican territory within its ancient limits; recognized by the United States in the treaties from the year 1828 to 1836, and for the purpose of assuring the threatened independence of the nation.

The same day the Secretary of the Treasury proposed the adoption of a law authorizing the government to make a loan, either domestic or foreign, for such an amount as should furnish the Treasury the actual sum of fifteen million dollars. To secure the payment of this loan and the interest, the government was to assume all the income that the nation had levied for any other debt.

The authority for the loan was granted by a law passed September 15, 1845,[18] but the proposed resolution authorizing a declaration of war was not passed, either because it was considered that war had already been declared, or because Herrera's government still had high hopes of adjusting the difficulty by negotiation, a result that Cuevas at least was sincerely anxious to accomplish.

Despite the warlike talk of the ministry, the attitude of the Herrera government was met by bitter opposition. It was accused of having bungled the Texas question completely; it had allowed itself

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[17] Rives, Mexico, 59.

[18] Dublan, Legislacion, V, 36.

to be deceived by the Texas rebels; and it had consented to discuss proposals of settlement, thus wasting precious time that could have been used in carrying on a war without quarter. To all these criticisms the Government replied that any arrangements which did not call in question the good name of the republic were preferable to the hazards of a war. No war could fail to be expensive even though it were just. There were risks in all wars; the caprices of fortune must be allowed for; and, moreover, even if the administration had declined the preliminaries which the Texans presented, the only result would have been to hasten annexation, with its consequent evils, which the ministers were endeavoring, for the good of the country, to prevent.[19] This sort of argument, of course, convinced no one; but the fact remained that the administration had been willing to bargain for the independence of Texas, a thing odious to many of the governing class, and probably to a majority of the Mexican people.

Although by late summer of 1845 the hour for the fall of Herrera seemed to have come still the man to take his place had not appeared. In the elections for the presidency in 1845 there were nearly a dozen candidates-Herrera, himself among them. But stronger than any of them, with several thousand armed men at his back, was Paredes, who still continued to bide his time. As was customary, therefore, the departments under orders from the central government, obediently voted for General Herrera, who was duly elected president of the nation for the remainder of Santa Anna's term, until February 1, 1849.[20]

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[19]Smith, Mexican War, Vol I, 96.

[20]Dublan, Legislacion, V, 35.

Prior to the formal announcement of his election, and as soon as the reports from the departments showed the result, Herrera received the resignation of all the members of his cabinet; and on August 14, 1845, he appointed a new set of ministers, who were thought to be more "democratic" than their predecessors. Important to this narrative, the new Minister of Foreign Relations was Manuel de la Pena y Pena, a lawyer of high standing, a member of the Supreme Court, and Minister of Justice in Bustamente's second term in 1837. He was regarded as a moderate man, inclined to support the church. "He will be guided in his foreign policy," Buchanan was informed, "by General Pedraza, who is decidedly in favor of an amicable arrangement with the United States."[21]

The members of Herrera's new cabinet, like those of the old, were suspected by opposition leaders of being lukewarm in regard to beginning a war for the recovery of Texas, and one of the first moves of the new ministry was to protest loudly its patriotic intentions; and the official newspaper, after a long silence on the subject of war, suddenly declared that the American government must now be made to understand that, accustomed as the Mexicans were to freedom and independence, they would never forgive the unparalleled offence committed by the United States, and would avail themselves of every opportunity to inflict exemplary punishment on their perfidious neighbors.[22]

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[21] Ltr. W.S. Parrott to Buchanan, August 23, 1845; State Dept. MSS.

[22] Ibid., September 13, 1845.

Such vague threats, magnificent as they were, committed the administration to nothing, and were not very convincing to Herrera's opponents. The press, or at least a very noisy section of it, continued to denounce the government as being subject to the fatal influence of Senator Pedraza, the cause of all the difficulties that were delaying the opening of the Texas campaign.[23] This accusation was unjust, for the administration was in reality helpless. The army, as always, was a Frankenstein monster of whom every government stood in dread, and at this time was more formidable than ever, due to an attempt by the government to concentrate the troops in preparation for an advance on the Texas border. The War Department had been doing its best ever since the overthrow of Santa Anna to get together an adequate army; but the mutinous temper of the leading officers tended to make the efforts of the central authorities fruitless.

General Mariano Arista, who commanded on the Rio Grande, probably had less than three thousand men under him in the late summer and autumn of 1845; but a much larger force, between eight and ten thousand men, who were intended for Texas, were in or within easy reach of San Luis Potosi. As they had neither clothing or transportation, it was difficult to move them through a barren country. The commanding officer at San Luis Potosi was General Paredes who, as previously mentioned, was definitely hostile to the Herrera government.

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[23] Bancroft, Hubert Howe, "The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft", History of Mexico, San Francisco, 1885, Vol V, Chaps. XI, XII, XIII.

and he was little disposed to obey the orders of the War Minister. In the early fall of 1845 orders were sent Paredes directing him to move his troops forward to reinforce General Arista, orders which he said he would obey when the government supplied him with money and clothing. Repeated orders were then sent directing him to come to the capital, but these he ignored. It was rumored in the city of Mexico at this time that General Vicente Filisola, commanding another division, had been ordered to move against Paredes, and then it was announced that Filisola had been relieved of his command and ordered to turn it over to Paredes, who thus had command of the two main divisions.[24] It was now apparent that the government had decided to placate Paredes by giving him command of two divisions buy by this act the government signed its death warrant for a few months later these troops spearheaded Paredes' successful revolt against the Herrera administration.

Summarizing the preceding material, it is evident that by the time the mission of John Slidell took shape, affairs south of the Rio Grande were indeed chaotic. The government was weak; the financial structure toppling; the economic system prostrate; and over all hung the pall of the army, led by men more interested in personal gain than national glory. These facts must be remembered in considering the events that followed; events which ultimately led to the outbreak of hostilities and the eventual subjection of the Mexican nation.

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[24] Ibid.

CHAPTER II

PEACE AT OUR PRICE

The diplomatic relations of the United States with Mexico were critical at the time James K. Polk assumed the task of guiding the American nation on March, 1845. The paramount reason for this was the passing of a joint resolution by Congress calling for the annexation of Texas, an act that to Mexico was tantamount to war. In March, 1846, the Mexican Minister to the United States, Juan N. Almonte, surrendered his passports to Secretary of State Buchanan, accompanying his departure with a scathing review of the action of the United States in regard to the Texas question. Almost at the same time, Wilson Shannon, United States Minister to Mexico, demanded his passports from M.C. Rejon, Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations. Rejon immediately handed them to him and like Almonte, accompanied them with a fierce denunciation of the policies of the United States in regard to the Mexican Republic.

This final development was not the result of action taken by the Polk adminstration but was the final link in a long chain of events originating in the decade of the 1820's during the period when Mexico was going through the agonies of securing independence. Later events tend to indicate that Polk manufactured a war with Mexico considering that the actual shooting war was waged during his administration, but Polk merely inherited the controversy and it is very difficult to see how any president could have avoided war considering the attitude of the Mexican nation and American expansionist ideology.

The breakdown in normal relations between the two countries began in the 1820's and during the administration of Andrew Jackson became increasingly bitter due to the Texas revolt. In 1836 John C. Calhoun first advocated Texas annexation and for this was attacked bitterly in the Mexican press. Until 1843, however, with the publication of the famous Gilmer letter on January 10, at least the forms of diplomacy were observed but this letter, which pleaded for immediate action on the part of the United States before the influence of Great Britain should make of Texas a separate, independent nation with the abolition of slavery as well, raised a storm of protest in Mexico when its publication became known. In the United States also, particularly in New England, the letter succeeded in concentrating the minds of the people on the Texas question. The anti-slave element especially was up in arms and the so-called Report of March 3, 1843, went so far as to state that the North would not submit to a violation of the national compact but that section would prefer instead a complete "dissolution of the Union." This report was signed by John Quincy Adams and fifteen other members of Congress. To counterbalance this anti-slave sentiment in the United States came the plea of Robert J. Walker, Secretary of Treasury, on January 8, 1844 who attempted to reinforce the Monroe Doctrine with a warning that Texas in unfriendly hands, i.e., British, was too near New Orleans. Walker painted a glowing picture of Texas as a market for northern goods, a field for southern enterprise, a solution for the Negro problem, and, from its logical unity with the Mississippi Valley, a necessary safeguard to the Oregon Trail. In fact, Walker contended that annexation was a military necessity. Texas, he contended was free by the same right of

revolution which had established Mexico and failure to annex her would ultimately mean British control of Texas as well as of a new league including our southern and southwestern states. Walker cagily played up the role of Britain and played down the slavery question and thus won many to the cause of annexation, but even so the Joint Resolutions of February 27, 1845 for Texas annexation were carried only by the most slender margin possible, 27 to 25.

There was the question of the claims of American citizens against the Mexican government in addition to this heritage that confronted Polk. These claims had been presented as far back as 1830. They were primarily a result of the chaos accompanying the Mexican revolution, and also alleged attackes on American citizens in Texas, and while many of the claims were pure fabrications, enough of them were solid to warrant treaties between the United States and Mexico, in which Mexico agreed to settle them. As indicated, the financial situation in Mexico made this impossible and of the total sum of $2,026,139.68, only three installments of small amounts were paid by March, 1845.[1]

There existed, therefore, a complicated background of slavery extension, westward expansion, Anglophobia, Mexican irritation, and armed intervention which made the situation delicate indeed for Polk.

Just what then were the choices that the Administration had in resolving the conflict? Three major alternatives were presented to

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[1] Sen. Ex. Doc. 52, 30 Cong., 1 Sess; Sen. Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 33.

them: One; annex Texas, and capitalizing upon Mexico's internal situation, ignore her protests and let the matter slowly subside. Two; reopen diplomatic relations, convince Mexico that Texas was no longer hers, and if necessary offer compensation. Three; goad Mexico into declaring war on the United States and take Texas as a right of conquest. The first alternative was inadequate, for it would leave unsolved the question of claims and also preclude the UnitedStates from extending her boundaries to the Pacific. The third alternative was likewise inadequate, as the American people were unwilling to wage war on such a platform and also the prestige of the United States would be considerably lowered in view of the comparative strength of the two countries. The second alternative was more workable as around the conference table the question of claims and additional territory also could be discussed, but there was the chance that Mexico would not consider arbitration and thus the situation would remain as before. As it worked out, it was a combination of the second and third alternatives that was chosen. This is extremely important to consider as only by understanding the objectives of the Polk Administration can the mission of John Slidell be understood. It is of the utmost importance whether Slidell was really intended for the role of peacemaker or whether he was a pawn of Polk, who had already decided to stall Mexico and thus gain time for the Administration until the Oregon question had been settled with Great Britain. Polk's somewhat jaunty talk about paying huge sums of money to Mexico,[2] while it betrays a gross ignorance of the Mexican character, tends to acquit him of any malicious determina-

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[2]Reports of Committees, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., Vol IV, Rpt. 752, p. 37.

tion for war on any pretext. There is good evidence, moreover, that he desired Slidell to be received and the negotiations to progress.[3] Unfortunately, many of Polk's instructions were oral; many of his projects were not confided, even to his diary, and Slidell, although "obliged to make an exception in favor of Mrs. S",[4] was pledged to secrecy. Neither Polk nor Slidell could feel entirely sanguine, but at least Slidell entered upon the mission confident that Mexico "desired to settle amicably all the questions in dispute between us..."[5] However, critics of Polk feel justified in claiming that he was desirous of securing peace only if numerous concessions could be wrung out of Mexico, and that if peace could not be maintained, then he was resigned to conflict. Too, Polk was not too nearsighted to realize, as did many Americans, that no Mexican government could remain in power which would voluntarily surrender Texas, an issue considered by Polk already closed.[6] A leading clergyman of New England, Reverend Dr. Ellis, adequately stated this when he declared that "our possession (of Texas) under any circumstances, must be a possession secured by force."[7]

The platform upon which Polk had been elected had been dedicated to expansion, and thus, in addition to personal motivations, he

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[3]Polks Diary, I, 36, Sept. 17, 1845.

[4]Moore's Buchanan, VI, 265.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Rives, Mexican Relations, 60.

[7]Bourne, E.G., "The Slidell Mission", American Historical Review, V, 491.

was committed to party standards.[8a] It was logical to assume that if the entire question of claims could be settled peacefully, as well as the dispute over the annexation of Texas, and at the same time the territory of the United States could be materially increased; party, person, and nation would ultimately be rewarded. The stipulation in the Texas Joint Resolution, which left the adjustment of boundaries to the United States, was the wedge that would bring this about.[8] Since Mexico could not pay the claims in cash, let her pay in territory. Polk stated this himself in his message to Congress shortly after his inauguration:[9]

> I could not, for a moment, entertain the idea that the claims of our much injured and long suffering citizens...should be postponed or separated from the settlement of the boundary question.

This evidence indicates that Polk was determined to waste no time in bringing about a settlement of the disputes. Mexico had withdrawn her Minister on March 7, 1845, and international protocol demanded that she take the first steps in any renewal of diplomatic relations, but Polk was willing to waive all ceremoney.[10] As he more than once later said, when justifying his break of this precedent: "A great power can take the initiative gracefully."[10a]

[8a] One of the campaign slogans used by the Democratic party was "54-40 or Fight", referring to the Oregon boundary question.

[8] Taylor had orders to advance to the Rio Grande as a boundary. Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 70, 71.

[9] Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 2. Polk's Message.

[10] Ibid., 81.

[10a] Ibid.

Cautiousness, however, was one of his dominant characteristics, and he had no desire to have an American Minister ignored if one should be sent to the Mexican capital. To convince the Mexican authorities of our interest in restoring diplomatic relations and at the same time to ascertain whether Mexico would receive a new Minister, he determined to quietly send a confidential agent to Mexico, and on April 3, 1845, on the same ship that carried the resigned Mexican Minister and his family back to their home, this confidential agent sailed for Vera Cruz.

The man that Polk and Secretary of State Buchanan had selected for this task was William S. Parrott, an American citizen who had spent considerable time in Mexico supposedly practicing dentistry. He had an inflated claim against the Mexican government but Polk was probably not aware of this at the time of his appointment as Buchanan had been primarily responsible for making the selection.[11] He was chosen principally for his knowledge of the Spanish language but otherwise was ill-fitted for such a task. While in Mexico, he had also been engaged in various and sundry financial enterprises and his claim against the Mexican government was based on a lot of English ale that he claimed had been seized. The amount of his claim was enormous and outrageous, and one contemporary sarcastically described it as being larger than "Jonah's Gourd."[12]

The nature of Parrott's mission is indicated by his instructions of March 28, 1845, in which Secretary Buchanan stated:

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[11] Reeves, Jesse S., "American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk," Baltimore, 1907, 268, 269. Hereinafter cited as Reeves, American Diplomacy.

[12] Parrott's claim of $986,880 was reduced to $114,750 by the award. Ibid., 270

[13,14] ...Your success may mainly depend upon your perfect command of temper in all situations and under all circumstances, and upon your prudence in refraining from the least intimation that you are a government agent, unless this should become indispensible to the success of your mission. The trust confided in you is one of a delicate and important character and may involve the public peace....You will proceed without delay by the most expeditious route to the City of Mexico, and will there ascertain the temper and tone of the present Mexican government toward the United States.....The great object of your mission and that which you will keep constantly in view in all your proceedings, is to reach the President and other high officers of the Mexican government and especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and by every honorable effort to convince them that it is the true interest of their country to restore friendly relations between the two Republics. Should you clearly ascertain that they are willing to renew our diplomatic intercourse, then and not till then you are at liberty to communicate to them your official character and to state that the United States will send a Minister to Mexico as soon as they receive authentic information that he will be kindly received....Whilst you ought not to conceal that the reunion of Texas with the United States is already decreed and can never under any circumstances be abandoned, you are at liberty to state your confident belief that in regard to all unsettled questions, we are prepared to meet Mexico in a most liberal and friendly spirit....If upon your arrival and establishment in Ver Cruz you should find that the government of Mexico has commenced upon open hostilities against the United States, you will return immediately. In that unfortunate event we shall be prepared to act promptly and vigorously.

Armed with these instructions, Parrott landed at Vera Cruz and journeyed to Mexico City, where he contacted Shannon, who had not yet

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[13] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 6ff.

[14] Ltr. Buchanan to Parrott, March 28, 1845. Ibid.

left the capital city and John Black, the American consul. For some unexplainable reason, his official character became an open secret in a very short time and due to his claim against the Mexican government, he soon was "persona non grata", although he was allowed to remain after Shannon left for the United States. Probably it would have been better for Parrott to have returned immediately but he was determined to carry out his instructions to the limit, even though it meant failure of his mission. Judging from his correspondence to Buchanan, he seems to have relied primarily upon newspapers for his information. From the time of his arrival he dwelt upon the strength of British influence and the danger of British seizure of Upper California,[15] and both of these items had received full coverage by the Mexican press who were attempting to scare the Herrera government out of the presidential palace. At first Parrott was without a "letter of security" which Black unsuccessfully tried to procure for him. On May 22, 1845 Parrott reported that the weak government of Herrera, after learning of President Jones' call for a Texas convention, had summoned a special session of the Mexican Congress to meet on July 1. As was mentioned previously, it was at this session that Cuevas, Minister of Foreign Relations, On July 16, 1845, reported the failure of

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[15] Ltr. Parrott to Buchanan, May 13, 1845 (rec'd. July 2). Ibid.

the British plan for settlement by negotiation of the Texas question, the expectation that the Texan people would ratify the action of the Texas Congress on the question of annexation to the United States and the surprising news that American troops under General Taylor would advance to the Rio Grande.

It was not until early in June, 1845 that Parrott managed to achieve indirect contact with the Herrera government. He reported on July 12, 1845 that according to his "sources" no one believed that war would be declared against the United States on account of Texas. "The presumption and folly of these people are great, it is true, but hardly enough so to force the administration to adopt a measure which if persisted in might ere long endanger the national existence of their country".[16] Parrott's disposition, however, was definitely not that of a peacemaker for he stated a few weeks later on July 26 that "nothing but severe chastisement would secure our people in the future".[17]

President Herrera reorganized and reshuffled his cabinet in August 1845, attempting to secure men who were amenable to his views, and at the same time would satisfy the increasing clamor of the press for vigorous action against the United States. As Parrott had never been in close contact with the old cabinet, it was more difficult for him to achieve contact with the new cabinet. To his credit,

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[16] Ltr. Parrott to Buchanan, July 12, 1845 (rec'd. Sept. 1). Ibid.

[17] Ltr. Parrott to Buchanan, July 26, 1845 (rec'd. Aug. 25). Ibid.

however, he was persistent and was able to report on August 26 that Herrera and his new cabinet would not go to war, and that there was desire, even publicly manifested, to receive a "commissioner" from the United States. He believed that an "envoy possessing suitable qualifications for this Court might with comparative ease settle over a breakfast table the most important national question".[18] On August 29 he wrote again that the Mexican government was the mere creature of circumstance and without any fixed principles for its guide; but that, judging from his knowledge of the men in power, and from the general and freely expressed feeling of the moment, he had no doubt an envoy from the United States would be greeted with "hearty welcome". The government, he was satisfied, was not strong enough to take a decided stand; the insubordination of Paredes was much more serious than had been supposed, for he had intercepted money and clothing sent by the government for Arista on the frontier; and a

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[18] Ltr. Parrott to Buchanan, McCormac, Polk, 384.

civil, not a foreign war, had begun.[19] Parrott, however, was not basing his reports completely on rumors for despatches sent during the same period by Black and Dimond, American consul at Vera Cruz, were in essence the same.

The information that Mexico was willing to negotiate came as a perfect godsend at this time to Polk and his cabinet. Since Polk had sent Parrott to Mexico, relations with the British concerning the Oregon territory had become increasingly hostile, and a declaration of war against Mexico could not have been carried on without an active and zealous support of both houses of Congress; a support that Polk could hardly count upon. It was doubtful whether a proposal to Congress to declare war for the failure of Mexico to settle the claims of American citizens, the only "casus Belli" at this time, would have met with popular favor; and it would have, at the very least, involved long debates in which the question of slavery and all the old controversies about Texas would certainly have been reopened. These were points

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[19] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess.

that Polk, attempting to assert his authority as president in the face of a recalcitrant Congress would just as soon ignore.

The entire question of relations with Mexico was thoroughly discussed at a cabinet meeting on September 16, 1845, the discussion being based on the dispatches received from Mexico. "After much consultation", the President recorded in his diary, "it was agreed unanimously that it was expedient to reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico; but it was to be kept a profound secret that such a step was contemplated, for the reason mainly that if it was known in advance in the U.S. that a Minister had been sent to Mexico, it would, of course, be known to the British, French, and other Foreign Ministers at Washington, who might take measures to thwart or defeat the objects of the mission". One great object of the mission, as stated by Polk, would be to adjust a permanent boundary between Mexico and the United States, and that in doing this the Minister would be instructed to purchase for a pecuniary consideration Upper California and New Mexico. Polk believed that the best boundary would be "the del Norte from its mouth to the Passo, in latitude about 32 degrees North, and thence West to the Pacific Ocean, Mexico ceding to the U.S. all the country East and North of these lines". The President said that for such a boundary the amount of pecuniary consideration to be paid would be of small importance. He supposed it might be had for fifteen or twenty millions, but he was ready to pay forty millions for it[20] if it could not be had for less.

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[20] Polks Diary, I, 33-35.

In these views the Cabinet agreed with Polk unanimously.[21] At the same meeting it was decided to offer the mission to John Slidell of Louisiana, a member of Congress, a friend of Buchanan's and well qualified by reasons of his knowledge of the Spanish language and his political ability.[22] Parrott used both terms, Envoy and Commissioner in his despatches, for it is possible that this might have misled Polk as to the desire of the Mexican government. At any rate, Polk chose to regard Parrott's statement as assurance that Mexico would receive a Minister and he was determined to send an official of that character. Naturally, if Mexico received a Minister, it would mean that the Mexican government had decided to restore diplomatic relations completely on United States terms, while if a Commissioner were received, it would only mean that Mexico had agreed to arbitrate the questions that had led to the rupture of diplomatic relations originally. It would be interesting to know whether Polk was really misled by Parrott's letter or whether he deliberately determined to send a regular minister, regardless of Herrera's wishes, for the nature of the credentials given to Slidell was later given as the reason for declining to receive him.

It was the intention of Polk to send Slidell at once, but he was dissuaded from doing so by the more skeptical Buchanan, who found it hard to believe that Mexico was doing a complete about face. In September, Herrera was elected for Santa Anna's unexpired term to February 1, 1849 and again reshuffled his cabinet. His new Minister of

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[21] Ibid., 34.

[22] Ibid.

Foreign Relations was Manual Pena y Pena, a lawyer, who, according to Parrott was expected to favor an amicable arrangement with the United States, and even Buchanan was encouraged. Buchanan soon changed his mind, however, for Pena y Pena, attempting to placate the press, soon joined in the attacks against the United States, and became, outwardly at least, as much a Yankee-baiter as the most violent critics of the Americans. It wasby reason of these attacks by Pena y Pena that Buchanan persuaded Polk to wait until more authentic offers of mediation came from the Mexican government. At a second meeting of the cabinet on September 17, 1845, Polk agreed to delay sending Slidell but instructed Buchanan to notify him of his appointment, and to ask him to hold himself in readiness to start for his post on a days' notice.[23]

That same afternoon instructions were sent to Black by Buchanan, who wrote:[24]

> Information recently received at this department, both from yourself and others, renders it probable that the Mexican government may now be willing to restore the diplomatic relations between the two countries. At the time of their suspension, General Almonte was assured of the desire felt by the President to adjust amicably every cause of complaint between the governments, and to cultivate the kindest and most friendly relations between the sister republics. It was his duty to place the country in a condition successfully to resist the threatened invasion of Texas by Mexico, and this has been accomplished. He desires, however, that all existing differences should be terminated amicably by negotiation and not by the sword. He is anxious to preserve peace, although prepared for war. Actuated by these sentiments, the President has directed to instruct you in the absence of any diplomatic agent in Mexico,

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[23] Ibid., 35.

[24] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 12.

> to ascertain from the Mexican government whether they would receive an envoy from the United States, instructed with full power to adjust all the questions between the two governments. Should the answer be in the affirmative, such an envoy will be immediately despatched to Mexico.

The instructions reached the City of Mexico on October 10, and Black, having received them, lost no time in arranging a confidential interview tith Pena y Pena, who agreed to the meeting if Black would state Polk's inquiry in writing. This Black did, writing a note containing a quotation word for word from Buchanan's instructions. Wednesday evening, October 15, Black called again by appointment at the Ministers' private residence, accompanied this time by Parrott in the role of interpreter, and was handed a written reply in which the proposal of the United States was accepted in the following language:[26]

> Although the Mexican nation is deeply injured by the United States, through the acts committed by them in the department of Texas, which belongs to this nation, my government is disposed to receive the commissioner of the United States, who may come to this capital with full powers from his government to settle the present dispute in a peaceable, reasonable, and honorable manner; thus giving a new proof that, even in the midst of its injuries, and of its firm decision to exact adequate reparation for them, it does not repel with contumely the measure of reason and peace to which it is invited by its adversary.

The note then proceeded to state that the envoy to be sent should possess dignity, prudence, and moderation; and further, that the American naval force then anchored near Vera Cruz should be withdrawn. The vessels were withdrawn, at Black's suggestion, a few days later. Black thought this answer satisfactory, especially

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[26] Ltr. Pena y Pena to Black, Oct. 15, 1845, H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 16.

view of the conversation he had with Pena y Pena after the delivery of the note. Pena y Pena began by apologizing for referring to the grievances of Mexico. If the government had only itself to consider, he said, it would have ommitted these expressions, but it was bound to try and reconcile public opinion; a strong opposition was daily scrutinizing and condemning every act of the government, which tried to have as little pretext as possible for criticism; and he desired Black to make this explanation to the American government. As to the person to be sent out, he said that it was the wish of the Mexican government, and would be for the good of both countries, that a person suitable in every respect should be sent. Anyone like Poinsett, for example, against whom the government and the people of Mexico entertained a fixed prejudice, would be a great obstacle in the way of an amicable adjustment of differences.[27]

Black of course could give no assurances as to the character of the person who would be sent to Mexico, for he had not been told who had been selected.

This information from Pena y Pena was enough to cause Parrott to return to Washington and on the next day he left Mexico City surrounded by the greatest secrecy. Parrott arrived in Washington on Sunday evening, November 9, and the next morning had a long conversation with Polk. But unofficial information had preceeded Parrott, for on November 6, George Bancroft, the Secretary of the Navy, had placed in the Presidents' hands despatches from Commodore David Conner, commander of the naval squadron off Vera Cruz, containing the welcome news.

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[27]Ltr. Black to Buchanan, Oct. 17, 1845. Ibid., 13.

On November 10, Polk personally wrote to Slidell in New Orleans, directing him to go at once to Pensacola, Florida and there await instructions. Buchanan immediately undertook to prepare the necessary official documents,[28] and to rewrite Slidell's instructions, which had been prepared seven weeks previously,[29] prior to the time when Slidell accepted the appointment,[30] and on the same day the instructions and commission were given to Lieut. Lanier of the Navy for delivery to Slidell.

Parrott was appointed Secretary of Legation in Slidell's ministry.[31] This is indeed strange for what Parrott had done was no secret in Mexico. On November 3, 1845, "El Amigo del Pueblo", a Mexican newspaper, denounced the Herrera government as engaged in a "horrible treason". "This vile government", it said, "has been and is in correspondence with the usurpers. The Yankee Parrott and the American consul at Mexico are those who have agreed with the government for the loss of Texas, and this same Parrott has departed for the North to say to his government to send a commissioner to make with our government an ignominious treaty on the basis of the surrender of Texas and we know not what other part of the republic. This is as certain as is the existence of God in Heaven". The article continued to characterize Parrott as a shameless sharper and adventurer, concluding with the statement that Parrott had himself disclosed these secrets on the eve of his departure.[32]

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[28] Polks Diary, I, 91-94.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ltr. Slidell to Buchanan, Sept. 25, 1845. Moore's Buchanan, VI 264.

[31] Polks Diary, I, 91-94.

[32] Reeves, American Diplomacy, 273.

It is probable that Polk did not realize the effect Parrott had on the Mexican people, or his appointment would not have taken place. Undoubtedly Polk chose him for his acquaintance with high Mexican officials and he conceivably though he would be a valuable aid to Slidell. Unfortunately, Parrott proved to be not an aid but a hinderance.

Prior to examining Slidell's instructions, it is well to reiterate that Polk conceived of his appointment as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Mexico, while Pena y Pena in his note and Parrott make reference only to a commissioner. Parrott's previous despatches had referred to both envoy and commissioner but in his final notesonly a commissioner had been mentioned. It again raises the question as to why Polk and Buchanan insisted on sending a minister, and, as before, no definitive information is available. Perhaps Polk and Buchanan conceived that the United States would lose national self respect by sending a mere commissioner, perhaps their interpretation was justified. In either instance, it is merely another illustration of the aura of perplexity that surrounds the entire period.

The instructions given to Slidell first of all reiterated the substance of the Monroe Doctrine and insisted that the United States could not permit the establishment of European colonies in North America. He was instructed to notify Mexico that the United States had waited long and patiently for Mexico to pay the just claims of American citizens, but that "These claims must now speedily be adjusted in a satisfactory manner". "But in what manner", the instructions continued, "can this duty be performed consistently with the amicable spirit of your mission? The fact is but too well known to the world, that the Mexican government is not now in a condition to satisfy these claims by

a payment of money".[33] Fortunately, however, the provision in the joint resolution of annexation of Texas relating to the adjustment of boundaries presented a means of satisfying these claims "in perfect consistency with the interests as well as the honor of both Republics". The means was the assumption of claims by the government of the United States, and the cession of territory by Mexico as a compensation. Needless to say, the independence and annexation of Texas were to be considered as settled facts.

The United States based her claims to the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas on the act passed by the Texas Congress on December 19, 1836, and on the fact that that river had been the boundary of the Louisiana Purchase, although Buchanan himself admitted that all rights under the latter had been transferred to Spain in 1819 by the Florida treaty. He did not claim that New Mexico had belonged to Texas or had come with that republic into the possession of the United States. To "obviate the danger of future collisions", however, the American government, in exchange for New Mexico, would assume the claims of her citizens against Mexico and pay in addition five millions of dollars. In case Mexico should be unwilling to cede any lands west of the Rio Grande, then the claims would be assumed but the five millions would not be paid. If either of these objects could be attained, Slidell was then authorized to conclude a treaty with Mexico.[34]

But there was another subject of "vast importance to the United States" and that was the ownership of California. Both Great Britain, and France, Slidell was informed, had designs upon California,

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[33] Ltr. Buchanan to Slidell, Nov. 10, 1845. Sen. Doc. 52, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 71-80.

[34] Ibid.

which was now but nominally dependent on Mexico. Between Mexico and California the United States did not intend to interfere, but "it would vigorously interpose to present the latter from becoming either a British or a French colony".[35] Buchanan continued:

> Under these circumstances, it is the desire of the President that you shall use your best efforts to obtain a cession of that province from Mexico to the United States. Could you accomplish this object, you would render immense service to your country, and establish an enviable reputation for yourself. Money would be no object, when compared with the value of the acquisition....Should you, after sounding the Mexican authorities on the subject, discover a prospect of success, the President would not hesitate to give, in addition to the assumption of the just claims of our citizens on Mexico, twenty-five millions of dollars for the cession.

Buchanan stated, however, that the amount would vary with the boundary line determined upon. He believed that "twenty-five millions would be none too much for a line from the southern extremity of New Mexico to the Pacific Ocean...which would embrace Monterey within our limits". Twenty millions could be offered for a similar line so as to include the bay and harbor of San Francisco. Buchanan concluded:[36] "Of course when I speak of any point on the western boundary of New Mexico, it is understood that from the Del Norte to that point our boundary shall run according to the first offer which you have been authorized to make."

This last point, the acquisition of California, has long been the chief subject of argument in interpreting Slidell's instructions. For example, Jesse S. Reeves, in his American Diplomacy under Tyler

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

and Polk makes the assertion that:[37]

> Parrott's mission and Slidell's instructions taken together prove two things: (1) that the Mexican War was not the result of the annexation of Texas, and (2) that the reopening of diplomatic relations with Mexico was for the purpose of securing California by purchase.

That one of the motives for seeking to reopen diplomatic relations was the desire to purchase California may be granted. But precisely how Parrott's mission and Slidell's instructions prove that the acquisition of this region was the main purpose of the administration, this writer is unable to see. Other evidence indicated that Polk decided to wage war because Mexico had failed to satisfy the American claims; but instead of proving that the Mexican War was waged for "the fulfillment of Polks' designs upon California"[38], Slidell's instructions seem to indicate that Polk, at the time these instructions were drafted, was ready to release Mexico from further obligation if she would cede only a part of New Mexico. Should he find it impossible to make better terms, Slidell was specifically authorized to conclude a treaty by which the United States would assume all claims if Mexico in return would cede that part of New Mexico lying east of the Rio Grande. Had Slidell been able to conclude such a treaty, Polk would have been deprived of all means of bringing pressure to bear on Mexico, except direct military action. To be sure, Polk was eager to acquire California. Thomas Larkin, the American consul at Monterey, had been instructed to assure the Californians that should they see fit

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[37]McCormac, Polk, 391

[38]Ibid.

to separate from Mexico, they would be welcomed into the Union, and now Slidell was instructed that his mission "was one of the most delicate and important which had ever been confided to a citizen of the United States";[39] nevertheless, there was not the slightest hint that the President had any intention of resorting to force in the event that Mexico should refuse her consent to the sale. On the contrary, as noted above, Slidell was to conclude a treaty which would assume all claims even though Mexico should confine her session to territory on the east side of the Rio Grande. It would seem that, at this time, Polk's plan to acquire California was limited to purchase or to annexation after the pattern that had succeeded in Texas, and not forcible conquest.

Preliminary to Slidell's arrival in Mexico, the United States had tried to conciliate Mexico by withdrawing from the waters off Vera Cruz. The Mexican Foreign Secretary, Pena y Pena, had urged this as proof of sincerity, and the government at Washington had yielded, confident in Black's opinion that the negotiations would progress, as they had the secret sanction of the Mexican congress. The path was therefore supposedly clear when Slidell quietly departed for Mexico, his movements being known only to the State Department. He landed at Vera Cruz, on November 29, 1845 and news of his arrival was in Black's hands in Mexico City on December 3, 1845, only seven weeks from the time that Pena y Pena had expressed his willingness to receive a commissioner of the United States. However, Slidell had no sooner stepped off the boat

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[39] Sen. Doc. 52, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 71-80.

when he was urged not to disembark, for in some way the Mexican newspapers had received news of his coming and they declared that the reception of Slidell by Herrera would be an act of treason. When Black called on Pena y Pena to announce Slidell's arrival at Vera Cruz, the Minister was therefore plainly very much disturbed as the Herrera government was already tottering and Black wrote to Buchanan:[40]

> The government did not expect an envoy from the United States until January, as they were not prepared to receive him; and he desired, if possible, that he would not come to the capital, nor even disembark at this time, and that I should endeavor to prevent his doing so, as his appearance in the capital at this time might prove destructive to the government, and thus defeat the whole affair. You know the opposition are calling us traitors for entering into this arrangement with you.

Black told him that all this should have been thought of sooner, as the envoy would now be on his way to the capital; but the minister, much flurried, continued to pour out explanations and excuses.[41]

> I know there was no time set; but from the conversation which I have had with yourself, and I have heard from others, I had good reason to believe that the envoy would not have been appointed by your government, or at least, would not have started on his mission, until after the meeting of Congress; which, he said, he understood would not meet until the first of this month. He said that the government itself was well disposed, and ready to proceed in the negotiation, but that if the affair was commenced now, it would endanger its existence; that the government was preparing the thing, collecting the opinion and consent of the departments, which they expected to have finished by January, and then they would be able to proceed in the affair with more security; that the government

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[40] Ltr. Black to Buchanan, Dec. 18, 1845. H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 23.

[41] Ibid.

> was afraid that the appearance of the envoy at this time would produce a revolution against it, which might terminate in its destruction.

All this agitated talk was evidently sincere. Herrera's administration would have been only too happy to settle all difficulties with the United States if it could have been permitted to do so, but the mere knowledge that the negotiations had begun was likely to be a spark that would blow up the powder magazine upon which the administration rested. The official proceedings were, therefore, purely dilatory.

Slidell reached Mexico City on Saturday, December 6, accompanied by Parrott and Lieut. Arnold H. Gillespie, who was on his way to Monterey to deliver despatches to Larkin from Buchanan. On Monday, December 8, he wrote the usual formal note to Pena y Pena, enclosing a copy of his credentials, and asking that a date be set when he might be received by President Herrera. He received no reply. On December 15, he again wrote to Pena y Pena, who answered that the matter was under consideration, and that the question whether Slidell would be received had been referred to the Council of Government, a very unusual proceeding. This was Herrera's method of shifting responsibility for Slidell's presence, for this Council was a remarkable body, representing, in fact, wheels within wheels, the inner sovereignty of the nation. It represented the will of the Archbishop of Mexico, Manuel Pasada y Garduno[41A] and thus could be counted on to oppose Slidell's presence. On December 17, the Council's opinion was stated as follows:[42]

[41A] Polks' Diary, I, 229, demonstrates the political importance of the Archbishop.

[42] Ibid., 23-27.

> The Supreme Government is advised that the agreement which it entered into to admit a plenipotentiary of the United States with special powers to treat of the affairs of Texas, does not compel it to receive an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to reside near the government, in which character Mr. Slidell comes according to the credentials.

However, at the time, this was unknown to Slidell and on the same day the Council refused to receive him, he wrote to Buchanan and stated that he was still hopeful of being received although he was doubtful of the strength of the Herrera government.[43]

> A revolution, and that before the meeting of Congress, is a probable event, a change of ministers, also almost a certain one. Notwithstanding the desire, which I believe the present administration really entertains, to adjust all their difficulties with us, so feeble and inert is it, that I am rather inclined to the opinion that the chances of a successful negotiation would be better with one more hostile, but possessing greater energy.

This letter was received in Washington on January 13, 1846 and was discussed thoroughly in a cabinet meeting held that day. And it was on the basis of this letter that President Polk ordered General Taylor to move from Corpus Christi to the Rio Grande. At the same time Commodore Conner was ordered to take his fleet back to Vera Cruz and Slidell's conduct was expressly approved. "The course you have determined to pursue", he was told by Buchanan, "is the proper one... The President, in anticipation of the final refusal of the Mexican government to receive you, has ordered the army of Texas to the left bank of the Rio Grande. He will thus be prepared to act with vigor and authority, at the moment that Congress shall give him the signal."[43 A]

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[43] Ibid.

[43 A] Ibid., 53.

Detractors of Polk have often cited this as a prime example of his determination to coerce Mexico at every opportunity, and surely this was a golden opportunity, for it would have been impossible for Mexico to do more than protest the move of Taylor's troops due to the impending revolution. However, Polk may have reasoned that with the Herrera government in control, negotiations would proceed more rapidly and thus ordered the troops moved, hoping to force General Paredes, who headed the opposition to Herrera, to abandon his planned coup. This latter suggestion seems more logical, for in view of Mexican conditions, there would have been nothing to prevent Polk from ordering the troops to cross the Rio Grande instead of stopping at its banks.

Pena y Pena wrote to Slidell on December 20, to inform him officially that he could not be received. The refusal was based, per the decision of the Council of Government, on the ground that Slidell had been commissioned a minister instead of a commissioner and Pena y Pena suggested he get new credentials.[44] Pena y Pena also stated that Slidell's appointment was incomplete because he had not been confirmed by the United States Senate. Slidell answered Pena y Pena on the 23rd of December, and in his note stressed the point that the United States had proposed an "envoy to adjust all the questions in dispute between the two powers", and that Mexico had agreed to receive a "commissioner with full power to settle those disputes in a peaceful, reasonable, and honorable manner". He concluded by saying that the object of his mission had been "by the removal of all mutual causes of complaint for the past, and of distrust for the future, to revive, confirm, and if

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[44] Ibid., 37.

possible to strengthen these sympathies."[44A] Slidell might as well have saved the paper, however, for the Herrera government had made its decision; he would not be received.

Whether the Mexican government was justified in its argument is a moot question, for I believe it has been aptly demonstrated that, in view of public hostility toward the United States, they had no other alternative. Undoubtedly, if Slidell's credentials were in order, some other ground on which to refuse him would have been discovered. The entire issue is, therefore, a question of Polk's motives in accrediting Slidell as a full fledged minister. In preceeding pages I have attempted to hastily interpret these motives and the reader may have concluded that I was somewhat whitewashing Polks actions. This is definitely not the case. While I am not convinced that polk deliberately sent a minister knowing that Mexico would not receive him, I am convinced that Polk was guilty of at least poor judgment if not a great tactical blunder. The evidence supports this. According to a statement dated August 8, 1889, made long afterwards by Benjamin F. Green,[45] Secretary of Legation at Mexico in 1844, President Polk had been informed that the Herrera government doubted its ability to remain in power if it should receive an ordinary minister as though nothing had happened. However, some allowance must be made for the fact that Greene made the statement many years after the event and that he was the son of Duff Greene, an uncompromising opponent of Polk. For more convincing as evidence is the letter of Pena y Pena to Black, which agreed to receive a commissioner

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[44A] Sen. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 35.

[45] Tyler, Lyon G., "Letters and Times of the Tylers", Richmond, 1884-1896, III, 176.

and said nothing about a minister, and the statement of Joel Poinsett, who was Minister to Mexico from 1825-1829. In a letter to ex-President Van Buren, dated May 26, 1846 Poinsett said:[46]

> I took the liberty of remonstrating to one in the confidence of the government that the Mexican government would not and dared not re-receive our Minister...But could and would receive a Commissioner and that any movement of our troops from the Nueces would lead to hostilities.

Despite Slidell's rejection, he did not believe it was final for Charles Bankhead, the British Minister, was requested by Pena y Pena to state to Slidell "That the government had in its present critical condition, feared to compromise themselves by receiving him, that had they been free to act, they would have pursued a different course, and that, should they succeed in putting down the movements of Paredes, they would take the necessary steps to bring about a renewal of relations."[47] This information was delivered to him on December 29, and fortunately for his peace of mind it came when it did, for on December 27, he wrote a very gloomy letter to Buchanan, dwelling on the "unparalleled bad faith" of the Mexican government, "its gross falsification of the correspondence which led to my appointment, and the utter futility of the miserable sophistry by which it attempts to justify its conduct". His own course, he feared, might be considered too forbearing, but he was unwilling to take steps which would preclude subsequent attempts at negotiation and render war inevitable.[48] He

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[46] Ltr. Poinsett to Van Buren, May 26, 1846. McCormac, Polk, 393.

[47] Ltr. Slidell to Buchanan, Dec. 29, 1845. Reeves, American Diplomacy, 283.

[48] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 50 ff.

summarized the situation with a severe criticism of the Mexican people:

> ...If all the parties be analyzed, they will be found to be mere personal factions, whose members, with very rare exceptions, have no other object in view than the elevation of some chief who will look with complacency upon any corruption or abuse of power that may be committed by his adherents. As for the people, in the proper sense of the term, it does not exist in Mexico, for the masses are totally indifferent to all the revolutions that are going on and submit with the most stupid indifference to any masters that may be imposed upon them. [49]

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[49] Ibid.

CHAPTER III

FAILURE OF A MISSION

As previously mentioned, it was stated by Pena y Pena to Slidell, via Bankhead, that as soon as the Paredes insurrection had been dealt with, the Herrera government would reconsider the question of Slidell's reception. The Herrera government, however, never had the opportunity to reconsider anything, for on December 31, 1845, Paredes' adherents succeeded in deposing Herrera and on January 2, 1846, General Paredes became the new president, ad interim, of Mexico.

The revolt of Paredes began in the customary Mexican manner. A meeting was called on December 14, 1845 by the General of all the principal officers in the army. At this meeting, General Romero, commanding the Department of San Luis Potosi, was directed by Paredes to explain that certain officers felt that the Herrera administration had lost public confidence because it had tried to avoid a war with the United States; because it had attempted to re-establish the civil militia, which was an insult to the regular army; because it had agreed to receive a commissioner with whom to treat in regard to the loss of national integrity; and because it had provoked anarchy by encouraging factions. A "plan" or platform was at once pushed through by the adherents of Paredes, and agreed to by the outnumbered opposition, which proclaimed, that inasmuch as the plenipotentiary of the United States had entered Mexican territory and was inhabiting the capital of the Republic, and as he had come by consent of the Cabinet to buy Mexican

independende and nationality, the Army would support the protest of the nation against all subsequent acts of the present administration, which from this date would be held null and void. The Congress and the executive authorities, the Plan declared, were to cease at once from carrying on their functions, the army would occupy the capital, and an extraordinary constituent Congress, without any restrictions upon its august functions, would be summoned to establish a new constitution. As soon as it was installed, the constituent Congress was to organize an executive power, and authority was to exist by its sovereign function. Departmental authorities were to continue in power until others might be substituted for them by the national body. The army named as its chief in this movement, as expected, General Paredes, who was invited to adhere to these proposals. The officers also stated solemnly that they had no thought of the personal elevation of the chief selected.[1] The next day Paredes accepted the Plan in a formal manifesto, protesting his disinterest and want of ambition, and promising to summon the new Congress as soon as the Army occupied the capital.

The government of General Herrera, of course, immedately denounced Paredes for his lack of patriotism in fomenting disorder at a

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[1]Dublan, Legislacion, V, 97-100; Ramirez, Jose, "Mexico durante su Guerra con los Estados Unidos", Mexico City, 1905, Vol III. Zamacois, niceto, "Historia de Mejico desde sus Tiempos mas remotos hasta nuestros Dias", Mexico City, 1876, Vol. XVII.

critical time such as this, referring to him and his followers as "shameful cowards" and contrasted his acts with his loud professions of love for his country. The official government newspaper, "El Dairio" compared him to Santa Anna and stated: "...the nation owes him little and has sufficiently paid him by its confidence".[2]

All the government authorities in the capital and many of the authorities outside the city protested against the "Plan of San Luis" as it came to be known. Congress on December 23 issued a manifesto that denounced the soldiers who had betrayed the organized government and proclaimed the establishment of a distatorship. The manifesto also urged all the sons of their country to be ready to support the government, and stated that any troops which sided with Paredes would be degraded.[3] President Herrera on December 22 also issued a proclamation of his own in which he denounced Paredes personally. He further announced that he relied confidently upon the aid of the people and the special protection of divine providence. Nevertheless, on December 25, he declared the capital to be in a state of seige.[4]

At twenty minutes before eleven o'clock on the night of December 30, the entire garrison of Mexico City, with the exception of the troops stationed at the National Palace, mutinied at a given signal from the citadel. The next morning, even the troops guarding Herrera announced their adherence to Paredes and before noon, Herrera quietly

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[2]Dublan, Legislacion, V, 106.

[3]Dublan, Legislacion, V. 96.

[4]Ibid.

left the Palace as a private individual. That same afternoon, General Valencia, President of the Council, and commander of the troops in the capital, went to the Palace accompanied by his staff and took possession of what cash was left in the treasury. He also ordered the church bells to be rung that evening as a symbol of the new regime, and as a means of notifying the people. The revolution was thus fully completed without the firing of a shot.[5]

The Constitutional Laws passed in December, 1836, stated that President of the Council was to succeed temporarily to the presidency of the republic in case the president no longer held office, and thus that same evening, General Valencia occupied the Palace. However, Paredes who had twice led revolutions only to see another man become president, was fully determined that it would not happen again and as soon as he neared the capital on January 1, 1847 he sent agents to Valencia to tell him that he would not hear of his becoming president, even temporarily. If the garrison had been willing to support him, Valencia might have resisted but the troops in the capital were solidly behind Paredes, so all Valencia could do was leave the Palace. He sent Paredes an assurance of his submission, adding that if his presence was an obstacle, he would voluntarily exile himself from Mexico for two years. Paredes merely replied that he did not consider Valencia or anyone else to be an obstacle. "I am resolved", he said, "to make my ideas triumph or to perish in the attempt, and as I am determined

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[5]Smith, Mexican War, I, 98-100.

not to prosecute anyone on account of their previous acts, so I will shoot anybody who starts out to oppose me, whether he is an Archbishop, a general, a magistrate, or anybody else", and as everyone at that time fully believe Paredes capable of doing what he said, he was at once hailed as President of the Republic.[6]

The Paredes revolt was typical of Mexican revolutions. A small proportion of the population, comprising those with political influence, and the officers of the Army, had become dissatisfied with the present government. Inasmuch as no one in Mexico ever had the slightest confidence in elections, which invariably resulted in the election of government candidates, they had no hope of showing their dissatisfaction by any means short of a revolution. The government in office naturally wished to stay there, and the financial oligarchy were unwilling to take sides until they knew which side was likely to be successful. The revolution of 1845 was, therefore, a political movement merely intended to exchange one set of government officials for another. As usual, until the military mutiny, which always started a revolution, showed marked signs of becoming a success, the members of Congress, the government officers, and the people of property loudly proclaimed their adherence to the government, but the moment the revolution showed that it was going to succeed, all the people who had professed themselves ardent supporters of the administration quickly hastened to attach themselves to the victorious mutineers and the government fell.

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[6] Zamacois, Niceto, "Historia de Mejico desde sus Tiempos mas remotos hasta nuestros Dias", Mexico City, 1876, Vol. XVII, p. 553.

Paredes made his public entry into Mexico City on January 2, 1846 and immediately issued a decree declaring that the legislative and executive powers had ceased, and directing that representatives of the various departments should be named for the purpose of appointing a president ad interim. The president so appointed was to execute the laws then in existence, but he might go beyond them if necessary to prepare the country for war, and he was to summon a new Congress to meet within four months at the capital.[7] In other words, Paredes was a dictator until the meeting of Congress, for on the next day he appointed the members of the commission who were to appoint the president and as all of them were fortunately in the capital, they very quickly and unanimously elected Paredes. On January 7, 1846 he appointed his cabinet, and of significance to this narrative, chose J.M. de Castillo y Lanzas as Minister of Foreign Relations. Castillo had at one time been Secretary of Legation and Charge d'Affairs in Washington during the administration of Andrew Jackson, and was characterized as being intelligent and well meaning but lacking sufficient energy to take a decided stand in support of his opinions.[8]

What had Slidell been doing in the meantime? When he was notified on December 17, 1845 that the Herrera government would not receive him, his first impulse was to demand his passports and return home, but realizing that there was still a possibility that the mission might prove to be a success, his decision was to retire to Jalapa, a pleasant mountain

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[7] Dublan, Legislacion, V, 100.

[8] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 50.

village located between Mexico City and Vera Cruz, and there await further instructions from Buchanan and at the same time keep close watch on developments in Mexico. He did not leave the capital, however, for three weeks, ostensibly by his failure to procure an escort, the roads being notoriously unsafe. His probable reason for staying, though, was to witness the reaction of the Mexicans to the annual message of President Polk, as the Mexican newspapers were rejoicing over the threatened conflict between the United States and Great Britain concerning Oregon. When the message was received in the capital, the rejoicing became widespread, for Polk seemed willing to wage war, thereby diverting the attention of the United States from the Mexican front. Slidell realized immediately there was no use in contacting the new Paredes government, and he wrote to Buchanan that there was no chance of a change on the part of Mexico as long as the United States and Great Britain were disputing.[9]

Accordingly, he withdrew to Jalapa, arriving there on January 20, and from this vantage point was able to render good service to his government as an observer of Mexican affairs and his despatches to Buchanan were frequent and detailed. From here he noted a situation which was later to place within our grasp all northern and eastern Mexico, particularly Yucatan.[10]

During the month of February, 1848 Slidell's hopes that he would be received took a decided turn upward. The news of his treatment

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[9] Ibid., 56.

[10] Prevented by the mission of Nicholas P. Trist.

at the hands of the Herrera government had caused the return of the Gulf Squadron to Mexican waters and this, combined with the advance of General Taylor to the Rio Grande, seemed to Slidell to be signs that Mexico would have to treat or else. Internal conditions also seemed to be grouping themselves in his favor. The concensus of opinion seemed to be that Paredes had definite totalitarian tendencies and his downfall was assured. In such a state of anarchy, it was only natural that Paredes should assume great powers but the people were opposed to such a course, and Slidell began to anticipate that they would welcome intervention by the United States as a deliverance from the prospective tyranny, a natural return to friendship found useful in the original war for Mexican independence. Best of all, the fiscal situation had reached an acute stage. Mazatlan, the second port of the country, declared itself against Paredes early in February, and had therefore cut off a great revenue indispensable to a leader who would retain the loyalty of his troops or who would avert European intervention on the pretext of long overdue interest on bonds and other loans.[11] Altogether, Slidell regarded the situation as auspicious. "My note," he wrote Buchanan on March 1,[12] "will be presented at the most propitious time that could have been selected. All attempts to effect a loan have completely failed". That his hopefulness was shared by others is evident from Commodore Conner's letter to General Taylor, written from his flagship

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[11] Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 53.

[12] Ibid.

off Vera Cruz on March 8, 1846:[13]

> ...Mr. Slidell is still at Jalapa; and though unlikely as it may appear, I have it from very good authority that it is probable he will yet be received by the Mexican government...

Finally, late in February, Slidell heard from Buchanan. The Secretary of State approved his actions wholeheartedly and gave him further directions. He was directed to apply for recognition to the Paredes government, for President Polk was still desirous of preserving peace as both inclination and policy dictated this course. Buchanan stated that should the Mexican government, however, finally refuse to receive him, the United States would consider that the cup of forbearance had been exhausted, and nothing would remain for the Polk government to do but to take the redress of injuries to the United States citizens and the insults to the American government into its own hands.[14]

Slidell was, therefore, to await a reasonable time for Mexico to decide on his reception, unless he discovered that she was inclined to trifle with the United States government. The length of time and the evidence of trifling were left to Slidell's discretion to determine.

Several things are clear by these instructions. It is evident that Polk now regarded a refusal to receive Slidell and a failure to pay the claims immediately as ample grounds for taking redress into our own hands, i.e., for making war on Mexico. No mention was made of protection of Texas from threatened invasion. To make still more clear

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[13] Ibid., 106.

[14] Moore, Buchanan, VI, 363-365.

Polk's intent Slidell was told in another paragraph that in case Mexico should finally decline to receive him, he was to demand his passports and return home. "It will then become the duty of the President to submit the whole case to Congress and call upon the nation to assert its just rights and avenge its injured honor". Buchanan also stated that additional naval forces had been sent to the Mexican coast and "should war become inevitable, the President will be prepared to conduct it with vigor".[15]

This was the parting of the ways in a sense. The outlook for those in Washington did not appear so hopeful, and in an attempt to estimate the forces at work, it is indeed difficult to determine just how sincere was the desire of the Polk administration after Herrera's rebuff to treat with Mexico, at any rate, to treat on the original basis on which Slidell had been dispatched. One feels that the mission from December 1845 until Slidell's return existed only to preserve appearances. The American people had to recognize that they were martyrs in a sense to the delay and folly of an impotent government. This rather farcical program demanded that we maintain a definite anxiety to treat. Slidell's mission had now acquired a new usefullness, a by product, so to speak, of its original purpose, a significance which Buchanan's final instructions, written before Slidell's final refusal, clearly recognized:[16] "...in the present distracted condition of Mexico, it is of importance that we should have an able and discreet agent in that country

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 56.

to watch the progress of events". The excuse for remaining was plausible enough, since governments in Mexico were short-lived, and what one refused, another might grant. To rest content with the refusal of one would even be dangerous as it would be difficult to satisfy the American people that all had been done which ought to have been done to avoid the necessity of resorting to hostilities. And Congress might refuse to support the active measures which Polk proposed to institute upon Slidell's final return.[17]

To confuse this new phase of the mission with its original intention is definitely not historical; for even now there lingered traces of good will toward the Mexican republic--a republic which Buchanan frequently described as "distracted". Moore's edition of the works of Buchanan includes a letter, submitted to Congress, in which Buchanan directed Slidell to inform Paredes "in some discreet manner that the United States was both able and willing to relieve his administration from pecuniary embarrassment".[18] The only return to be exacted was justice for the claims and a settlement of the boundary. There is reason to believe that this attempted bribe was a genuine move in a last effort to secure peacefully what we seemed determined to gain at all costs.

Evidence also is present that demonstrated another reason for Polk's desire to have Slidell continue to press his mission upon the Mexican government. Until the dispute was settled with Great Britain

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[17] Ibid., 55.

[18] Moore, Buchanan, VI, 403.

over the Oregon question Polk did not want to be forced to a situation demanding immediate war with Mexico. This is evident in a letter from Buchanan to Slidell, written early in March, 1846 in which he stated:[19]

> ...The Oregon question is rapidly approaching a crisis. By the steam packet which will leave Liverpool on the 4th of April, if not by that which left on the 4th instant, the President expects information which will be decisive on the subject...Your return to the United States before the answer to our proposal is known, would produce considerable alarm in the public mind and might possibly exercise an injurious influence on our relations with Great Britain...

The new drift of events was clear to Slidell, and in it seemed to have found compensations for the failure of his mission as originally evolved, for at no time in the future was he bitter about his seemingly fruitless stay of four months in Mexico. He agreed with Buchanan that he must remain at his post so as to "place us in the strongest moral position before our own people and the world by exhausting every possible means of conciliation".[20] Thus, in accordance with Buchanan's instructions of February 17, Slidell wrote to Castillo y Lanzas, referring to his correspondence with Pena y Pena, and stating that his course had been approved by the President of the United States who, in view of the governmental change in Mexico, had directed that one more effort should be made to preserve peace. He, therefore, submitted again the question of his being received as an envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary.[21]

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[19] Reeves, American Diplomacy, 285.

[20] Ex. Doc. 196, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 57.

[21] H.R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 63.

While Slidell was seeking an audience with General Paredes in Mexico an agent of the exiled Santa Anna, who was chafing at the bit in Cuba, appeared in Washington and obtained an interview with President Polk. This agent was Colonel Alexander J. Atocha, a Spaniard by birth but a naturalized citizen of the United States. As a friend of Santa Anna, he had been arrested when that rulers' government had been overthrown, but on proving his American citizenship was released and banished. As will be remembered, he had called on Polk previously in June, 1845 for the purpose of urging the United States government to press certain claims which he held against Mexico. He had now returned from a visit to Santa Anna, prepared to lay before Polk the views of the ex-dictator. In his diary dated February 13, 1846 Polk stated that Atocha had called on him that day, and the substance of the conversation was recorded. Atocha claimed that Santa Anna was in constant communication with the Mexican leaders and he said that Santa Anna approved the Paredes revolution and was in favor of a treaty with the United States. In adjusting the boundary dispute Atocha stated that Santa Anna stated that the Del Norte should be the western Texas line, and the Colorado of the West down through the Bay of San Francisco to the sea should be the Mexican line on the North, and that Mexico should cede all East and North of these natural boundaries to the United States for a pecuniary consideration, and he mentioned thirty million dollars as the sum. This amount, Santa Anna believed, would pay the most pressing debts of Mexico and support the army until conditions improved. Colonel Atocha also stated that Santa Anna was surprised that the United States naval

force had been withdrawn from Vera Cruz in the fall of 1845 and that General Taylor's army had been kept at Corpus Christi instead of being stationed on the Del Norte. Atocha closed by saying that he considered the conversation confidential and that he had more to communicate.[22]

Santa Anna's motive in sending Atocha is clear. He must have hoped to repeat his political successes at the time of the Spanish invasion of 1829 and the French attack on Vera Cruz in 1838, and he must have believed that in case a genuine threat of war were made by the United States, the people of Mexico would inevitably turn to the hero of Tampico and Vera Cruz. But whether he would, or could, in that event, make peace on the terms he had caused to be suggested to Polk was another matter, about which Santa Anna at that time probably felt little concern.

President Polk was evidently very much interested in the views expressed by Atocha and at a regular cabinet meeting held on the following day, February 14, he related to the members the bulk of the conversation. The idea of sending a confidential agent to confer with Santa Anna was mentioned. Secretary Walker was inclined to favor such a move but Buchanan was opposed to it. Polk stated that although he did not propose to send such an agent, if one should be sent, C.P. Van Ness, former minister to Spain, would be the best man who could be selected.[23] Atocha again called to see the President on February 16th. After discussing relations with Mexico for nearly an hour the conversation was

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[22] Polk, Diary, I, 222-225.

[23] Ibid.

adjourned until that afternoon when it was continued for more than an hour. Atocha repeated what he had said on February 13. Polk told him that Mexico must satisfy the claims of American citizens and that if that government had any suggestion to make, the United States would consider it after it had been made. Atocha then pointed out that no government of Mexico would dare to make such an offer and that it "must appear to be forced to agree to such a proposition". It was the opinion of Atocha himself and of Santa Anna that the United States army should be marched at once from Corpus Christi to the Del Norte and that Slidell should leave Jalapa and go on board one of the warships at Vera Cruz. From here he should demand the payment of claims and when the Mexican government realized the precarious position it was in, it would agree to the suggested boundary immediately. Santa Anna's emissary stated that Paredes, Almonte, and Santa Anna were all willing for such an arrangement, but that they dare not make it until it was made apparent to the Archbishop of Mexico and the people generally that it was necessary to save the country from a war with the United States. Atocha said that Mexico owed a half million dollars to the Archbishop and that he could be reconciled by assurance that he would be paid as soon as Mexico had obtained the money from the United States.[24] He reported Santa Anna as having said that he could be in Mexico in April or May of 1848 and could probably go into power again but that he and Paredes must have money to

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[24] Ibid.

sustain themselves. With half a million in hand, they could make the treaty and retain control until the balance had been paid. Arista, he concluded, was very friendly to the United States and in favor of ceding the northern departments of Mexico. On leaving, Atocha hinted that he was returning to Santa Anna and seemed desirous of getting Polk's views, but the President remained silent. Polk thought him to be a man of talents, but one who could not be trusted: "I therefore heard all he said but communicated nothing to him."[25] We may well believe the President's statement that he listened attentively but offered no hint of his own intentions, for this habit was one of his best known characteristics. Although he believed Atocha to be a person who could not be relied upon, events which followed make it evident that he looked with favor upon some of the suggestions that had been offered, as we can note in the new instruments of instructions given to Slidell and the request made to Congress for money to be used in conducting negotiations.

Polk's first impulse was to follow Atocha's suggestions very closely as manifested by the discussion which took place in the cabinet meeting on the following day, February 17, 1846. In giving an account of this meeting Polk says in his diary that after relating the conversation held with Atocha he expressed the opinion that it would be necessary to take strong measures toward Mexico before our difficulties with that government could be settled. He thus proposed that in addition to his first instructions, Slidell should be further instructed to de-

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25 Ibid., 228-230.

mand an early decision from the Mexican government as to his reception; and, if they received him, whether they would without unnecessary delay pay the amount due to American claimants; and that if the Mexican government refused to do one or both, that he should immediately leave the country, but instead of returning immediately to the United States as he had been instructed to do, he should go on board one of the United States vessels at Vera Cruz and there remain until he had further instructions from his government.

Polk concluded by stating that in that event he would send a strong message to Congress calling on that body to authorize him to cause another demand to be made by Slidell from on board the ship and if it was refused, then he would ask Congress to confer authority on him to take redress into our hands by more agressive measures.[26]

Secretaries Walker, Marcy and Bancroft favored the plan suggested by the President. Johnson was inclined to hold a different opinion but was willing to acquiesce. The main disagreement came from Buchanan who was peeved, so Polk thought, because of certain appointments Polk had made. However, it was finally decided that Buchanan would prepare new instructions for Slidell, in accordance with Polk's wishes. Buchanan drew up the instructions and set them off to Polk with a note attached stating he desired corrections and also stating his reasons for not wanting to issue the instructions. Polk considered the conduct of the Secretary reprehensible but on account of his hostility decided to postpone instructing Slidell for the present.[27]

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[26] Ibid., 233-236, 238.

[27] Ibid.

Despatches arrived from Slidell on March 9, 1846 and were discussed in cabinet meeting the next day. Again it was decided to issue new instructions for the emissary and Buchanan was again directed to draft them. While the new instructions, which bore the date of March 12, reflected in some degree the suggestions offered by Atocha, their tone was somewhat less warlike than the declaration made by the President to the cabinet on February 17. The change in tone was probably due to the opposition of Buchanan. Slidell was directed to make a formal demand to be received by the Paredes government. Apparently the administration had slight hopes that Paredes would comply but Buchanan pointed out that the demand should be made in order to satisfy the American people that everything had been done to avoid the necessity of going to war. "On your return to the United States, energetic measures against Mexico would at once be recommended by the President, and these might fail to obtain the support of Congress, if it could be asserted that the existing government had not refused to receive our Minister". Slidell was to make it known to Paredes "in some discreet manner" that the United States was both able and willing to relieve him from pecuniary embarrassment the moment that a treaty had been signed and ratified by Mexico.[28] A rumor was afloat, said Buchanan, of a design of European powers to establish a monarchy in Mexico and to place Prince Henry of Spain on the throne. He thought that these rumors were idle speculation, but "should Great Britain or France attempt to place a Spanish or any other European prince on the throne of Mexico, this would be resisted by all the power of the United States". Whether he was received or not, Slidell was ad-

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[28] Moore, Buchanan, VI, 402-406.

vised to delay his return to the United States, for the Oregon question was rapidly approaching a crisis and his return might influence its settlement by creating public alarm.[29] Nothing was said about Slidell retiring to a war vessel for the purpose of making another demand, as Atocha had advised and Polk had recommended to the cabinet.

At the next cabinet meeting where discussion took place concerning the Slidell mission, Polk seemed to be more confident that Slidell would be received, probably because of the tenor of Slidell's despatches, for as has been explained the diplomat had been encouraged by a series of events that proved anything but helpful. Polk stated the greatest obstacle to the conclusion of a boundary treaty, such as Slidell had been instructed to procure, would be the want of authority to make a prompt payment of money at the time of signing it. Paredes was in great need of money to pay his troops and keep them loyal, and Polk was of the opinion that if Slidell could be authorized to pay a half million or a million dollars as soon as the treaty had been signed, it might induce Paredes to make such a treaty, which he would not otherwise do. Some of the cabinet members raised the question of how this money could be obtained from Congress without exposing to the public and foreign nations the object of voting it. Polk stated that the object would be to procure a cession of New Mexico and California and if possible all North of Latitude 32 degrees from El Paso on the Del Norte and West to the Pacific Ocean.[30]

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

The cabinet, with the exception of Buchanan, agreed. Buchanan thought the plan of asking Congress for an advance appropriation to be impracticable, but Polk called attention to the Act passed in 1806 to enable Jefferson to purchase the Floridas, and suggested that members of Congress might be consulted informally for the purpose of ascertaining the probability of obtaining the appropriation. He had already broached the subject to Senator Ingersoll of Pennsylvania and Senator Cullom of Tennessee. After the meeting had adjourned Polk summoned Senator Benton of Missouri and asked his opinion concerning the feasability of the plan. Benton concurred in the views of the President and promised his cooperation.[31] Polk examined the laws and found still another precedent for his proposed appropriation - the two millions voted in 1803 to enable Jefferson to purchase Louisiana. He conversed with Allen, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, and with Senator Cass and both approved his plan. They suggested that he confer also with Calhoun which Polk immediately did and although Calhoun did not like the boundary suggested by the President, he did state that he was in favor of annexing California.

While Polk was exerting his influence to obtain from Congress the appropriation, a despatch arrived on April 6, 1846, from the American consul at Vera Cruz, stating that all indications pointed to Slidell again being refused. The despatch was read in the cabinet meeting the next day

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[31] Polk, Diary, I, 303-308.

and Polk recorded in his diary:[32]

> ...I stated that in the event Mr. Slidell was not received and accredited, and returned to the United States, my opinion was that I should make a communication to Congress recommending that legislative measures be adopted, to take the remedy for the injuries and wrongs we had suffered into our own hands.

On the evening of April 7, 1846, despatches again arrived from Slidell, informing the President that he had not been received and that he had demanded his passports.[33] The next morning Polk consulted Benton concerning the steps to be taken, and throughout that day sent for numerous members of Congress, among them Houston and Allen, and all suggested that nothing further be done until it was ascertained whether passports had actually been given to Slidell.[34] About a week later on April 18, the President told Calhoun that he "saw no alternative but strong measures toward Mexico". Calhoun deprecated war and expressed the opinion that if the Oregon question could be settled first, there would be no difficulty in adjusting the dispute with Mexico, for he believed that Great Britain desired to prevent a war between the United States and Mexico. Calhoun thus urged against sending a message to Congress on Mexican affairs until the Oregon question had been settled. "I told him", said Polk, "that I would delay a reasonable time, but that whatever the settlement of the Oregon question might be, I would feel it my duty to lay the Mexican question before Congress, with my opinion on the subject, in time for their action at the present session".[35]

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 319, 322.

[34] Ibid., 325-327.

[35] Ibid., 337-339.

Three days later Polk told his cabinet that "our relations with Mexico cannot be permitted to remain in status quo", and that he contemplated asking Congress to adopt strong measures, but thought it prudent to await news from England before taking this step. He did not have long to wait, for on the following day, April 22, a despatch from McLain was received. McLain was of the opinion that Great Britain would take no step on the Oregon question until the Senate had come to some decision on the bill to terminate joint occupation of the territory. The following day, the conference committee of the two houses of Congress came to an agreement on the bill to give England twelve months notice on termination of joint occupation; and on April 25, 1846, Polk informed his cabinet that he now deemed it to be his duty to make a communication to Congress without delay. The President recorded in his diary that he expressed the opinion that the United States must now take aggressive action; that he had attempted to conciliate Mexico in vain and had forborne until forbearance was longer virtuous or patriotic and that the United States should take a firm and bold course towards Mexico.

Buchanan, whose opinion was first requested, thought that the President should recommend a declaration of war, while the other members suggested that a war message be prepared and submitted to them within a week. After considerable discussion, Buchanan was requested to collect materials and prepare the draft of a message for Polk's consideration.[36] While Buchanan was preparing a history of the wrongs on which to base a message to Congress, the president once more consulted

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[36] Ibid., 343, 344, 347, 354.

Senator Benton. The Missouri Senator had not yet made up his mind, but he expressed a decided aversion to war with Mexico. He advised delay until the Oregon question had either been settled or brought to a crises. "I told him", said Polk, "we had ample cause for war, but that I was anxious to avoid it if it could be done honorably and consistently with the interests of our injured citizens". He would delay, he said, until the arrival of Slidell in Washington, but he could not permit Congress to adjourn without laying the subject before them.[37]

It should again be noted that up to this point, President Polk dwelt entirely on the refusal to receive Slidell and the failure to adjust the claims of American citizens. These furnished, in his opinion, ample grounds for war. This fact is again significant for time had not proven a blessing to Mexico and she was still in such financial straits that she could not pay the claims except by a cession of territory. Polk does not, up to this time, mention any military aggressions on the part of Mexico. But on May 5, 1848 he received a despatch from General Taylor, dated April 15, stating that he had been ordered by General Ampudia to fall back across the Nueces, and the President noted in his diary that "the probabilities are that hostilities might take place soon".[38] On May 8, Slidell arrived in Washington and called on the President and told him that there was only one course now left - for the United States to take redress of its injuries into its own hands. "In this I agreed with," Polk stated, "and told him it was only a matter of time when I would make a communication to Congress on the

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[37] Ibid., 375, 376.

[38] H. Ex. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 138

subject, and that I made up my mind to do so very soon."[39] The cabinet met on the following day and the President informed them that, although no open act of aggression by the Mexican army had been reported, it was imminent that such would be committed. All agreed that if Taylor's forces should be molested, the President ought to recommend a declaration of war. Polk then asked each member whether, in his opinion, a message should be sent to Congress on the following Tuesday, this being Saturday, May 9, and whether it should recommend a declaration of war. All answered in the affirmative except Bancroft, who, however, favored immediate war should Mexico commit any overt act. It was agreed that a message should be prepared and considered at the next meeting. On the same evening a despatch from Taylor arrived, giving an account of the killing of American soldiers on the east bank of the Rio Grande. Polk summoned the cabinet to a special meeting, and it was agreed unanimously that the President should lay the matter before Congress and urge prompt measures to enable the executive to prosecute the war. At noon, on Monday, May 11, the war message was ready and on its way to Congress. Mexico had herself thus removed the obstacle that had worried both Bancroft and Buchanan, and in addition, had rendered Polk a distinct service by enabling him to base his war message on more tangible grounds - grounds which all the friends of the administration could endorse with enthusiasm and those which the opponents, for patriotic reasons, would find it hard to assail.

Returning to Slidell's final contact with the Mexican government, on March 12, 1846, the day on which Buchanan penned his final

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[39] Ibid.

instructions to Slidell, the Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations notified Slidell that he could not and would not be received. He was told that the annexation of Texas had always been and was still regarded by Mexico as a cause for war. Inspite of this fact, she had agreed to receive a commissioner to discuss this question, but the United States had sent instead a resident minister. Should the United States persist in its present course, the Mexican government "will call upon all her citizens to fulfill the sacred duty of defending their country", and if war should come, the entire blame would rest on the United States.[40]

Slidell realized that this was the end of diplomacy and after waiting in vain for five days for instructions from Buchanan, wrote to Castillo y Lanzas on March 17 requesting his passports and concluding his letter with a severe criticism of the Mexican government:[41]

> ...As Your Excellency has advanced no new arguments in support of the refusal to receive the undersigned as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, he will abstain from commenting upon that portion of the note of Your Excellency which with a mere difference of phraseology presents substantially the same reasoning as urged by Mr. Pena y Pena in his note of the 20 December last...The United States can confidently appeal to the history of the events of the last twenty years, as affording the most conclusive refutation of the charges of usurpation, violence, fraud, artifice, intrigue, and bad faith so lavishly scattered through the note of Your Excellency.... 34

The next day, March 18, 1846 Slidell penned the fateful note to Buchanan summing up his prolonged struggle for acceptance and in-

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[40] Ibid., 67-72, 79

[41] Sen. Exc. Doc., 337, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 44.

forming him of the decision of the Paredes government.[42] He also stated his belief that the government of General Paredes would not be able to maintain itself as the eyes of many Mexicans were turned toward Cuba to Santa Anna. No one else could rally about him so much strength as the former popular idol. Slidell stated that "I shall not be surprised soon to hear of Santa Anna's arrival at Vera Cruz and of a pronunciamento in his favor by the garrison there. If he has the nerve to take the step and get possession of Vera Cruz, he will easily put down Paredes. Should he arrive before my departure, I will ascertain his views in relation to the United States, and if I find them favorable I will not hurry my departure".[43] 35

Castillo enclosed Slidell's passports on March 21, with a parting statement of the needlessness of further discussion.[44] Slidell immediately set about leaving and on April 9, 1846 set sail from the harbor of Vera Cruz, mission completed.

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[42] H. Ex. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 140.

[43] Reeves, American Diplomacy, 286

[44] H. Ex. Doc., 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 79.

Conclusion

Scanning the diplomatic history of the United States, the period from the middle of 1845 to the middle of 1846 is both interesting and significant. It is the period when the United States and Mexico, and incidentally, the major powers of Europe, were involved in the diplomatic interchange that led to the Mexican War. Repercussions of this period are still evident in the United States and Mexican national memory is still acute. That the professional historian considers the year worthy of detailed study may be shown by a cursory examination of bibliographic materials in any university or college library. However, with all due respect to Smith, Rives, Reeves, Bancroft, Rippy, Sears, and the countless others that have labored to evaluate this period, no definitive history has yet been written. In addition, the literature that is available is many times contradictory; one author characterizing Polk as avowed imperialist in the most derogatory sense of the word, while another claims for him the role of avowed nationalist; another author labels Slidell an enlightened statesman while still another accuses him of being a mere political hack and a tool of the administration.

Yet out of the mass of material certain ideas may be extracted that evidence points to as believable. These ideas are as follows:

1. The administration of James K. Polk inherited the dispute with Mexico and did not manufacture it.

2. Polk believed in territorial expansion and was elected on such a platform.

3. Polk personally desired the acquisition of California but prior to hostilities was not prepared to wage aggressive war to get it.

4. Secretary of State James Buchanan was instrumental in selecting both Parrott and Slidell.

5. Polk unwittingly sent Slidell as minister while Mexico agreed only to receive a commissioner.

6. Slidell personally believed the mission had every chance of success.

7. Slidell's position after his rebuff by Herrera was more that of scout than mediator.

8. Mexico's internal condition made it impossible for any established government to treat with the United States.

Based upon these principles, an interpretation of the Slidell mission may be attempted, although the reader may well question the choice of ideas. Perhaps it would be wiser merely to catalogue the factual data point by point and eliminate any explanation. This would prove nothing except the knowledge of source materials. As regards choice of material, the standard secondary and primary sources have been utilized and the narrative based on them.

The historian, no matter how objective, of necessity becomes identified with his subject and sooner or later must decide on interpretation. This author is no exception. The common picture of a machiavellian Polk leading a grasping United States toward continental domination at the expense of a defenseless Mexico has always seemed a bit thin. In the first place, President Polk is not the ogre his opponents claim, nor was he a far-sighted statesman. His foreign policy was always determined by the attitude of others in his counsel,

especially Buchanan, and he was guilty of numerous errors of strategic importance. His appointment of Slidell as minister in the face of Mexican requests for a commissioner was not deliberate, but unwise. In his diary he complains, after Slidell's rejection, that he was uninformed as to Mexico's desires. Uninformed or not, there is no evidence to prove his action was planned. The selection of Parrott is another example of the President's bad judgment. He knew nothing of his background or personality, but despatched him on the sole recommendation of Buchanan. Time and time again during the period under study, in cabinet meeting after cabinet meeting, he suggested immediate ultimatums to Mexico, only to be dissuaded by more rational cabinet members. The section of the narrative relating to Colonel Atocha is merely one illustration of the vacillations he enjoyed. Numerous authors attempt to prove Polk's designs upon California and their cases are well documented but may be dismissed by a close perusal of Slidell's instructions, in which he was granted authority to conclude a treaty with Mexico on the basis of territory east of California. If a treaty had been signed on this basis Polk would have been unable to bargain for California and would have had to resort to armed entrance. Polk desired California, but on the basis Texas came into the union - revolution, independence, annexation, in that order.

Several other topics relative to Polk's administration need to be clarified in summing up the narrative. As we mentioned, Polk had no hand in the origins of the controversy with Mexico, but believing in expansion was partially responsible for the platform which elected him. His party cried for territory, yet chose a man to get it

who was ignorant of diplomatic procedures and whose very personality - vacillating, suspicious, and impetuous made it impossible for regular diplomatic protocol to be observed. More important than this, however, Polk did not understand the Mexican mind and dealt with the Mexicans as if they were no different than fellow Tennessee farmers attending a horse auction.

It has been said that a president's stature is most easily recognized by the appointments he makes, especially in his cabinet. If this is true, Polk ranks high for his cabinet was above average in experience. Secretary of War Marcy was trained as a public administrator, had been a soldier, and was a leading member of the Democratic party; Secretary of the Navy Bancroft was one of the most brilliant men in America, a scholar, and was well versed in naval affairs; Secretary of the Treasury Walker was an economist, a tariff expert, and a trained politician as well. Of the major members of the Cabinet, however, James Buchanan, Secretary of State, was by far the most important. Naturally it is difficult to determine his actual influence in shaping the foreign policy of the Polk administration, but it is quite evident from his papers that he was afraid of war with Great Britain and this conditioned his attitude toward Mexico. He personally chose Slidell and Parrott, opposed Polk's belligerent attitude toward Mexico, and on more than one occasion succeeded in convincing the president that more conciliatory tactics were needed.

Yet, if Polk's government had had to deal only with Mexican leaders uninfluenced by the clergy, the landed estates, the financial oligarchy, and to a lesser degree, the peasant population, the Slidell

mission would have been a success. The leaders had done much to stimulate the fanaticism which was hindering their own plans. The Mexican people, originally misled and misruled, were demanding a course of action which their leaders knew would be fatal. It was a case of the Catholic Church hating and fearing its Protestant neighbor; a landed estate fearing change and loss of privilege and seeing in the United States the agent of that change; a select economic group grown fat on corruption and exploitation and also fearing dealings with a nation founded on democratic principles; a large uneducated, pauperized, servile lower class believing in the efficacy of Mexican sons and not realizing that warfare demands more than a stout heart. A population with democratic procedures and yet could not understand the rudiments of self-government. From this point of view, not Polk, not Slidell, nor any other person was the mainspring behind the Mexican War, but the faltering democracy of nineteenth century Mexico. There is truth in the statement that Mexico waged a two-front war: a war against the United States and at the same time a war against herself.

And what of John Slidell? We have seen him caught in a web not of his own design, stymied at every attempt, and embittered by rebuff and delay. On the other hand, to his credit, the mission had increased his experience, which served him to advantage when he came forward as a leading diplomat of the Confederate States, securing the position of minister to France. Here again, a web of circumstances was to frustrate his efforts, but that is another story.

A final judgment upon the underlying motive of Slidell's mission

must assume that its original purpose was to usher in Manifest Destiny with as little friction as possible. Conditions in Mexico proved such as to render futile any such hope, but Manifest Destiny waits not for the delays of men and if peace be impossible, she uses war. Here the mission served as a burnt offering. Slidell was sacrificed on the altar of his country's wrongs. His importance in this latter aspect has obscured the primary object of his mission - to keep the peace.

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