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Texas, War, and Empire: The American Empire in the Conquest and Annexation of the Floridas and the American Southwest

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Cover Page Footnote

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The title of empire floats about the modern United States from time to time in a variety of political or social contexts, but in this current-day conversation, it is almost always in relation to the previous seven or so decades. The American imperialism debate was reinvigorated with the invasion of Iraq in early 2003, and sharp divisions appeared in public opinion.¹ The topic is highly politicized and often avoided in public company; however, the discussion is far from new to American society.² American social and political leaders have been discussing the virtues and implications of expansion, empire, and contingent concepts such as commerce and war since the earliest days of the Republic. The concept of expansion had been approached as a “when” subject, as opposed to an “if” subject, for decades by the time of the Revolution, as evidenced by the Royal Proclamation of 1763.³ This spirit of expansionism pervades American history.

At the dawn of 1835, the western edges of United States territory were the international borders between the U.S., Mexico, and the Oregon Country. That autumn, the Mexican province of Texas rebelled against the central government alongside several other provinces, and in the spring of 1836, Texas declared independence. The Republic of Texas established itself among the states of North America with victory at San Jacinto and sent a request for annexation to Washington; the request was declined.

Annexation succeeded under a later attempt after a decade of independence, and a U.S. garrison entered Texas under General Taylor. Four days after Christmas 1845, Texas received full statehood in the American Union despite still being claimed as a province by the Centralist Mexican Republic.⁴ On its own, the annexation of Texas to the American Union did not ignite

¹ Dane Kennedy. “Essay and Reflection: On the American Empire from a British Imperial Perspective” *The International History Review* 29, no. 1 (March 2007), 83

² Alfred W. McCoy, Francisco A. Scarano, “On the Tropic of Cancer: Transitions and Transformations in the U.S. Imperial State,” *Colonial crucible: empire in the making of the modern American state*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 8.

³ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, ed. Henry Adams, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), 3:225

⁴ “President’s Message,” *Milwaukie Daily Sentinel* (Milwaukie, WI), Dec 12, 1845

the Mexican-American War. This aggressive act of expansion likely would have started a war if Mexico had been in a stronger position relative to the United States, but the reality of the day in Mexico was debilitating debt and civil disorder. The United States was requesting diplomatic resolutions, and in no position to defend her claims to Texas militarily, Mexico began the process of reopening diplomacy.⁵ Following a military coup d'état, the restoration of diplomacy ended, and U.S. forces were sent into disputed border territory.

General Taylor's forces moved down the Texan coast, and they approached the Rio Grande near Matamoros with explicit orders to abstain hostility unless attacked.⁶ They encamped in an elevated position there, built breastworks around the camp, and placed artillery overlooking the river and city.⁷ In the following days, a cavalry skirmish left Americans dead on the river's north bank.⁸ A defensive war was declared by the United States, and offensive campaigns deep into undisputed Mexican territory were soon underway. This was a thinly veiled act of aggression, and it constituted an act of imperialism.

Defining Empire and Imperialism

The moniker "empire" describes an impressively diverse group of states across the majority of civilized history. With that in mind, it is unsurprising that the characteristics of each application of the term are also diverse. Defining an empire is therefore a less simple task than one would initially presume. Merriam-Webster defines empire as "a major political unit having a territory of great extent or a number of territories or peoples under a single sovereign authority."⁹

⁵ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*. (1885. Reprint, Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1952. Reprint, New York: De Capo Press, 1982), 23

⁶ *The Works of James Buchanan*, ed. John Bassett Moore, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1909), 6:481

⁷ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 30

⁸ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:481

⁹ "Imperialism." *Merriam-Webster.com*, Accessed April 29, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imperialism>.

In his *Journal of Contemporary History* article “Where Does the World Historian Write From?”

Richard Drayton elaborates on this definition significantly:

Imperialism, in all its contexts, is a regime through which external entities derive maximum gain from the labour and resources within a territory. A foreign power, with or without formal colonization, although always with local collaborators, secures a protected and privileged sphere for its economic actors. There the relationship of labour to capital is manipulated via the suppression of taxes, wages, social or environmental protections, by forms of coercion which drive labour towards that direction of employment and limit its legal or practical ability to resist the regime, and from which tribute, commodities and profit may be freely expatriated.¹⁰

In the traditional sense, an empire is a sovereign entity which expands territorially via direct annexation, colonial subjugation, or compelling weaker states to accept the larger state as their suzerain. In addition to traditional imperialism, there is the concept of informal imperialism. Informal imperialism holds that any sufficiently powerful state that projects influence of a social, cultural, or economic kind is also an empire, even if it does not gain political control over the influenced states.¹¹ The common theme between traditional, formal empires and informal empires is actionable relative power balances wherein a powerful state plunders or subjugates a weaker state.¹² The methods, goals, and results of such interactions begin to diverge so rapidly that further generalizations fail to incorporate the full collection of imperial states.

¹⁰ Richard Drayton. "Where Does the World Historian Write From? Objectivity, Moral Conscience and the Past and Present of Imperialism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 3 (2011): 680-681

¹¹ McCoy, Scarano, "On the Tropic of Cancer," 4

¹² Frank Ninkovich, "The United States and Imperialism," *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert Schulzinger, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 79-80

Existing Arguments on Empire and the United States

Whether the thus-defined term applies to the United States is, as already mentioned, an active debate. Frank Ninkovich has said that it “is undeniable that the United States was an imperial power,” and the important question is, rather than whether the U.S. was imperial, whether the “US continue[d] on an imperialistic course even after it had abandoned its colonial possessions.”¹³ In response to this question he presents two primary schools of thought, historical continuity and aberration. Both are established on the recognition that imperialism reared its head with the Spanish-American War and subsequent acquisition of Spanish colonies in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean; the disagreement between them lies in the interpretation of these events and their causes. If the individual making an interpretation sees the 1890s as the maintenance of already-present patterns in American history, that individual belongs to the historical continuity school, and he or she likely views “imperialism [as] a central theme of US foreign relations.”¹⁴ If the analyst considers expansion during 1890s distinct from other instances of expansion for any reason, they belong to the aberration camp, and they “likely see imperialism as only one element, albeit an important one, of broader national and international processes.”¹⁵

In “From Old Empire to New,” a chapter in *Colonial Crucible*, an edited collection of essays on empire and America, Thomas McCormick presents an unbalanced example of both the continuity and the aberration arguments. McCormick opens with his understanding of the “Great Aberration” viewpoint, and he makes no secret of his conviction that it is a myth rooted in national exceptionalism, cognitive dissonance, and national self-image preservation. He argues that imperialism is an inherent aspect of the United States and has been present from the

¹³ Ninkovich, “The United States and Imperialism,” 80-81

¹⁴ Ninkovich, “The United States and Imperialism,” 81

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 84

Republic's earliest days. He divides American history into a First and Second American Empire, and he separates them with the transition from continental expansion to overseas expansion.¹⁶ Not only does this argument hold that imperialism was inherent and present from the Nation's inception, it considers the intensity of this imperial character to be of an extreme degree. McCormick agrees with this paper's argument that the annexation of the American Southwest was imperial, but he goes even further, arguing that those portions of Mexico not annexed remained under Mexican sovereignty merely because the requirements of administering an empire of that size outmatched the resources then at the country's disposal. Following the nineteenth century consolidation of the modern-day contiguous 48 states, the First American Empire transitions into the Second, and the country's imperial ambitions shifted south and west to the Caribbean and Pacific.

In the first chapter of the collection in which McCormick's article appears, *Colonial Crucible*, the authors Alfred McCoy, Francisco Scarano, and Courtney Johnson lay out the central positions collectively argued by the various essays when read in tandem, after which they segue into a thorough history of twentieth-century scholarship on imperialism in American policy and actions. Their thesis is that American colonialism was a profound actor in shaping modern American statecraft, and that both the American imperial methodology and those on the receiving end of imperial actions played equally important roles in this capacity. This essay presents a well-balanced view of American imperialism that fits into both camps described by Ninkovich. While imperialism is seen as a central theme in American history, "direct colonial rule ... represented something of an aberration within a distinctively indirect American

¹⁶ Thomas McCormick, "From Old Empire to New: The Changing Dynamics and Tactics of American Empire," *Colonial crucible: empire in the making of the modern American state*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 64-66

hegemony.”¹⁷ Similar to McCormick’s article, this chapter also recognizes an imperial typology categorizing empires as continental or maritime and typical administrative approaches within each.

Dane Kennedy also argues in favor of the existence of an American Empire, and he spends far more time elucidating informal empire both as a term and as it applies to the United States. Little in his article, “On the American Empire from a British Imperial Perspective,” directly addresses the events that formulate the scope of this paper, but he does provide a detailed look into specific behaviors characteristic of empires or imperial ambitions. Foremost among these is the willingness to utilize military power at will, unilaterally, and unprovoked. Secondary to this are exerting overwhelming economic influence as both producer and consumer, providing foreign aid substantial enough to force regimes into a state of dependence, using covert operations to overthrow otherwise nonaggressive regimes that happen to block state interests, compelling states to accede to U.S. interests via gunboat diplomacy, and occupying land in foreign states on which military bases, prisons, and American-owned business assets are operated. He also discusses the characteristics of the culture and ideology of imperialism; the most generally applicable aspect of which is the civilizing mission, or, as applied to the British and American examples, Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden.” He agrees with McCormick regarding the United States having been different kinds of empires at different points in its imperial history, but he does not distinguish between successive empires.¹⁸

Of the arguments discussed thus far, most focused on the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth. The question to be asked now is whether the behaviors and actions established above as imperial in nature can be observed during the early nineteenth century, specifically the

¹⁷ McCoy, Scarano, “On the Tropic of Cancer,” 5

¹⁸ Kennedy, “Essay and Reflection,” 108

period from 1803 to 1848. To address this question, this paper will organize the qualities used as imperial diagnostics on the post-1898 United States into distinct themes and examine each through the lens of Mexican-American relations. The categories of unilateral military provocation, imposing state interests on foreign powers through either influence or military strength using relative power advantages, actively seeking to increase the resources and territories without regard for foreign sovereignty, and the role – if any – played by racism in justifying expansion all come directly from the previously mentioned scholars, but the final category – examining the state’s goals in comparison to the state’s actual gains and whether the interim events were deliberate strategy or simple happenstance – is not discussed in depth by any of the articles referenced above. This final category’s contents are not required to conclude a state’s imperial status, and in fact they are traditionally incorporated in arguments against post-1898 imperialism. However, it is nearly untouched in relation to pre-1898 arguments, and applying its criteria in this context will be a useful addition to the American imperialism discussion.

Thesis

Mexican-American diplomatic relations soured over the American annexation of Texas, but this was not the direct cause of the war of 1846-1848 between them. Despite explicit claims otherwise, the friendship between the two states was not founded on the principle of shared republicanism; rather, the American stance on Mexico was the product of an American agenda relative to an intercontinental, interimperial competition. Initial refusal to recognize Mexican independence was in response to American relations with the Spanish Empire and ongoing negotiations on a treaty between Madrid and Washington. When it came, recognition was a

means of protecting an American sphere of influence under the guise of an anti-imperial policy in the North American continent. When relations soured, it was because the U.S. had pursued territorial growth via Texas despite conflicting, variably-valid claims held by Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the United States. War came to the American Southwest not because Texas joined the Union, but because Texas alone did not sate the United States' territorial appetite. This war was not inevitable, and it was not a defensive war. Because each point in the evolution of Mexican-American relations was shaped by American goals of either expanding their own power or territory or reducing that of European empires, the entire evolutionary process from recognition to war collectively illustrates the imperial character of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. The eventual war being neither defensive nor inevitable support that diagnosis of imperialism, and the results of reapplying the discussed arguments by other scholars regarding American imperialism are consistent with this conclusion.

The centermost points in the above thesis are the Mexican-American War not being a direct result of annexing Texas, the War not being inevitable, and the eventual outbreak of conflict being the result of a popular imperial agenda rather than either the annexation of Texas or the deceitful tactics of James K. Polk. All three are uncommonly argued, and each point challenges established arguments. Few works indeed address whether the war with Mexico was inevitable, but most passively treat war as a necessary outcome of annexing Texas. A modest number more argue that war became inevitable following Texas' addition to the Union, effectively arguing simultaneously that the war was both inevitable at that point and directly caused by annexation. T.J. Stiles briefly mentions Texas and the Mexican-American War in passing in his Jesse James biography, arguing that the "absorption of Texas virtually guaranteed

war with Mexico, which had never accepted the independence of its rebellious province.”¹⁹ In his article on General Kearney, Anthony Brandt mentions in the first paragraph that “no one doubts [Polk] deliberately manufactured” the instigation to war, but he provides no citation for this claim.²⁰

The imperial agenda upon which this paper places war-guilt refers generally, in this context, to the unqualified desire for Mexican lands stretching many hundreds of miles further west and north than the full extent of territory claimed by Texas. While this fact of history is occasionally acknowledged in direct correlation to the pre-war events surrounding Texas, it is rarely explored except as Manifest Destiny or simply expansionism. The popular alternate cause of war is slavery, and the slaves of American settlers in Texas and the Mexican government’s anti-slavery stance is an often-mentioned source of conflict that resulted in Texan independence. The slavery argument’s primary point, however, is the escalating passions and discord surrounding the balance of free states to slave states, and the geographic location of Texas would designate it, if it was welcomed into the Union, a slave state as per the Missouri Compromise.

The Birth of Conflict

The seeds of conflict that would grow into the tense fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century were planted in 1803 with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. Prior to this, the western and southern U.S. borders were the Mississippi River and the north edge of Spanish Florida. Where French Louisiana ended and New Spain began was a matter of dispute, and the extent of the lands included in the Louisiana Purchase was defined as

¹⁹ T.J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 21-22

²⁰ Anthony Brandt, “General Kearney’s California Trek, 1846: How the father of the U.S. Cavalry won the West with an all-but-bloodless war,” *Military History Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2016): 54

“fully and in the same manner as it had been acquired by France from Spain, in virtue of the Treaty of San Ildefonso, . . . with the same extent that it then had in the hands of Spain and that it had when France possessed it, and such as it should be after the treaties subsequently entered into between Spain and other states.”²¹ The extent Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin’s above 1810 quote refers to is finally defined in detail in the “grant of Louis XIV, to Crozat, dated 14th September, 1712,” and Gallatin summarizes its contents as “all the country drained by the waters emptying directly or indirectly into the Mississippi is included within the boundaries of Louisiana.”²² Gallatin goes on to establish the American 1803 claim to lands beyond the modern-day Louisiana-Texas state line:

The discovery of that river [Mississippi] by the French, and the general principles adopted by the European nations in relation to the rights of discovery, the publicity of the grant, and the long acquiescence of Spain, establish the claim of the United States to that extent. But the western boundary on the sea-shore, and south of the waters emptying into the Red River, is still a subject of controversy between the two nations; the territory called by Spain ‘Province of Texas’ being claimed by both. The claim of France, now transferred to the United States, extended at least as far west as the bay of St. Bernard [Espiritu Santo Bay], in virtue of the settlement made there by La Salle, in 1685, in the vicinity of the river Guadeloupe, at a time when Spain occupied no part of the territory east of the Rio Norte [Rio Grande]. That settlement was destroyed, and, notwithstanding the repeated orders of the French government, was not resumed by the local authorities. In the mean while (in 1717), the Spaniards sent some priests among the Indians, and shortly after established a small military post at Adayes, afterwards transferred to Nogodoches, on which rests their claim to the country east of La Salle’s settlement.²³

He then shifted to territorial disputes to the east and south of the Louisiana Territory regarding the border between Louisiana and Spanish Florida. At the Seven Years’ War’s conclusion, France ceded that fraction of Louisiana east of the Mississippi to England by the 1763 Treaty of Paris and the remainder of Louisiana to Spain by a separate treaty in 1762. Spain

²¹ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:211

²² *Ibid.* 3:211

²³ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:211

ceded colonial Florida to England by the same treaty, and the two separate English acquisitions were named East and West Florida. The most important distinction comes at the end of the American Revolution; Gallatin informs his reader, “by the treaties of 1783, Great Britain ceded to the United States all that part of the former colony of Louisiana east of the Mississippi which lay north of the 31st degree of north latitude, and to Spain, under the name of West and East Florida, both that part of Louisiana east of the Mississippi which lay south of that parallel of latitude, and the old Spanish province of Florida.”²⁴ Therefore, because Spain briefly held the entire territory of Louisiana prior to “Louisiana [being] retroceded to France ‘with the same extent that it then had in the hands of Spain,’” and “the territory in question, by whatever name Spain chose to call it, was then substantially in her hands,” that retrocession provided France with title to the portion of Louisiana since renamed West Florida, and subsequently, “The title of the United States to the territory in question [West Florida]... is fully established.”²⁵

These disputes over the international border between the United States and New Spain destabilized U.S.-Spanish relations and increasingly cultivated feelings of antagonism and hostility. By 1816, mounting tensions began approaching levels sufficient to introduce legitimate worries over a coming war, and by 1817, they had escalated to the point of it being an imminent threat.²⁶ The United States was determined to have the whole of Florida, and on the basis of the tenuous claim from the Louisiana Purchase, Congress authorized the seizure of half of West Florida in 1810.²⁷ In January of 1811, that authorization was expanded to allow the deployment of federal troops to the remainder of West Florida if it was in danger of falling into the hands of

²⁴ *Ibid.* 3:212

²⁵ *Ibid.* 3:212-213

²⁶ *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 6:22, 142

²⁷ *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, (New York: R. Worthington, 1884) 2:488

any power other than Spain or the United States, including newly declared independent republics.²⁸ Across the Mississippi, Spain had settlers building a town on Galveston Island, and the U.S. protested that the settlement was on American land.²⁹

Word reached Washington that Seminole raids into the American Deep South were originating from a location within Spanish Florida, and that the offending tribes were being allowed to reside there without penalty. Spain was obligated by treaty to “not suffer her Indians to attack the citizens of the United States,” but Spanish forces in Florida had refused to act when called upon by the U.S..³⁰ Eventually Andrew Jackson was sent with a detachment of men, and there he engaged the Seminole in combat and occupied the Spanish city of Pensacola and Fort Saint Marks. Jackson refused to return either to Spanish possession until certain conditions were met.³¹ At nearly the same time, John Quincy Adams found a 1720 map of Louisiana clearly depicting the border as the Rio Grande, and tensions on both sides of the Mississippi successfully escalated further.³²

The United States had just recently ended a war, and the Spanish were facing armed rebellions in New Spain. A Spanish-American War in 1818 was not in the interests of either power. Seeking to avoid that culmination of these events and to resolve the border disputes, the two nations entered negotiations for a treaty to these ends. After repeated delays and new developments in the border controversy, the American and Spanish representatives, John Quincy Adams and Luis Onís, finally reached acceptable terms. Following additional delays, an international scandal, and more requested concessions from Spain, the terms were passed into

²⁸ *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 6:286-288

²⁹ *Ibid.* 6:310-311

³⁰ *Ibid.* 6:388-389

³¹ *Ibid.* 6:389, 393

³² *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 6:345-346

law as the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, and war between Spain and America was delayed by 75 years.

The treaty's conditions stipulated specific territorial exchanges and relinquishments, and the U.S. was to accept \$5M in indemnities due to Spain. The entirety of both East and West Florida passed to the United States, and Spain officially renounced their claim to the Oregon Country. In return, and in addition to the \$5M debt, the U.S. renounced their claim to Texas beyond the Sabine, Red, and Arkansas Rivers.³³

In a report back to Washington by the American minister in Madrid, the cause of some of the negotiation delays was revealed to be Spanish anxiety that the United States would offer formal recognition to the rebellious provinces of New Spain as soon as the treaty was concluded. In a twist of fate, it was, in fact, Spain who recognized Mexican independence first. By the same letter, the American Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, also learned that the Spanish cabinet was considering requiring an American pledge to abstain formal recognition of their American provinces before Spain would ratify the 1819 treaty.³⁴ The American minister in Madrid was told in no uncertain terms that such a pledge would not be forthcoming, and Spain had already been informed of this. It was also made clear that, while the United States considered itself legitimately entitled to the treaty's terms, the U.S. would not seize East Florida under arms. The controversial behavior of the Spanish government was seen in a bad light throughout Europe, and the Post-Napoleonic institutions of Europe were designed specifically to prevent the outbreak of war. Patience, in spite of insults, would yield the same results as violence but without nearly as high the cost of violence.³⁵ In the event of violence, Spain's unpopularity

³³ *Ibid.* 6:457-459; 546

³⁴ *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 6:562

³⁵ *Ibid.* 6:563

would provide advantages to the already advantageous local position held by the United States in the relevant territories, but any preemptive military seizure of East Florida could rapidly reverse these advantages to Spain's favor. All John Quincy Adams had to do was wait; Spain was cornered as long as the U.S. behaved itself militarily.

Mexican Independence, Rebellions, and Texan Independence

Spain ratified the treaty in 1820, and the United States Senate followed suit in 1821.³⁶ Recognition of independence was extended to Mexico via officials of each government in the year following their respective ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty. Mexico soon assented to the border agreed upon within the treaty.³⁷ Within the United States, however, contentment with that border was shrinking, and many there felt that the willful abandonment of the full territory of Texas to the Rio Grande was a mistake.³⁸ Furthermore, the Spanish government in Madrid would soon rescind Spanish recognition of Mexican sovereignty and attempt to reconquer the colony for several years.

Meanwhile, Mexico was considering opening their borders to foreign settlers in a bid to shore up the population and development in lightly populated areas, and the revolutionary first government of Mexico instituted the *empresario* program for this purpose. The program invited foreigners to these vacant or nearly vacant spaces in their northern provinces, including Texas. In return, settlers were required to promise to develop the region they settled and assist the government in its struggle against the Native Americans there.³⁹ Stephen Austin settled along the

³⁶ Ibid. 7:218

³⁷ Ibid. 7:419

³⁸ Ibid. 6:307

³⁹ Sarah Rodriguez, "The Greatest Nation on Earth: The Politics and Patriotism of the First Anglo American Immigrants to Mexican Texas, 1820-1824." *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (February 2017): 64

Rio Brazos with 300 families under this program, and by 1827, roughly 1,800 Americans were living in Mexican Texas.⁴⁰

The young Mexican state was troubled, and experienced relatively frequent shifts in government. The First Mexican Republic replaced the First Mexican Empire following declarations of independence from several imperial Mexican provinces and the abdication of the first emperor. The First Republic was a federal system comprised of voluntary constituent states that nominally retained individual sovereignty, but the right of secession was not established.⁴¹ In 1834, President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna dissolved the First Republic's national congress and set about forming a new, centralized government. At the end of 1835 he suspended the Mexican constitution, and a new constitution of his design was installed in its place. Santa Anna was making himself dictator of Mexico, and it sparked more armed rebellion throughout many Mexican states.

Santa Anna was brutal in his suppression of the various rebellions, but the fires of civil war continued to spread. They reached Texas in 1835, and the following year the state broke off from Coahuila and the rest of Mexico by declaring itself an independent republic. Coahuila would also declare independence alongside Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon as the Republic of the Rio Grande. Over the course of the next decade, rebellions continued to flare up in Zacatecas, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Yucatan, Sinaloa, New Mexico, Durango, California, Tampico, Querétaro, and Michoacán, and two more independent republics were declared in Yucatan and California.⁴² Only Texas found victory on the battlefield, and only Texas retained its independence.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 50

⁴¹ Ibid. 79-80

⁴² "Still Later from Mexico; Important Intelligence," *Boston Daily Atlas*, (Boston, MA), April 10, 1846; *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:275-276, 404, 406; Ibid. 7:223

The Mexican Republic was wracked with debt and instability as multiple internal factions fought each other and regional rebellions erupted throughout the country. In the years immediately following the Texan revolution, news arrived in the U.S. of a second “successful revolutionary movement.”⁴³ The debt of Mexico would not find an easy resolution, and it would remain a problem throughout the coming years.⁴⁴ Mexico found itself in a dangerous position of weakness while holding vast territory and resources.

The internal struggle for power in Mexico provided foreign empires and domestic provincial entities the ability to exercise their own agendas on the weakened state. Mexico owed money to Great Britain, France and the United States, had resident civilians from the United States and France living within its territory, and faced numerous armed nationalist uprisings all at the same time.⁴⁵ The rebellion in Texas began in 1835 and resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836. Texas applied for admission into the United States the following August, but it was denied in the interests of international foreign relations and internal domestic controversy.⁴⁶ The independence of Texas was not recognized by Mexico, and the annexation of Texas would have been viewed as hyper-aggressive expansionism by a country which already threatened leading global powers of the day. Mexico insisted that Texas was sovereign Mexican territory in rebellion, and made good on its insistence by maintaining a formal state of war with Texas from 1835 until the end of the Mexican-American War in early 1848. Even more important than that, the annexation of Texas could have added up to five new states with slavery

⁴³ “Revolution in Mexico” *Boston Courier* (Boston, MA), November 8, 1838

⁴⁴ “France and Mexico,” *New York Spectator* (New York, NY), December 20, 1838; “From the Louisville Journal of the 25th: France and Mexico,” *Daily Commercial Bulletin* (St. Louis, MO), December 31, 1838

⁴⁵ “France and Mexico,” *New York Spectator* (New York, NY), December 20, 1838

⁴⁶ “Message of the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress, December 4th, 1838,” *Boston Courier* (Boston, MA), December 10, 1838

to the Union, giving the Civil War-South an extreme political advantage over the North in Washington.

The independent Republic of Texas was recognized as a sovereign state by the U.S. in March of 1837, an “example soon followed by England, France, Holland, and Belgium.”⁴⁷ President Tyler then reopened the annexation talks with the government of Texas in 1844 as his administrative term’s end drew near. He completed a treaty of annexation before leaving office in 1844, but it failed ratification in the Senate. The job was inherited by President Polk in 1845.⁴⁸

The object of acquiring Texas was far from new when President Tyler restarted annexation negotiations in 1844. In a speech to the Senate on the issue of annexing Texas, Secretary of State Buchanan noted that “Messrs. [Quincy] Adams and Clay made two unsuccessful efforts, in 1825 and 1827, to purchase Texas from Mexico, whilst actual war-not a mere paper war-was raging between Spain and Mexico, and long before the government of Spain had recognized the independence of Mexico.”⁴⁹ He then discussed a third attempt that was made in 1829 by General Jackson and Martin van Buren despite the fact that Spain was in the middle of “a last and desperate struggle to recover Mexico.” In addition to revealing that the U.S. had long been interested in southwestern territorial expansion, these comments further addressed arguments being made for and against annexation in 1844. A treaty had been signed acknowledging Texan independence following Houston’s victory at San Jacinto in 1836, but this treaty was signed by General Santa Anna while being held prisoner in Texas. After signing the treaty, he and his army were permitted to return to Mexico in peace. There, he disavowed the treaty’s validity, but Buchanan and General Jackson claimed Santa Anna had “repeatedly”

⁴⁷ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:28

⁴⁸ “President’s Message,” *Milwaukie Daily Sentinel*, (Milwaukie, WI), December 12, 1845

⁴⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:38

recognized “the folly” of continuing to claim Texas as Mexican.⁵⁰ Ulysses S Grant discussed this same treaty in his memoirs, and he asserted its invalidity because it was signed under duress.⁵¹ Buchanan’s pro-annexation argument rested on notions of honor, but honor does not remove the hue of aggression from annexing territory not recognized as independent.

Mexico insisted the 1836 treaty was invalid all the way up through the end of the Mexican-American War, after which it became a practically moot point. A state of war between Texas and Mexico was maintained officially until the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 at the closure of the Mexican-American War, but hostile contact and combat engagements were scarce following San Jacinto in 1836. Secretary Buchanan said that “no serious attempt” had been made by Mexico to reconquer Texas since 1836, but he later clarified that he had excluded Mexican expeditions into Texas under General Woll in 1842 because they were brief and half-hearted.⁵² In 1842, Secretary of State Daniel Webster stated that, “no hostile foot [found] rest within her [Texas] soil for six or seven years, and Mexico herself [refrained] for all that period from any further attempt to re-establish her own authority over that territory.”⁵³ Albert Gallatin wrote in *Peace with Mexico* that Texans had not entered Mexico for military purposes since 1842.⁵⁴

The issue of annexation was so popular among the American public that it would be central to the 1844 election, and it was so important to the election that Martin van Buren’s presidential candidacy was cast in doubt following his public anti-annexation stance.⁵⁵ It was

⁵⁰ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 3:27

⁵¹ Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 23

⁵² *The Works of James Buchanan*, 3:31

⁵³ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:30

⁵⁴ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:576

⁵⁵ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:2

amid this concoction of international relations, national interests, potential for personal political gains, and widespread public opinion that President Tyler reached out to Texas in 1844.

Imperialism and Economy in the Case of Texas

The British Empire had long been interested in the relationships between the United States and both Spain and Mexico. During the dangerously high tensions preceding the Adams-Onís Treaty, the British advanced an offer of mediation between Washington and Madrid, but knowing the Americans would not want British interests represented in negotiations, the offer was only presented to Spain at first.⁵⁶ It was speculated that this was because Spain had previously sworn to never cede Florida to the U.S., but they had changed their minds in the years leading up to 1819.⁵⁷

The British Foreign Office and American State Department were locked in competition over Mexico's favor from that country's first day of independence onwards, and the British were ahead.⁵⁸ When resolutions for annexation passed Congress, Great Britain, France, and Holland lodged formal protests that the United States was in contravention of an international treaty, and Great Britain and France worked closely together to defeat annexation from start to finish despite French promises not to oppose U.S. efforts there.⁵⁹ Once Texas had asserted its independence at the Battle of San Jacinto, the British competition for influence at once expanded to the new Republic. The same European powers, Great Britain, France, and Holland, were as quick to recognize Texas as the United States was. Alongside extending recognition, England also offered

⁵⁶ *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 6:306-308

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 6:308

⁵⁸ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine; Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 67

⁵⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:128

the service of mediating a treaty between Texas and Mexico that would grant Texas official Mexican recognition of their sovereignty, and when France and the U.S. proposed to join England and make a joint effort in this endeavor, England refused. Making note of that refusal, Secretary Buchanan remarked on the political gains of accomplishing such a feat single-handedly relative to sharing success with two other countries, and he warned, “England is using every effort of skilful [*sic*] diplomacy to acquire an influence in Texas, to be used notoriously to our prejudice...hereafter which might render annexation impossible.”⁶⁰

The interest of the European empires in Texas was largely economic, but there were degrees of simple asset denial and anti-slavery involved as well. Despite its young age, the American Republic had grown explosively in both land and population by 1845. The U.S. was lightly industrialized compared to Great Britain, and American industrialization was primarily found in the Civil War North until the second half of the century. This meant that while U.S. manufacturing was on the rise, the dominant producer of manufactured goods remained the British Empire. Naturally, producing high volumes of manufactured goods is only profitable if one has access to the appropriate markets. In the 19th century world, protective tariffs remained ever-present, meaning that an economy with comparatively high production capacity could only remain profitable if adequately supplied with raw resources and unindustrialized territory in need of their products. Empire provided both these requirements to the imperial homeland.

Into the above equation, enter the valuable and none-too-easily produced resource of raw cotton. The cultivation of cotton is labor-intensive, the crop depletes soil nutrients, and it only grows in specific biomes. Despite extensive European efforts to establish or expand other cotton supplies, these factors culminated in a 19th century global American monopoly on the production

⁶⁰ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:43-44

of quality and affordable raw cotton.⁶¹ The importance of this monopoly is made clear by its juxtaposition to the contemporary British industrial economy, the chief export of which was textiles. Remarking on this relationship, Secretary Buchanan noted, “cotton manufacture is necessary not merely to the prosperity but almost to the very existence of England.” The result was Great Britain being “dependent upon the nation which holds in its hands the raw material of this manufacture. Such is our position towards her at the present moment.”⁶²

At this point Texas entered the global stage. Texas was massive in size and its economy was unindustrialized, but most importantly, it was home to “a soil and climate better adapted for the cultivation of cotton than any other region on the face of the earth.” In addition to this, Texas contained abundant farmland capable of producing significant crops of “all the agricultural staples of the middle and western States.”⁶³ While every international empire stood to make substantial gains by insuring the Texan Republic remained independent of the United States, Great Britain was in position to gain the most of all, and regardless of which European power gained most, in such a scenario the United States would be facing new substantial economic competition and relative power loss. The American annexation of Texas would maintain the U.S. monopoly on cotton, provide a large, domestic demand for manufactured goods, and deny both an alternate agricultural supply and a new, high-demand manufactured goods market to Europe. Failure to annex Texas would result in the end of the U.S. cotton monopoly, the denial of a new market for American industry, the introduction of a new major competitor in agriculture, and the opening of new markets for British, French, and any other industrialized European power’s

⁶¹ Ibid. 6:14; *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, Vol. 1. ed. Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 204-205

⁶² *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:13

⁶³ Ibid. 6:15

manufactories. With the United States continuously growing in size, wealth and strength, blocking annexation was a major goal for America's imperial competitors.

Spies in Texas

In view of these high stakes that took shape over the future of Texas with a lively competition already longstanding between England and the U.S., it is unsurprising that every practical measure to better ensure the success of annexation was taken by the American government. To this end, the State Department dispatched Charles Wickliffe to the Texan capital city, Austin. In the letter detailing his assignment from the State Department, Wickliffe was forewarned, "Great Britain and France are exerting themselves in concert through their public ministers in Texas, to defeat the reünion [*sic*] of that Republic with the United States," thus making it, "expedient to employ a confidential agent for the purpose of counteracting their efforts." His first task was to contact the official American government representative and Charge d'affaires in Texas, A.J. Donelson, but his "official character" and purpose in Texas was to be kept strictly secret.⁶⁴ The President's instructions, relayed through the Secretary of State to Wickliffe, revealed that the Polk administration was willing to go great lengths for the annexation of Texas:

You will perceive from the first of the joint resolutions, "annexing Texas to the United States," that the consent of the existing Government is a pre-requisite to the election of deputies to form a Constitution. To obtain this consent may possibly be found the greatest obstacle in the way to annexation. As this very question must now be under the consideration of the authorities of Texas, the necessity is urgent for your presence at their seat of Government as soon as practical. [...] You are fully acquainted with the nature and progress of this great question, in all its bearings, from the beginning; and you will use such arguments on the proper occasions and to the proper persons, as you may deem best adapted to convince the authorities and people of Texas that their reünion [*sic*] with the United States will promote and secure their own best interests and those of their

⁶⁴ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:139

posterity. Under the broad banner of the Union, they will be relieved from foreign influence, which now threatens to distract and divide them, and which has ever proved the bane of all Republics within its reach; -their peculiar institutions will be protected against the attacks of the English and French fanatics; the emigration of their brethren from the United States will be largely increased; the value of their property be greatly enhanced, and the blessings of liberty and free government will be permanently secured to them by a powerful Confederacy, which will be rendered still more powerful by the accession of Texas. Instead of mutual jealousies, which will be fomented by the policy of foreign governments and which may result in mutual hostility and lasting injury to both, the sister Republics in union will proceed on a career of prosperity such as the world has never witnessed. If some of the conditions proposed in the second joint resolution for annexation may seem unreasonable, there can be no doubt but that prompt justice will be done to Texas in a liberal spirit after she shall have been restored to the family of her sisters. These and similar topics which will readily suggest themselves to your experienced and well informed mind, you will not fail to press upon all suitable occasions, knowing that the United States have nothing to oppose to the machinations and influence of Great Britain and France except arguments founded on truth and justice.⁶⁵

The skill of Secretary Buchanan in phrasing things written in his official capacity as head of the State Department as innocuously as possible was certainly impressive, but these instructions to Mr. Wickliffe revealed an expansionist strategy was in action at the White House that appeared to consider nothing off the table in the pursuit of Texas. His task was to directly influence the “authorities and people of Texas” and convince them that joining the American Union was the best way to protect their interests. Among the list of the claimed benefits for Texas, the Secretary of State, bearing the words of the President, suggested that, if they did not pass the annexation resolutions, foreign influence, “the bane of all Republics,” would divide and weaken them, their slaves would be taken from them, their considerably larger and more powerful northern neighbor, the United States, would become jealous of them, and they may find themselves in a hostile conflict with the U.S. resulting in “lasting injuries.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:130-131

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 6:130-131

The “annex now, details later” sentiment was an approach Secretary Buchanan reflected often in his writings. Not least of all the things unveiled in this letter, the simple act of sending an undercover agent to a friendly country and prospective member of the Union for the purpose of asserting American interests above their own was a troubling act of empire and a debasement of the principles of self-determination and popular sovereignty. Each of these points was, of course, conveyed as harmlessly and amicably as possible by one with great talent in that regard, but the message to be conveyed remained urgent, ominous, and suggestive of a willingness to undermine legitimate democratic proceedings with covert propaganda to further the interests of the state.

The Severance of Diplomacy

General Almonte, the Minister of the Mexican Legation to Washington, penned a letter of protest addressed to both the Secretary of State John Calhoun and the President, John Tyler, dated March 10th, 1845, regarding the House of Representatives having voted on annexing Texas in the affirmative. He expressed regret at the “despoiling of a friendly nation” by “an act of aggression the most unjust of which can be found recorded in the annals of modern history...on the part of the American government.”⁶⁷ Almonte further declared his mission in Washington terminated, and he demanded his passports. President Polk’s administration began that week, and it fell to James Buchanan, the new Secretary of State, to respond. Buchanan deflected blame by stating that, having passed Congress and been signed by the Executive, the matter was then out of that government’s hands; stopping the admission of Texas to the Union could be accomplished by “nothing but the refusal of Texas to ratify the terms and conditions on which

⁶⁷ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:119

her admission depends.” His letter to General Almonte finished with the soon-to-be ubiquitous sincere regrets, earnest hopes for future reconciliation, and cheerful declarations of upcoming “strenuous efforts...devoted to the amicable adjustment of every cause of complaint.”⁶⁸

Following the suspension of diplomacy between Mexico and the United States, the foremost goal of the American government was to restore diplomatic intercourse if possible while remaining “consistent with the national honor.”⁶⁹ The Polk administration’s response to this situation was to send a spy to Mexico City, and W.S. Parrott was selected for the job. Forewarned that success would require the “perfect command of temper in all situations and under all circumstances, and [his] prudence in refraining from the least intimation that [he is] a Government agent, unless this should become indispensable to the success of [his] mission,” Parrott was reminded that his mission was “delicate and important in character and may involve the public peace.” From there the letter takes on the tone of a Cold War espionage story:

You will proceed without delay by the most expeditious route to the City of Mexico, and will ascertain the temper and tone of the present Mexican Government towards the United States. Such previous knowledge is necessary to enable you to decide upon the manner of approaching the chief officers of that government. From the nature of the case, it is impossible to give you specific instructions as to your mode of proceeding. Nearly all must depend upon your own prudence and discretion. The great object of your mission and that which you will constantly keep 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, as it certainly is, 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 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. The policy which the President will pursue towards Mexico is best illustrated by the following extract from my note to General Almonte under the date 10th instant, in answer to his note to Mr. Calhoun of the 6th, protesting against the Resolution of the late Congress for annexing Texas to the United States, and demanding his passports. [...] Whilst, therefore, you ought not to conceal that the reünion [*sic*] of Texas with the United States is already decreed and can

⁶⁸ Ibid. 6:118-120

⁶⁹ Ibid. 6:132

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. You will ascertain the nature and causes of the late revolution in Mexico, and whether the new Government will most probably be permanent, the character of the chiefs of that revolution, and what are their dispositions towards the United States and other foreign nations. [...] If upon your arrival at Vera Cruz you should find that the government of Mexico have commenced open hostilities against the United States, you will return immediately. In that unfortunate event we shall be prepared to act promptly and vigorously in maintaining the rights and honor of the country.⁷⁰

This letter revealed that the U.S. was already prepared for and expecting the coming of a war with Mexico, and that all declarations of friendly desires and hopes for continued peace were simply matters of maintaining the most advantageous position possible in pursuing further state interests at the lowest cost possible. Another letter written the following day, March 29th, 1845, to Mr. Wilson Shannon, the head of the American Legation to Mexico, further illustrated the American position towards Mexico and the methods the U.S. was undertaking in regards to state interests relevant to Mexico:

After a careful examination of your controversy with that Minister [Mr. Rejon, Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs], he [President Polk] regrets that you have assumed the high responsibility of suspending all diplomatic intercourse with the Mexican Government without the previous authority of your own government. The President, whilst expressing this regret, is fully sensible of the provocation which you have received, and has no doubt of the purity and patriotism of the motives by which you were actuated. The relative position of the United States towards Mexico is best sustained by firmness of action accompanied by moderation of language. Power and true greatness such as belong to our country ought never to waste themselves in words towards a feeble and distracted sister Republic, no matter how much her minister may have scolded. It is probable that nothing could have been more agreeable to the Mexican Government than to learn from your note of the 8th of November, 1844, to Mr. Rejon, that unless his notes... should be withdrawn, all further official intercourse between you and the Government of Mexico would be suspended until you could hear from your own government. His prompt refusal to withdraw these notes has placed you in such a position that you have never since been able to press upon Mexico the numerous claims which we have upon her justice, independent of the Texan question. [...] It is his [President Polk] purpose and desire to adjust all the other questions in dispute between the two Republics upon the most fair and liberal terms. [...] Should Mexico commence hostilities against us, we shall be prepared

⁷⁰ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:132-134

promptly and efficiently to maintain the interests and honor of the country, but nothing short of actual hostilities or the plunder and imprisonment of our own citizens will induce the President to depart from the tone and language of conciliation.⁷¹

This letter to Mr. Shannon, more than any of the previously discussed letters, established the relative power between the United States and Mexico as heavily favoring the United States. Furthermore, it established the irredeemably racist paternalism exhibited toward Mexico and the realpolitik approach of the Polk administration. Once again, war was already on the table as a realistically possible contingency, and one which would be vigorously enacted if commenced. In this letter, as in the previous one to Mr. Parrott, insults and impugnation of American honor were fully anticipated on the part of the Mexico; however, Secretary Buchanan and President Polk advised their representatives that these words would merely be words, while the territory, resources, wealth and power gained by the United States in exchange for these insults were real, physically tangible, and lasting. This approach to Mexican-American relations was not the result of forward-thinking American politicians; it was the result of significant American advantages in wealth and power combined with a racist outlook on the Mexican people as inferior to white people. The statement, “power and true greatness such as belong to our country ought never to waste themselves in words towards a feeble and distracted sister Republic,” conclusively illustrated that, even if the United States did not actually occupy a position of such relative strength as to open the door to imperial policies, they surely viewed themselves as occupying such a position. While this cannot conclusively prove that the U.S. built an empire during these events, it certainly does show that imperial ambitions and preconditions were present in 1845.

With the annexation of the Texan Republic progressing through the national legislatures of both Texas and the United States, President Polk selected other targets as major goals of his

⁷¹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:134-135

administration. Among the largest of his goals was the partition of the Oregon Country with the British Empire and the annexation of the portion consigned to the United States. Equally important to Polk's administration was the acquisition of the California and New Mexico territories from Mexico. Although he preferred to accomplish all this peacefully, he was willing to push the issue as far as was required for success.⁷²

New Opportunities pique Interest in California

When rebellion began to flare in California, the U.S. Department of State was made aware by letter from Thomas O. Larkin, the U.S. Consul in Monterey, California. In his reply, the Secretary of State James Buchanan noted that "we could take no part" in the conflict there, "unless [Mexico] should commence hostilities against the United States." He further claimed, "This Government has no ambitious aspirations to gratify and no desire to extend our federal system over more territory than we already possess, unless by the free and spontaneous wish of the independent people of adjoining territories. The exercise of compulsion or improper influence to accomplish such a result, would be repugnant both to the policy and principles of this Government."⁷³ At best, this second statement would prove to be purposefully misleading. In the same letter, dated October 17th, 1845, Secretary Buchanan further elaborated the official, public U.S. stance on California:

But whilst these are the sentiments of the President, he could not view with indifference the transfer of California to Great Britain or any other European Power. The system of colonization by foreign monarchies on the North American continent must and will be resisted by the United States. It could result in nothing but evil to the colonists under their dominion who would naturally desire to secure for themselves the blessings of liberty by means of republican institutions; whilst it must prove highly prejudicial to the best interests of the United States. Nor would it in the end benefit such foreign monarchies.

⁷² *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:135

⁷³ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:255

On the contrary, even Great Britain, by the acquisition of California, would sow the seeds of future war and disaster for herself; because there is no political truth more certain than this fine Province could not long be held in vassalage by any European Power. The emigration to it of people from the United States would soon render this impossible. [...] It appears that Mr. Rea, the Agent of the British Hudson Bay Company, furnished the Californians with arms and money in October and November, last, to enable them to expel the Mexicans from the country; and you state that this policy has been reversed, and now no doubt exists there, but that the Mexican troops about to invade the province have been sent for this purpose at the instigation of the British Government; and that 'it is rumored that two English houses in Mexico have become bound to the new General to accept his drafts for funds to pay his troops for eighteen months.' Connected with these circumstances, the appearance of a British Vice Consul and a French Consul in California at the present crises, without any apparent commercial business, is well calculated to produce the impression, that their respective governments entertain designs on that country which must necessarily be hostile to its interests. On all proper occasions, you should not fail prudently to warn the Government and people of California of the danger of such an interference to their peace and prosperity; to inspire them with a jealousy of European dominion, and to arouse in their bosoms that love of liberty and independence so natural to the American Continent. Whilst I repeat that this Government does not, under existing circumstances, intend to interfere between Mexico and California, it would vigorously interpose to prevent the latter from becoming a British or French Colony. [...] Whilst the President will make no effort and use no influence to induce California to become one of the free and independent States of this Union, yet if the people should desire to unite their destiny with ours, they would be received as brethren.⁷⁴

The letter to the U.S. consul in California ended by adding the tasks of a spy to Mr. Larkin's functions there. He was explicitly warned to "take care not to awaken the jealousy of the French and English agents there by assuming any other than your Consular character." A second spy, Lt. Archibald H. Gillespie of the Marine Corps, was already en route to him in Monterey, and the two of them were tasked to provide intelligence on current events, the general disposition of Californians to the U.S., the Californian population numbers and their fieldable armies.⁷⁵ They were to discern the "proportion of Mexican, American, British, and French citizens and the feelings of each class towards the United States, the names of and character of the principal persons in the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Departments of the Government

⁷⁴ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:276-277

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 6:277

and of other distinguished and influential citizens.” Beyond demographics, the two were told to report on California’s financial systems and resources, its commerce with other nations, its products that may be of use to the U.S., the products of the U.S. that are in demand there. Finally, they were also to discover where in California the “principal American settlements exist, the rate at which the settlers have been and still are increasing in number; - from what portions of the Union they come and by what routes they arrive.”⁷⁶

While there is much that can be said in regard to the above letter, the importance of any such analysis increases substantially in light of a second letter sent by the Secretary on November 10th, 1845, to the U.S. minister in Mexico City, John Slidell. This second letter, even longer than the first, explains in excruciating detail the exact demands of the United States Slidell was to make in negotiations with the Mexican government over territorial disputes and international debts.

After detailing to John Slidell how to negotiate for the land claims of Texas, Secretary Buchanan turned the discussion to New Mexico. He maintained the façade of a hopeful friend, but that façade remained stiffly formal and vaguely threatening. The discussion’s transition from Texas began by acknowledging that, despite claiming half the territory of New Mexico due to the course of the Rio Grande, Texans had never possessed that area. He then noted that the Native Americans in the region were raiding settlements there and compelling Mexico to spend hefty resources in its defense, suggesting that these costs outweigh Mexico’s returns. Claiming it to be “greatly desired that our boundary with Mexico” would, following these negotiations, “be established in such a manner as to preclude all future difficulties and disputes,” Buchanan ominously suggested that, “should it remain a Mexican province,” it would “become a subject of

⁷⁶ Ibid. 6:277-278

dispute ... between those who, I trust, are destined in future to be always friends.”⁷⁷ After reiterating the supposed Mexican benefits of ceding New Mexico to the United States, he went further by saying, “it would seem to be equally the interest of both Powers, that New Mexico should belong to the United States.”⁷⁸

Assuring Slidell that “the President desires to deal liberally by Mexico,” Buchanan then blatantly revealed Polk’s administration’s goal there by releasing Slidell to pay Mexico five million dollars on top of any indemnities they may claim in exchange for the border being drawn along New Mexico’s western edge northward to the 42nd parallel. If Mexico refused this offer, Slidell was instructed to offer forgiving the indemnities claimed by the U.S. in exchange for the full territory claimed by Texas in New Mexico. The section on New Mexico ends with Buchanan remarking that it was “scarcely to be supposed ... that Mexico would relinquish five millions of dollars[*sic*] for the sake of retaining the narrow strip of territory... west of the Rio Grande.”⁷⁹

With “there is another subject of vast importance... Great Britain and France have designs upon California,” the official instructions began the next topic of negotiations. After repeating the U.S. stance on California from the October 17th, 1845 letter to Thomas Larkin, Secretary Buchanan instructed John Slidell to “ascertain whether Mexico has any intention of ceding it” to either of them. Slidell was carefully warned to do everything in his power to prevent any such Mexican cession if one was discovered, and it was recommended that he contact Thomas Larkin as well. Of course, all this was to be strictly secret and kept from “fall[ing] into improper hands.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:302

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 6:303

⁷⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:303

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 6:304

That is where the similarities to the October 17th Larkin letter ended, and the following passage made bare the true ambitions and intentions of the U.S. federal government in the American Southwest. Buchanan's façade of friendly hopefulness in equal sister republics rapidly crumbled as he added to Slidell's instructions:

The possession of the Bay and harbor of San Francisco is all important to the United States. The advantages to us of its acquisition are so striking, that it would be a waste of time to enumerate them here. If all these should be turned against our country, by the cession of California to Great Britain, our principal commercial rival, the consequences would be most disastrous. The Government of California is now but nominally dependent on Mexico; and it is more than doubtful whether her authority will ever be reinstated. 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. [...] Money would be no object when compared with the value of the acquisition. Still the attempt must be made with great prudence and caution, and in such a manner as not to alarm the jealousy of the Mexican Government. 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 [*sic*] of dollars for the cession. Should you deem it expedient, you are authorized to offer this sum for a boundary, running due West from the southern extremity of New Mexico to the Pacific ocean [*sic*], or from any other point on its western boundary, which would embrace Monterey [Monterey, California] within our limits. If Monterey cannot be obtained, you may, if necessary, in addition to the assumption of those claims, offer twenty millions [*sic*] of dollars for any boundary, commencing at any point on the western line of New Mexico, and running due West to the Pacific, so as to include the bay and harbor of San Francisco. The larger the territory South of this Bay, the better.⁸¹

The final segment of Slidell's negotiation directions was a sudden, significant shift away from all previously stated positions. The formal air of stiff friendliness was maintained all throughout, but following the revelation of U.S. ambitions in New Mexico and California, this attitude was clearly a mere formality, if not a purposeful concealment of intentions.

Furthermore, the course of diplomacy between the United States and Mexico was staggering regardless of new pursuits of hidden agendas. Mexican independence was

⁸¹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:304-305

purposefully unrecognized for years as a means of placating Spain while Secretary John Quincy Adams and Minister Luis Onís debated a treaty that would prove highly advantageous to the U.S. Once this was completed and Florida was American territory, Washington quickly extended recognition to Mexico and several other former Spanish colonies; in doing this, the power of one of America's three primary New World rivals, France, Great Britain, and Spain, was significantly reduced.⁸² When Texas rebelled, the United States refused assistance to its new, nominal friend in quelling the border territory's rebellion. Instead, the U.S. Army was deployed into Mexican territory without permission, where it occupied Nacogdoches.⁸³ For a decade Congress refused to annex Texas despite its direct request to join the Union and Texas' status as *de facto* independent and sovereign. This was done in spite of numerous attempts to acquire Texas from Mexico prior to the Texan Revolution as a land purchase.⁸⁴

Annexation was finally pursued only after the U.S. felt that future annexation attempts would quickly diminish in achievability, foreign missions in Texas were actively pursuing agendas detrimental to U.S. interests, the United States' ability to claim annexation was not in contravention of international law had increased, and the U.S. had positioned itself such that it could annex Texas, New Mexico, and California simultaneously without guaranteeing a war.⁸⁵ This bore all the hallmarks of long-term planning and strategic positioning on a stage purposefully set to maximize chances of success and minimize culpability.⁸⁶ The United States struck at a time of relative weakness from a position of relative strength, and it only revealed its cards when it defensibly could claim to have done no wrong in the process.⁸⁷ According to

⁸² *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7:419

⁸³ Gene Brack, "Mexican Opinion and the Texan Revolution," *Southwest Historical Quarterly* 72, no 2 (October 1968), 177

⁸⁴ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:23

⁸⁵ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:558-559; 562-563; 564

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 3:568

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 3:578

President Grant, “the occupation, separation, and annexation were, from the inception of the movement to its final consummation, a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union. . . .The fact is, annexationists wanted more territory than they could possibly lay claim to, as part of the new acquisition.”⁸⁸ He later described the lands gained via the Mexican-American War as “an empire and of incalculable value,” and that, in the pursuit of procuring that empire, the U.S. conspired to “provoke a fight, but it was essential that Mexico commence it.”⁸⁹ This is the art of empire-building, and the evidence for this only continued to gather as events moved forward.

Texas Annexed by act of Congress

In the meantime, Great Britain, France, and Mexico remained engaged extensively in Texas in last-ditch efforts to block U.S. annexation. The English Chargé d'affaires in Texas, Sir Charles Elliot, was so publicly active in his efforts to keep Texas out of Union that he provided the U.S. an opening to enact “one of the grandest moral spectacles which has ever been presented to mankind” by completely concealing the equally active, ongoing American efforts to achieve annexation.⁹⁰ The intended spectacle to be displayed was that, relative to the European powers at play in Texas, the United States would appear to avoid “even the least appearance of interference with the free action of the people of Texas.”⁹¹ Charles Elliot obtained terms from Mexico to be proposed to Texas in early summer, 1845 that offered Texas Mexican recognition of their independence and sovereignty on the condition that Texas remain independent of the United

⁸⁸ Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 23

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 24; 30

⁹⁰ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:165

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 6:165

States.⁹² It was further reported that, if the Texans were to refuse his offer, seven thousand Mexican soldiers were waiting across the Rio Grande to invade Texas, and Elliot was expected to begin sending their commander intelligence as soon as he knew he wouldn't defeat annexation.⁹³

Annexation moved forward despite the growing international opposition. On April 12th, 1844, President Tyler's efforts to reopen annexation negotiations concluded in a treaty with Texas for the latter's annexation to the United States, but it would fail to be ratified in the Senate.⁹⁴ March of the following year, Congress passed a two-part joint resolution for annexing Texas and sent it to the Texan government for consideration; the Texan government formed a convention to vote on the terms of annexation and if accepted, draft a constitution.⁹⁵ The convention ratified annexation on July 4, 1845, and Texas was formally accepted into the Union as an equal state "by the act of our Congress of the twenty-ninth of December, 1845."⁹⁶

During the process of considering the proposed terms for annexation, threats from Mexico regarding Texas and independence versus annexation, such as those announced to Texas by English Charge d'affaires Charles Elliot, presented mounting tensions and worries for the security of Texans. Texas requested that the U.S. Army take occupancy of the State as soon as possible to provide for their defense while drafting a constitution and awaiting congressional approval of statehood. The Polk administration responded that they could not deploy the military into Texas until the terms of annexation had been formally accepted, making Texas official American territory.⁹⁷ Immediately following the acceptance of the joint resolutions of

⁹² *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:563; *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:324

⁹³ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:171

⁹⁴ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 2:606; 3:561; *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:321

⁹⁵ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:321; 7:143

⁹⁶ "Texo-American Affairs in Europe," *New York Herald* (New York, NY), July 6th, 1845; *The Works of James Buchanan*, 7:141-142

⁹⁷ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 7:142-143

annexation, the U.S. Army entered Texas from Fort Jessup, Louisiana. A unit of dragoons rode overland to Corpus Christi to make a public show of presence, but the majority of the Army of Occupancy, under General Taylor, was transported there by ship through the Gulf of Mexico. The force, comprising over half of the entirety of the regular U.S. military, encamped outside Corpus Christi in August, 1845.⁹⁸ Both the army and the navy were given explicit orders to restrict themselves to defensive positions and avoid any hint of aggressive intentions.⁹⁹

The final, formal annexation of Texas did nothing to Mexican-American relations except exacerbate tensions in an already volatile situation; however, the maintenance of peace was still within practical reach for the two North American countries. To keep war at bay, diplomacy still needed to be reinstated as quickly and amicably as possible. W.S. Parrott's mission to Mexico City had proven successful, and John Slidell was dispatched to the Mexican capital in November of 1845 as the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, the head of the new American Legation to Mexico. His instructions on how to proceed in that city have already been detailed in part as they relate to California and New Mexico, but an equally striking task was also assigned to the new American Minister: demand Mexican payment of indemnities.¹⁰⁰ This would finally lead to the eruption of armed conflict.

The Reopening of Diplomacy

As already mentioned above, the letter to John Slidell was written on November 10th, 1845, and the process of formally uniting Texas and the United States was in its penultimate stage at that date. Indeed, Texas was already claimed by Washington as federal territory of the

⁹⁸ "Report of the Secretary of War," *Semi-Weekly Ohio Statesmen*, (Columbus, OH), December 26, 1845

⁹⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:323

¹⁰⁰ See page 30 for previously discussed portions of this letter

United States at the time of this letter. The American Consul in Mexico City, John Black, had written Washington in October, reporting that the Mexican government had accepted Polk's request of reopening diplomacy, and the government's response was the tasks assigned to John Slidell. The letter detailing his new job and instructions in that capacity began by acknowledging the "present crisis of the relations between the two countries" and solemnly reminding him of the "vast importance" of the office he had been appointed to.¹⁰¹ His general task was to "counteract the influence of foreign powers" and "restore those ancient relations of peace and good will which formerly existed" with Mexico.¹⁰² Before getting into specifics, Buchanan wrote for a while on the history of American relations with Mexico. He mentioned the "early and decided stand which the people of the United States and their Government" made in favor of the independence of former Spanish colonies in the Americas, and he claimed that this had earned America their goodwill.¹⁰³ However well these former colonies viewed the United States in their infancy, the Mexican people's sympathies had "since [been] estranged from us" as a result of "unfortunate events."¹⁰⁴ Buchanan's point in that paragraph was to tell Slidell that the people of Mexico "ought to feel assured that their prosperity is our prosperity," and that "we cannot but have the strongest desire to see them elevated, under a free, stable, and Republican Government, to a high rank among the nations of the earth."¹⁰⁵

He then spent another lengthy paragraph comparing the "peculiar" and "free forms" of government enjoyed by North and South Americans to the "monarchical institutions of Europe."¹⁰⁶ He suggested that the free republics of the Americas should form an "American

¹⁰¹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:294

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 6:294

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 6:294; 294-295

¹⁰⁴ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:295

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 6:295

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 6:295

system of policy” centered around keeping Europe and European colonies out of the two American continents.¹⁰⁷ To this end, Slidell was clearly instructed to firmly refuse any offers of mediation on the part of any European power. Secretary Buchanan asserted, “The United States will never afford, by their conduct, the slightest pretext for any interference from that quarter in American concerns. Separated as we are from the old world...the march of free Government on this continent must not be trammelled[*sic*] by...European powers.”¹⁰⁸ As the Secretary went on, his words became increasingly reminiscent of imperial spheres of influence then being established in Asia by European empires. This rhetoric continued for a short, third paragraph that only increased in intensity. Buchanan claimed that attempts to exert influence or establish colonies in the New World would inevitably end in failure as the “expansive energy of free institutions” spread to the colonists, and revolution would turn attempted colonies into more “free and independent States.”¹⁰⁹

After casually positing that the United States had only the best intentions for the welfare of Mexico and indirectly presenting an American sphere of influence as a sort of community service, Secretary Buchanan outlined Slidell’s first specific task:

The first subject which will demand your attention is, the claims of our citizens on Mexico. It would be useless here to trace the history of these claims and the outrages from which they spring. The archives of your Legation will furnish all the necessary information on this subject. The history of no civilized nation presents, in so short a period of time, so many wanton attacks upon the rights of persons and property as have been endured by the citizens of the United States from the Mexican authorities. These never would have been tolerated by the United States from any nation on the face of the earth, except a neighbouring and sister Republic. President Jackson, in his message to the Senate, of the 7th February, 1837, uses the following language with great justice and truth: “The length of time since some of these injuries have been committed, the repeated and unavailing applications for redress, the wanton character of some of the outrages upon the property and persons of our citizens, upon the officers and flag of the United

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 6:295

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 6:295

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 6:295-296

States, independent of recent insults to this Government and people by the late Extraordinary Mexican Minister, would justify, in the eyes of all nations, immediate war.” Still, he was unwilling to resort to this last extremity, without “giving to Mexico one more opportunity to atone for the past, before we take redress into our own hands.” Accordingly, he recommended, “that an Act be passed, authorizing reprisals, and the use of the naval force of the United States by the Executive against Mexico, to enforce them, in the event of a refusal by the Mexican Government to come to an amicable adjustment of the matters in controversy between us, upon another demand thereof, made from on board one of our vessels of war on the coast of Mexico.”¹¹⁰

The talk of the alleged indemnities, outrages, and repeated refusals to pay went on for pages and would comprise a third of the entire letter.¹¹¹

After this extensive and colorful review of the seemingly unending Mexican depredations, Secretary Buchanan charged Slidell “in a prudent and friendly spirit, to impress the Mexican Government with a sense of their injustice towards the United States, as well as of the patient forbearance which has been exercised by us.”¹¹² He insisted that the patience exercised in this regard could not be continued much longer, and the claims “must now speedily be adjusted in a satisfactory manner.”¹¹³ The Secretary immediately acknowledged the impossibility of Slidell’s task by asking, “But in what manner can this duty be performed consistently with the amicable spirit of your mission?”¹¹⁴ To this point in the letter, the annexation of Texas had not been acknowledged at all, but the purpose behind that lack of acknowledgement was obvious. It was to be maintained that the United States had done no wrong in annexing Texas, and the Mexican claims of American-inflicted injury in the loss of Texas were groundless. Such an approach was wholly inconsistent with the claimed desire for continuing peace between friendly and equal sister republics.

¹¹⁰ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:296

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 6:296-299

¹¹² *Ibid.* 6:299

¹¹³ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:299

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 6:299

“The fact is but too well known to the world,” Buchanan continued his letter, “that the Mexican Government are not now in a condition to satisfy these claims by the payment of money.”¹¹⁵ The solution to this impossible situation, as told to Minister Slidell by Buchanan, was to be found in the annexation of Texas: “This question of boundary may, therefore, be adjusted in such a manner between the two Republics, as to cast the burden of the debt due to American claimants upon their own Government, whilst it will do no injury to Mexico.”¹¹⁶ He then reviewed the history of ownership over the lands now claimed by Texas, concluding that there absolutely could not exist “any very serious doubt” of the U.S. claim’s validity.¹¹⁷ Before the conversation moved on, Slidell was given explicit orders regarding negotiations over the Texan border: “The independence of Texas must be considered a settled fact, and is not to be called into question.”¹¹⁸

From there, the letter entered into the section on negotiating the cession of New Mexico and California, as already discussed above. Briefly summarized, the maximum offers Slidell was authorized to make were dependent upon the degree of territory Mexico would willingly part with. In exchange for the full territory claimed by Texas, the United States would forgive Mexico’s debts. If Mexico was willing to part with New Mexico, they would receive up to an additional five million dollars after the forgiving of their debts. If Mexico was willing to part with California and Slidell can learn of that willingness without revealing America’s ambitions to have it, he was allowed, “without hesitation,” to offer an additional twenty-five million on top of the forgiving of Mexican debts.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 6:299

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 6:300

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 6:300

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 6:301

¹¹⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:300-305

Before this lengthy and telling letter to John Slidell finally concluded, Secretary Buchanan raised a final point regarding the profound implications of this mission's success or failure, and the difficulty he would encounter in his efforts in Mexico City:

Your mission is one of the most delicate and important which has ever been confided to a citizen of the United States. The people to whom you will be sent are proverbially jealous, and they have been irritated against the United States by recent events and the intrigues of foreign Powers. To conciliate their good will is indispensable to your success. I need not warn you against wounding their national vanity. You may probably have to endure their unjust reproaches with equanimity. It would be difficult to raise a point of honor between the United States and so feeble and degraded a Power as Mexico. This reflection will teach you to bear and forbear much for the sake of accomplishing the great objects of your mission. We are sincerely desirous to be on good terms with Mexico, and the President reposes implicit confidence in your patriotism, sagacity, and ability to restore the ancient relations of friendship between the two Republics.¹²⁰

One month and a week later, Secretary Buchanan wrote another letter to Slidell updating his instructions. The authority to forgive all debts owed the United States by Mexico was restricted to all debts preceding 1839 or included within “the provisions of the unratified Convention of 20 November, 1843, had they arisen prior to its date.”¹²¹ Any debts claimed by Mexico that had not been diplomatically recognized by an official commission on indemnities as well as any debts incurred following the most recent commission's conclusion were not to be included. To help offset this new restriction and increase Slidell's persuasiveness in general, a sum of six million dollars had been made newly available for immediate withdrawal upon the completion of a treaty along the guidelines previously set out in the November letter's instructions.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 6:305-306

¹²¹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:345-346

War

In late January, a third set of instructions was mailed to John Slidell pertaining to the criteria under which he should demand his passports and terminate his mission in Mexico. If the Mexican government refused to receive him, there would be nothing left to do “but to take the redress of the wrongs of [our] citizens into [our] own hands.”¹²² The ultimate decision upon how to proceed in that situation was left up to him, but he was told to behave and speak in such a way that cast the blame of diplomacy’s failure on Mexico. After warning Mexico of the “inevitable consequences” of their refusal to receive him, he was to announce that he would be staying in Mexico City until Washington sent updated instructions.¹²³ Furthermore, if a revolution replaced the government there or “a change in ministry” happened, he was to “ascertain the views and wishes of the new Government or administration.”¹²⁴ The impetus for these new instructions was then addressed directly:

It would seem to be the desire of the Mexican Government to evade the redress of the real injuries of our citizens by confirming the negotiations to the adjustment of a pecuniary indemnity for its imaginary rights over Texas. This cannot be tolerated. The two subjects must proceed hand in hand. They can never be separated. It is evidently with the view of thus limiting the negotiation, that the Mexican authorities have been quibbling about the form of your credentials; without ever asking whether you had instructions and full powers to adjust the Texan boundary. The advice of the Council of Government seems to have been dictated by the same spirit. They do not advise the Mexican Government to refuse to receive you; but, assuming the fact that the government had agreed to receive a Plenipotentiary to treat upon the subject of Texas alone, they infer that it is not bound to receive an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary without this limitation. In the mean time the President, in anticipation of the final refusal of the Mexican Government to receive you, has ordered the army of Texas to advance to take position on the left bank of the Rio Grande, and has directed that a strong fleet shall be immediately assembled in the Gulph [*sic*] of Mexico.¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid. 6:360

¹²³ Ibid. 6:361

¹²⁴ Ibid. 6:361

¹²⁵ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:361-362

By this point in the course of events, Mexican-American relations had begun a trend of deterioration that would continue unabated until the two nations were at war. The administration of President Herrera had accepted President Polk's overtures and begun the resumption of diplomacy, but between the time of that acceptance and the arrival of John Slidell in Mexico City, domestic Mexican forces of public opinion had turned against Herrera so vehemently that he was forced to stall Slidell from beginning negotiations. General Paredes staged an insurrection against Herrera and seized the federal government of Mexico.¹²⁶ Instructions as to how to proceed in such an event had already been sent by letter on January 20th, but Secretary Buchanan repeated these instructions in greater detail upon learning of Paredes' coup:

The President is sincerely desirous to preserve peace with Mexico. Both inclination and policy dictate this course. Should the Mexican Government, however, finally refuse to receive you, the cup of forbearance will then have been exhausted. [...] In view of this serious alternative, every honorable effort should be made before a final rupture. You should wait patiently for a final decision on the question of your reception, unless it should be unreasonably protracted or you should clearly discover that they are trifling with this Government. [...] Much must necessarily be left to your own discretion. In general terms, I may say, that you should take care to act with such prudence and firmness that it may appear manifest to the people of the United States and to the world that a rupture could not be honorably avoided. [...] In addition to the naval force already in the Gulph [*sic*], the Frigates Cumberland, Potomac, and Raritan have been ordered to rendezvous before Vera Cruz as speedily as possible. Should war become inevitable, the President will be prepared to conduct it with vigor. [...] Your request for instructions relative to the mortgage stipulations entered into by the Government of Mexico with their foreign creditors on the proceeds of the public lands in California, New Mexico, Chihuahua, Senora, and Tamaulipas, presents a subject of considerable difficulty. To attempt, however, to obtain the previous consent of these creditors, would be almost certainly to defeat your negotiation. I can devise no other mode of obviating this difficulty than that of withholding for their benefit the payment of a part of the stipulated sum until their release can be obtained, should Mexico agree to such a stipulation in the Treaty. [...] If no other alternative remains but either to fail in the negotiation or to accept such a title as Mexico can convey, then conclude the treaty upon the terms authorized by your original instructions, without reference to the alleged mortgage. In that event, we must leave for future arrangement the claims, if any such justly exist, of the foreign creditors of Mexico. A great measure of public policy must not be defeated by an attempt previously to adjust the pecuniary claims of these creditors.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Ibid. 6:479

¹²⁷ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:363-365

The Paredes government sharply refused to receive Slidell, and Slidell demanded his passports. In response, General Taylor was ordered to move south to edge of the claimed American territory, where he set up a fortified camp along the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros. The Mexican garrison in Matamoros sent him two messages before the opening engagement of the Mexican-American War; the second message was simply a notification that hostilities had begun. Polk's administration had successfully provoked Mexico into initiating contact, and he requested that Congress declare war: "But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war. As war exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country."¹²⁸ Congress voted, and two days later, on May 13, 1846, President Polk issued a proclamation of a congressional declaration of war: "By the act of the Republic of Mexico, a state of war exists between that Government and the United States."¹²⁹

Was it Imperialism?

Albert Gallatin wrote that it is important to bear in mind that the indemnities themselves were not the cause of war. He argued that the annexation of Texas was "tantamount to a declaration of war against Mexico," on the grounds that Mexico was formally at war with Texas

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 6:481

¹²⁹ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:483

at the time of annexation.¹³⁰ The relative weakness of Mexico kept this from being the result of annexation: “Mexico, sensible of her weakness, declined war.”¹³¹ Gallatin described this sequence of events as intentionally planned by the proponents of annexation, and the above review of the contemporary documents is consistent with his analysis. From these documents, it appears that the leaders of the United States were genuinely interested in avoiding war as long as possible, if not entirely; however, the preference of avoiding war was clearly not strong enough to override the territorial ambitions harbored by the same leaders. Rather, the preference for peace was, at least in part, a cover for keeping the price of expansion as low as possible.

Was that enough to constitute imperialism? Did the United States unilaterally provoke military action, use either military or compelling influence to impose state interests on foreign powers using relative power advantages, actively seek to increase its resources and territories without regard for foreign sovereignty, or employ racism as either a justification for actions or means of centralizing authority? Was the sequence of events examined coincidental or deliberately strategized?

The relevance of the first category – the unilateral provocation of military action – is self-evident. Despite efforts to avoid war, whether sincere or feigned, the commencement of hostile activity was provoked by an indefatigable pursuit of U.S. interests by the Polk administration that, despite being driven in part by opposing interests, refused to publicly acknowledge rival claims, their validity, or opposing interests. There was extensive allusion to foreign interference during the 1844-1846 period, but this phrase was either privately used in government correspondence or, when used in public proclamations, cast in such a light that implied the U.S. had the moral high ground. The latter use, while recognizing foreign interests and claims, only

¹³⁰ *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 3:562

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 3:564

tangentially acknowledged their presence as a threat, and the presence of fellow states' interests was never approached as a multilateral situation with potential multilateral solutions. Indeed, specific instructions were meted out to accept foreign mediation under no circumstances. Texas, California, and New Mexico were approached unilaterally solely according to the interests of the United States; this process provoked the Mexican-American War.

The use relative power advantages in exerting either influence or military strength in attempt to compel foreign compliance with American interests is observable with both Spain and Mexico in 1810-1821 and 1844-1846, respectively. General Jackson's incursions into Spanish Florida during the Seminole Wars were in full violation of Spanish sovereignty, and they coincided with contemporary revolutions in Spanish America. His expeditions there were domestically authorized by legislation allowing for the seizure of West Florida and in the event of Spanish loss of control, military deployment into East Florida. The passage of this legislation came at the tail-end of the Napoleonic Wars. As the Adams-Onis Treaty neared completion, American recognition of former Spanish colonies as independent was withheld in the interest of finalizing the treaty, which ceded Florida to the United States. Spain was in no position to back out of the treaty. American military assets already occupied West Florida and had recently demonstrated the capacity to conquer East Florida; in exchange for the peaceful transfer for Spanish Florida to the U.S., Washington was dropping rival claims to Spanish borderlands in the west. Rebellions throughout the rest of Spanish America were taxing Madrid's strength, and the conflict with the U.S. that would result from refusing to ratify the treaty was likely to add the United States to Spain's New World enemies' number. Spain was cornered, and the U.S. exerted its relative superior strength to great effect.

Mexico felt the pressure of American influence in Texas early on. The U.S. Army occupied Nacogdoches during the Texan Revolution, and the U.S. Navy briefly occupied Monterey in the final weeks leading up to the Mexican-American War.¹³² Substantial American military assets were stationed along the Sabine River at the Louisiana-Texas border waiting for the annexation of Texas as a federal territory, and they promptly entered Texas once that was officially done. After annexing Texas without regard for Mexico's valid rivaling claims, the Polk administration's plan was to press Mexico's economic weakness for greater territorial concessions, and if Mexico refused, the U.S. would demand immediate payment of outstanding debts sourced from Mexican indemnities. If Mexico refused to settle these debts, the U.S. military would extract payment forcibly. Washington knew of Mexico's financial inability to pay off the debts, so they would accept the rest of Mexico's northern territory as recompense. The third category, the active pursuit of expansion at foreign expense, is equally observable in the coercive diplomacy and high demands foisted on Mexico, and this is reinforced by observing that the same territorial demands were made "a sine qua non of any treaty" during the Mexican-American War.¹³³

Racism played a moderately active role in the pursuit of the formal transfer of sovereignty over the Southwest, where it was made most evident in occasional statements made in defense of annexing either Texas or the entire Southwest. An excellent example of one such statement was given by Buchanan in an 1844 speech: "It is utterly impossible that a nation chiefly composed of native-born Americans, who carry with them all the principles and safeguards of political liberty, can ever remain citizens of Mexico, where all these blessings are practically unknown. Besides, in the very nature of things, our race of men can never be

¹³² *The Works of James Buchanan*, 7:275

¹³³ *Ibid.* 7:274

subjected to the imbecile and indolent Mexican race.”¹³⁴ This is the civilizing mission rationale for expansion, but it was not as heavily applied to Texas and Mexico in the 1840s as it would be later in the century in the Philippines by Americans or in Africa by European empires.

Nonetheless, it was present among the aspects of the continental U.S. expansion.

The growth of American borders in the first half of the nineteenth century bore the same hallmarks of imperialism used in the identification processes applied to the United States in the late 1890s. The exact manner in which each specific identifying quality manifested itself during this period of expansion by sale, intimidation, and conquest may have varied both throughout the 1803-1848 period as well as from the 1898 expansion overseas, but the central characteristics of each imperial quality reappeared faithfully across both. The final descent into war was finally made inevitable when the United States made high demands of Mexico using coinciding Mexican debts and economic weakness to limit Mexico’s response options. Either Mexico would surrender half its territory or be forced to keep it from being taken as payment of debts. By the annexation of this territory, the United States secured to itself a global monopoly on cotton, a vast, long-lasting market for its industrial goods, the ability to more easily access additional such markets across the Pacific Ocean, and denied these things to rival empires. This was the process of empire-building, and it was an active participation in the interimperial competition of the nineteenth century.

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¹³⁴ *The Works of James Buchanan*, 6:40-41

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