

As to means of transportation, they were no better in Mexico in 1846 than they had been in 1825; but in the United States about 5,000 miles of railway had already been put in operation, steam-boat facilities on the rivers and Great Lakes had largely increased, and traffic upon the canals was perhaps at its height. So important, indeed, had American methods of communication become that a serious French work in two large volumes, with an atlas, published in 1840, was wholly devoted to the history and description of traffic facilities in the United States.¹

Not less incontestable was the superiority of the United States navy. The Mexican navy, consisting of a few ill-found and ill-manned vessels of small tonnage, was a negligible quantity. The American navy, on the other hand, with over thirty vessels actually at sea, had acquired a brilliant reputation for efficiency; and, what was still more vital, it had acquired in many seas such traditions of gallantry as sufficed to make it a formidable opponent to any adversary. The one apparent element of warlike superiority on the part of Mexico was the greater size of its army. On paper the regular Mexican troops far outnumbered the American, and whether this superiority in numbers could be offset by a difference in *personnel* and by the enlistment of volunteers was the only problem to which an answer could not well be given in advance.²

¹ Chevalier, *Histoire et Description des Voies de Communication aux Etats-Unis*.

² A part of this chapter has already been published as an article in the *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, vol. XVIII, pp. 275-294. I have to thank the editors for the permission to reproduce it here.

CHAPTER XXXII

PEACE OR WAR

THE public aspect of the relations between the United States and Great Britain during the first year of Polk's administration certainly bore a very warlike appearance. It was in July, 1845, that the British minister in Washington had peremptorily declined the proposal to settle the Oregon question by extending the line of 49° north latitude from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and had left it to the American government to make some other proposal, "more consistent," as he pleasantly put it, "with fairness and equity, and with the reasonable expectations of the British government."

The issues of peace or war thus seemed to be left solely in the hands of the President and his Secretary of State, and the timid and irresolute spirit of Buchanan was greatly vexed in dealing with a subject so full of the most dreadful possibilities. Never was the sobering action of official responsibility more clearly exhibited. He who had so courageously declaimed as a senator against the pretensions of Great Britain was now, as Secretary of State, filled with painful forebodings at the possibility of war.

But if the Secretary of State was terrified at the spectre he had helped to raise, the President stood firm against any policy of concession, and "communicated to the several members of the cabinet," as he himself has related, "the settled decision to which his mind had come."¹ Mr. Buchanan's reply to Pakenham, he said, should assert the American claim to the whole of the Oregon territory, from

¹ Polk's *Diary*, Aug. 26, 1845, I, 2. It was the importance of this conversation in the cabinet that suggested to the President the keeping of a diary, which he did, from that day on.

California to Alaska, and should distinctly state that the proposal to compromise on the line of 49° had been made, first, in deference to what had been formerly done by the agents of the United States, and, second, from an anxious desire to preserve peace. This proposal had been rejected in language, to say the least of it, scarcely courteous or respectful, and it was now withdrawn by the United States, and was no longer to be considered as pending for the consideration of the British government.

Buchanan, according to Polk, was for saying in the reply that the United States would deliberately consider any further proposition the British minister might submit; but to this Polk would not consent. The inevitable inference, he said, from such an invitation would be that the administration was prepared to accept less favorable terms than those which it had already proposed.

"Any proposition less favourable than 49° the President said he would promptly reject. Why then invite a proposition which cannot for a moment be entertained. Let our proposition be absolutely withdrawn & then let the British Minister take his own course. If he chooses to close the negotiation he can do so. If he chooses to make a proposition he can as well do it without our invitation as with it. Let him take the one course or the other, the U. States will stand in the right in the eyes of the whole civilized world, and if war was the consequence England would be in the wrong. The President further remarked that he had reflected much on this subject; that it had occupied his thoughts more than any and all others during his administration, and that though he had given his assent to the proposition to compromise at 49°, he must say he did not regret that it had been rejected by the British Minister."

Buchanan, in reply, urged that if the President's views were carried out it would lead to war, and that the people would not be willing to support war for such a cause. He also made allusion to the difficulties with Mexico,

"and thought his reply to Mr. Pakenham ought to be postponed until we could know whether we would have actual war with that country or not. The President said he saw no necessary connection between the two questions; that the settlement of the one was not

dependent on the other; that we should do our duty towards both Mexico and Great Britain and firmly maintain our rights, & leave the rest to God and the country. Mr. Buchanan said he thought God would not have much to do in justifying us in a war for the country North of 49°."

To this very obviously just remark of Buchanan's the President seems to have had no adequate repartee, and the conversation, after a further effort by Buchanan to secure a month's delay, ended with a peremptory direction from the President to have a draft of the reply to Pakenham ready the next morning for consideration by the cabinet.¹ Next morning the draft of the note to Pakenham was read, and Buchanan was soothed by the unanimous opinion of all present that it was "an able and admirable paper." He still urged delay, but was overruled, and with some verbal modifications it was copied, signed, and delivered at the British legation. It contained another long exposition of the American case, and stated that, by the President's instructions, the proposition of settlement made to the British government was withdrawn, although the President still cherished the hope that this long-pending controversy might yet be adjusted in such a manner as not to disturb the peace between the two nations.²

Pakenham, of course, transmitted all the correspondence to the Foreign Office, and, commenting on the last note, said he believed Buchanan was intent mainly on wringing humiliating concessions from Great Britain, and was not sincerely anxious to end the dispute by an honorable compromise.³ Aberdeen, however, took a much more serious view of the matter. The expression of a diplomatic hope at the close of the last American note was a pretty distinct threat, and therefore, about the first of October, very soon after receiving Pakenham's despatch just mentioned, when Aberdeen had an interview with the American minister in London, he expressed his regret that Pakenham had, on his

¹ Polk's *Diary*, I, 2-6.

² Buchanan to Pakenham, Aug. 30, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 177-206.

³ Pakenham to Aberdeen, Sept. 13, 1845; *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, XVI, 298.

own responsibility, rejected the American offer of compromise, and intimated the willingness of the British government to agree to a modified proposal.¹

As soon as this expression of Aberdeen's views was received, Buchanan asked in a cabinet meeting what ought to be done about it. The President was very positive that no further proposals should be made to the British government. If they had any further proposition to make it could be considered, and so Pakenham should be told if he called. Buchanan insisted that if the negotiation stopped where it was it would inevitably lead to war; to which Polk replied that he was well satisfied with the ground he occupied on this subject, and that he would take a strong position in his message to Congress.²

Pakenham was thus, very obviously, left in a difficult position. His conduct had been disapproved by his own government, and he did not know how to make a new proposition, now that that made by the United States had been withdrawn. Buchanan was inclined to help him out of the difficulty, but Polk resolutely insisted that the British government must make the first move. For several days Buchanan tried to persuade the President to agree either to renew the former proposition or to make a new one; but Polk still remained firm, and said that the British minister should be left to take his own course, and that not even a hint must be given as to what the decision would be upon any proposition he might make.³

During the remainder of October and the whole of November the Oregon negotiation remained dormant, Pakenham awaiting further instructions from his government, then

¹ McLane to Buchanan, Oct. 3, 1845; *State Dept. MSS.* And see Polk's *Diary*, I, 62.

² *Ibid.*, 63.

³ *Ibid.*, 75, 82. Pakenham on October 27 left a note with Buchanan, on the understanding that he might be permitted to treat it as unofficial and subsequently withdraw it. A reply was prepared, as the result of two cabinet discussions; but when the President learned that Pakenham reserved the right to withdraw his note he directed Buchanan not to deliver the reply unless Pakenham elected to have the note considered official. Buchanan, according to Polk's diary, was much annoyed at the course prescribed for him, but obeyed. See also Moore's *Buchanan*, VI, 285.

sorely troubled over the Irish famine and the incipient discussions upon the repeal of the corn laws, and the American government waiting for the British to make the next move. On the second of December Congress met and the President sent in his first annual message.

He began by recalling the joint resolution of Congress for annexing Texas to the United States, related briefly the steps taken to carry it into effect, urged prompt action to extend the revenue laws and judicial system of the Union over the new state, and sounded a loud note of rejoicing:

"If we consider the extent of territory involved in the annexation—its prospective influence on America—the means by which it has been accomplished, springing purely from the choice of the people themselves to share the blessings of our Union—the history of the world may be challenged to furnish a parallel."

From Texas the President turned to Mexico. He informed Congress of Almonte's protest against the annexation of Texas, and the consequent rupture of diplomatic relations. Since that time, until recently, Mexico had occupied an attitude of hostility toward the United States, and had been marshalling and organizing armies, issuing proclamations, and avowing an intention to make war. Under these circumstances, and in view of a threatened invasion, he had considered it his duty to protect and defend Texas the moment that country accepted the terms of annexation offered by the United States. He had therefore ordered a strong squadron to the coasts of Mexico, and stationed a strong military force on the western frontier of Texas, between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. The naval and military commanders had orders to commit no act of hostility against Mexico unless she declared war or was herself the aggressor, and the result had been that Mexico had made no aggressive movement, and the peace of the two republics had not been disturbed.

Mexico, the President continued, could not justly complain of the annexation of Texas, a country which had maintained independence by her arms for more than nine years, and

had been recognized as an independent state by the United States and the principal powers of Europe. But other serious causes of misunderstanding continued to exist, "growing out of unredressed injuries inflicted by the Mexican authorities and people on the persons and property of citizens of the United States, through a long series of years." Mexico had admitted these injuries, but had neglected and refused to redress them. Some of these claims had been submitted to arbitration, and had resulted in awards amounting to over two million dollars, of which only three-twentieths had been paid. Claims left undecided by the joint commission, amounting to more than three million dollars, together with other claims for spoliations upon the property of our citizens, remained wholly unsettled, although the United States was ready to submit them to arbitration. Such a continued and unprovoked series of wrongs could never have been tolerated had they been committed by one of the principal nations of Europe.

The executive, however, as the message proceeded to point out, had no power, without the authority of Congress, to enforce adequate remedies for the injuries suffered, nor could the President do more than prepare to repel threatened aggression. After the army and navy had remained on the frontier and coasts of Mexico for many weeks, without any hostile movement on her part, though her menaces were continued, he had deemed it important to put an end, if possible, to this state of things. He had therefore caused inquiries to be made as to what the designs of the Mexican government were, "whether it was their intention to declare war, or invade Texas, or whether they were disposed to adjust and settle, in an amicable manner, the pending differences between the two countries." He had received, on the ninth of November, an official answer to the effect that the Mexican government consented to renew diplomatic negotiations, and he had therefore, on the following day, appointed a distinguished citizen of Louisiana as minister to Mexico. It was expected that the negotiation would be brought to a close before the termination of the session of

Congress, and until the result was known, the President would forbear recommending "such ulterior measures of redress for the wrongs and injuries we have so long borne, as it would have been proper to make had no such negotiation been instituted."

The subject of the Oregon dispute was next taken up. The President, after reciting the history of the three attempts made under the administrations of Monroe and Adams to settle the question by compromise, and the renewal in 1843 by the United States of the offer to adjust the controversy by taking the forty-ninth parallel of latitude, said that although he entertained the settled conviction that the British pretensions of title could not be maintained to any portion of the Oregon territory, yet, in deference to what had been done by his predecessors and their proposals of compromise, he had deemed it to be his duty not to break off abruptly the pending negotiation, and had therefore made one more effort to settle the controversy in a spirit of moderation. The proposition made by the United States was rejected by the British plenipotentiary, who, without submitting any other proposition, had suffered the negotiation on his part to drop. For this reason the proposition of a compromise had been withdrawn and the American title to the whole Oregon territory asserted. "The civilized world," he continued, "will see in these proceedings a spirit of liberal concession on the part of the United States; and this government will be relieved from all responsibility which may follow the failure to settle the controversy." The President then recommended that notice should be given to terminate the joint occupation under the treaty of 1827, and that legislation should be adopted at once, extending civil and criminal jurisdiction over American citizens in Oregon. Whether any other measures should be adopted for the security of American rights, he left to the wisdom of Congress to determine.

He followed up this defiant statement by an assertion of his adherence to the Monroe doctrine, which, he said, forbade the European powers from interfering with the annexa-

tion to the United States of any independent state upon this continent—a remark which did not seem to have much relevance to the question of Oregon, and could hardly have had any to Texas, as annexation to the United States was an accomplished fact. What he was really thinking about was California.¹

At this same time events were happening in England which were of serious consequence in American affairs. On the day that the President's message was sent to the Congress in Washington Sir Robert Peel, at a cabinet meeting in London, was proposing to his colleagues a reduction and ultimate removal of the highly protective British duties on imported grain—a measure which, in its later form of the practical abolition of all duties, was generally known as the repeal of the corn laws.² Up to this time the Conservative party had stood for a policy of protection to that particular form of home industry in which almost all the members of the House of Lords and a large proportion of the House of Commons were personally interested, namely, agriculture; and it is therefore not surprising that ministers were sharply divided upon the question of adopting a policy which had previously been advocated only by their strongest political opponents.

The discussions in the British cabinet continued until Friday, the fifth of December, when Peel went to the Queen and laid his resignation before her, following it up by a letter on the following Monday, in which he explained his inability to carry on the government with a divided following. The Whigs, being in a minority in Parliament, could hardly have been expected, under ordinary circumstances, to undertake the task; but Peel offered to support a Whig government if formed by Lord John Russell, so far at least as related to the two questions of repealing the corn laws and of increasing the naval and military expenditures, in view of "the heavy demands made upon the army of the country for colonial service, of our relations with the United States, and of the bearing which steam-navigation

¹ Polk's *Diary*, I, 71.

² See memorandum in Peel's *Memoirs*, II, 214.

may have upon maritime warfare and the defence of the country."¹

The position in which the Whigs were now placed was evidently difficult; but nevertheless, after consultation with leading members of his party, Russell on the eighteenth of December informed the Queen that he was ready to undertake the formation of a government. Two days later, however, he informed her that his ability to form a government had depended upon his securing the zealous aid of all the members of his party, and upon his ability to get them to act in concert; that in one instance he had been unable to obtain this concert; and that he "must now consider that task as hopeless which has been from the beginning hazardous."²

The "one instance" which had led to this sudden reversal of the decision of the Whigs to take office was the refusal of Lord Grey (long known in the House of Commons as Lord Howick), whose assistance was regarded as essential, to join the proposed government. According to that very well-informed person, Mr. Charles Greville, what had happened was this: Russell—

"had offered Howick the Colonies. Howick accepted, but begged to know the other arrangements, and particularly who was to have the Foreign Office. He told him 'Palmerston.' Then said Howick, 'I will not be in the Cabinet.' He argued with him, told him all the reasons for this arrangement, said everything he could think of, but all in vain. So they parted."³

Next day Russell told the story to the Queen, and read her a long letter from Lord Grey, in which the latter explained his motives, and ended by saying that he was not answerable for the failure to form an administration.⁴ The worst of it was that the Queen herself had already spoken to Russell about Palmerston, and had expressed alarm at the

¹ Sir R. Peel to the Queen, Dec. 8, 1845; *ibid.*, 223-226.

² Lord J. Russell to the Queen, Dec. 20, 1845; *ibid.*, 243-245.

³ Greville, *Journal of the Reign of Queen Victoria*, II, 64.

⁴ Memorandum by Prince Albert, Dec. 20, 1845, in *Letters of Queen Victoria*, II, 71.

idea of his returning to the Foreign Office. The same feeling was undoubtedly entertained in the city; but when Russell hinted this to Palmerston, and asked if he would not accept another office, he positively refused to enter the government except as the head of the Foreign Office.¹

Upon this the Queen sent again for Peel, and asked him to withdraw his resignation, which he at once agreed to. The cabinet, almost without exception, stood by him, and they introduced and carried the repeal of the corn laws with the aid of the Whigs, after a most bitter contest in Parliament between the two wings of the Tory party. They were not turned out of office until nearly six months later.²

These events, which were not fully understood until many years afterward, were obviously of the gravest import to the United States. If Lord Palmerston had become Foreign Secretary at the beginning of the year 1846, it is quite certain that his manners and methods would have added serious obstacles to a settlement of the Oregon question. Under the circumstances of the times, it would have been easy for him to irritate the United States into declaring war, and it would also have been in his power to afford efficient British support to Mexico. Precisely what he would have done is, of course, the idlest conjecture, but it may at least be said, with some confidence, that if Palmerston had been in the Foreign Office during the first six months of the year (which Lord Grey's firmness alone prevented) the map of North America would have been very different from what it is to-day.

However, as soon as it was settled that Peel was to remain

¹ *Ibid.*, 70; Greville, 56, 64. In the *Letters of Queen Victoria*, II, 79-82, is printed a letter from Lord Palmerston to Lord Melbourne (which was sent to the Queen) in which the former gives his version of what was said to him by Russell, and defends his course.

² It was in this contest that Disraeli first came into real prominence. His famous simile of Peel's coming upon the Whigs while they were bathing and running off with their clothes was a taking picture of the course of the government. The only member of Peel's cabinet who refused to go on after Lord John Russell's notification that he could not form a government, was Lord Stanley (afterward known as Lord Derby). Lord Wharncliffe, one of the cabinet, died suddenly just at this time. Their places were taken by Lord Dalhousie and Mr. Gladstone, who was also near the beginning of his great career.

in office, Aberdeen again took up the Oregon negotiation. "His most earnest desire," Greville wrote early in December, "is to get over the Oregon affair as well as he can, and he knows that nothing will have so great an effect in America, nothing tend so materially to the prevalence of pacific counsels, as an announcement that the corn laws are going to be repealed."¹ Just before Christmas Aberdeen talked freely with Greville about Oregon. He "treated the President's message with great indifference, and said he was certain to settle the question in the course of the year, and confident there was no disposition to go to war in America."²

Whatever might have been the disposition in America, it was quite certain that there was no desire for war in Peel's cabinet. The distress in Ireland, and to some extent also in England, were powerful arguments against it, for the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company were not to be put in the scale against those of a starving people. Oregon, in itself, was an object of very trivial interest to most Englishmen, and they certainly would have been very unwilling to fight for it if that alternative could by any reasonable means be avoided. The first move of the British government was, therefore, to propose once more an arbitration of "an equitable division" of the territory; and when that was again refused, Pakenham renewed the offer of arbitration, but proposed to include the question of title. This offer the United States also declined, after long discussions in the cabinet as to the form of the reply, all the members of the cabinet agreeing, however, that the offer to arbitrate should be rejected.³

So far as the two executives were concerned matters there rested, but Congress was busy through the winter taking a

¹ Greville, II, 48.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ Polk's *Diary*, 207. The first of these proposals to arbitrate was made on Dec. 27, 1845, and declined Jan. 3, 1846; the second was made Jan. 16 and declined Feb. 4, 1846.—(Moore's *Buchanan*, VI, 355, 357, 370, 377.) When Pakenham first called to offer arbitration, he urged Buchanan to renew the offer of 49° north; and when told the President would not retrace his steps or renew his offer, Pakenham presented the arbitration plan. Buchanan told him the Senate would not confirm a treaty of arbitration, even if the President agreed to it. Pakenham then "remarked that the affair might remain just where it was, and the British Government would not disturb it. He did not