

almost every bill, no matter how remote its purpose from that of the war, was apt to bring about a discussion upon the question of slavery extension; and in reality, though not always in form, the chief subject of debate was the Wilmot proviso.

On January 4, 1847, Preston King, of New York, attempted to obtain leave to introduce in the Senate a bill appropriating three million dollars, which contained as one of its clauses the famous proviso. Leave was refused, but a similar bill was soon after reported in both houses—on January 19 in the Senate and on January 20 in the House—by the chairmen of the appropriate committees, in which King's preamble and appropriating clause were exactly copied, but no allusion was made to the question of slavery. It was in the course of the discussion over this bill that Wilmot again offered his proviso as above stated.

The proviso was ultimately defeated in both houses. In the Senate, the bill as reported from the Committee on Foreign Relations was passed at one o'clock in the morning of March 2 by a strict party vote of 29 to 24, Calhoun voting in the affirmative. On the next day, March 3, Wilmot again moved his proviso in Committee of the Whole, and it was then carried by a vote of 90 to 80. But with every succeeding vote in the House the proviso was voted down. The clause was struck out of the bill in the House by a vote of 102 to 97; a motion to lay the bill on the table was lost by 87 to 114; and the bill, minus the proviso, was passed by a vote of 115 to 81.

The bill as finally passed recited that it was desirable to terminate the existing war upon terms just and honorable to both nations; that the President had already given assurances to the government of Mexico of his desire to settle all questions between the two countries on the most liberal and satisfactory terms; and that the President might possibly be able to conclude a treaty of peace if means for that object were at his disposal. It further recited that "in the adjustment of so many complicated questions as now exist between the two countries, it may possibly happen that an

expenditure of money will be called for by the stipulations of any treaty which may be entered into," and it was therefore enacted that three million dollars be appropriated—

"to enable the President to conclude a treaty of peace, limits, and boundaries with the Republic of Mexico, to be used by him in the event that said treaty, when signed by the authorized agents of the two governments, and duly ratified by Mexico, shall call for the expenditure of the same, or any part thereof; full and accurate accounts for which expenditure shall be by him transmitted to Congress at as early a day as practicable."¹

But although the debates in Congress had taken so wide a range, and so much heat had been developed against the conduct of the executive, Congress near the very close of its session passed almost every one of the measures which had been advocated by the administration.² Only two of their measures were defeated. One was the bill imposing duties upon tea and coffee; the other was the bill to create the office of lieutenant-general. As Polk had foreseen, the latter measure met with great opposition in Congress, for the purpose of putting Benton at the head of the American army, though not expressed in the bill, had become a matter of common gossip. The thing was ridiculous enough as it was. Benton was not a professional soldier, and it was generally believed in Congress that the President merely wished to put him forward so that Whigs, like Scott and Taylor, should not have the whole credit of the war; but what was probably most effective in defeating the bill in Congress was the personal dislike of Benton, which must have influenced many members of the Senate whom his bullying methods had repeatedly offended.³

¹ *An Act making further appropriation to bring the existing War with Mexico to a speedy and honorable conclusion*; 9 U. S. Stat. at Large, 174.

² "Warn't we gittin' on prime with our hot and cold blowin', A condemnin' the war wilst we kep' it agoin'?" asks the Whig politician in the *Biglow Papers*.

³ The bill passed in the House of Representatives on February 26 by a vote of 112 to 87, but failed in the Senate. It was rather absurdly charged by some of Benton's friends that the administration had killed the measure, as they feared that if an eminent Democrat were to bring the war to a triumphant close he would inevitably become the next President. See Blair to Buchanan, Nov. 22, 1849; Moore's *Buchanan*, VIII, 365-367.

By an act of January 28, 1847, Congress authorized an issue of either short notes (one or two years) or, in the President's discretion, twenty-year bonds, for the purpose of financing the war.¹

By another act, of February 11, ten additional regiments were to be added to the regular army "for and during the war with Mexico," one or more of which might be organized and equipped as "voltigeurs, and as foot-riflemen, and be provided with a rocket and mountain howitzer battery." The same act authorized some additional officers, a number of chaplains and surgeons, and provided for compensation for men who were wounded in the war.²

By an act of March 3, authority was given to organize these new regiments into brigades and divisions and, "if the efficiency of the service shall require it," to appoint three brigadier and two major generals. The same act made numerous other provisions tending to increase the efficiency of the army.³

The President on the same day availed himself of the authority conferred upon him, and nominated as major-generals Thomas H. Benton, of Missouri, and William Cumings, of Georgia; and as brigadier-generals George Cadwalader, of Pennsylvania, Enos B. Hopping, of New York, and Franklin Pierce, of New Hampshire—the same Pierce who had just before declined a nomination as Attorney-General. All five of the nominees were at once confirmed; but Benton within the next few days declined the appointment when he discovered that he could not supersede senior officers in the field.⁴

The President all through the session had been in a state of the utmost impatience over the prolonged discussion of what he regarded as perfectly irrelevant subjects. The distracted state of the Democratic party was his constant

¹ *An Act authorizing the issue of Treasury Notes, a Loan and for other Purposes*; 9 U. S. Stat. at Large, 118.

² *An Act to raise for a limited Time an additional military Force, &c.*; *ibid.*, 123.

³ *An Act making Provision for an additional Number of general Officers and for other Purposes*; *ibid.*, 184.

⁴ *Polk's Diary*, II, 406-419, *passim*.

topic of conversation. Slavery, he thought, could have no legitimate connection with the war in Mexico or the terms of a peace which might be concluded with that country. "To connect it with the appropriations for prosecuting the war, or with the two million appropriation with a view to obtain a peace, can result in no good, but must divide the country by a sectional line & lead to the worst consequences." Such an agitation he thought not only unwise but wicked, and he regarded the slavery question as "assuming a fearful & most important aspect."¹

As the weeks passed, the President felt more and more helpless.

"Nearly half the session has passed," he wrote on January 14, "and they are engaged in debates about slavery and party politics, and have passed none of the essential measures which I have recommended as indispensable to the vigorous & successful prosecution of the war. With a large nominal majority in both Houses, I am practically in a minority. The several cliques & sections of the Democratic party are manifestly more engaged in managing for their respective favourites in the next Presidential election, than they are in supporting the Government in prosecuting the war, or in carrying out any of its great measures."²

A few days later he again confided to his diary his annoyance over the failure of Congress to adopt his measures, and his consequent inability to accomplish anything in spite of having a nominal majority of Democrats in both houses of Congress.

"The disappointments about office among the members," he thought, "and the premature contest which they are waging in favour of their favorites for the Presidency in 1848, are the leading causes of this lamentable state of things. . . . I am perfectly disgusted with the want of patriotism which seems to control the votes and course of a portion of the Democratic members. I am resolved to do my duty to the country & if I am not sustained by Congress I will fearlessly appeal to the people.

"Even the question of slavery is thrown into Congress and agitated in the midst of a Foreign War for political purposes. It is brought forward at the North by a few ultra Northern members to advance

¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

² *Ibid.*, 328.

the prospects of their favourite. No sooner is it introduced than a few ultra Southern members are manifestly well satisfied that it has been brought forward, because by seizing upon it they hope to array a Southern party in favour of their favourite candidate for the Presidency. There is no patriotism on either side, & it is a most wicked agitation that can end in no good and must produce infinite mischief."¹

During the first week in February he was even more troubled over the delay of Congress in passing the bill for raising ten additional regiments. Could it have been passed in December, the President thought it would have been of great importance, but by February the favorable season for military operations in Mexico was already nearly half over.

"In truth," he wrote, "faction rules the hour, while principle & patriotism is forgotten. While the Democratic party are thus distracted and divided and are playing this foolish and suicidal game, the Federal party are united and never fail to unite with the minority of the Democratic party, or any faction of it who may break off from the body of their party, and thus postpone and defeat all my measures. I am in the unenviable position of being held responsible for the conduct of the Mexican War, when I have no support either from Congress or from the two officers (Scott & Taylor) highest in command in the field. How long this state of things will continue I cannot foresee."²

But the session of Congress necessarily came to an end on the fourth of March, and the President and his cabinet were left free for the next nine months to make the most of the powers which had been conferred on them.

In the course of the session the President and his policies had been publicly denounced in the most violent terms, the war itself had been declared by members to be dishonorable and unjust, and yet ample means, both in men and money, had been voted, after quite inexcusable delays, for carrying it on. The members of Congress scattered, and some two weeks later New Orleans newspapers were received in Washington which contained vague rumors of a battle fought with great loss on both sides near Saltillo. It was reported that Taylor's army was in the most critical position.

¹ *Ibid.*, 347.

² *Ibid.*, 368. Polk invariably referred to the Whigs as "the Federal party."

CHAPTER XL

BUENA VISTA

WHILE General Taylor had been scattering his troops over a line hundreds of miles in length, General Santa Anna was concentrating every available man at San Luis Potosí. A small garrison was left at Vera Cruz, and a division of infantry under General Vasquez was stationed at Tula, in the mountains in the southwestern corner of Tamaulipas, while some small bodies of cavalry were stationed along the road leading from San Luis to Saltillo. But the larger cities were denuded of their garrisons with a view to assembling an army capable of striking a decisive blow at the American invaders.

Santa Anna's preparations for an advance went forward as rapidly as the very limited means at his disposal would permit. Clothing and ammunition were manufactured and all *matériel* was put in condition for service; yet in spite of Santa Anna's utmost energy the work of preparation progressed but slowly. The commissary department could hardly have been said to exist, any more than the medical branch of the army. There were, of course, no wagons for transport and the troops had no tents. The press of the capital, however, kept urging a forward movement, and in every note of patriotism, sarcasm, and ridicule they called upon the army to leave the Capua in which they had been taking their pleasure, and to go out to meet the invaders.

It was noticeable that the mass of the people remained calm and indifferent.

"It cannot be denied," wrote an officer who was in the army at San Luis, "that the state of San Luis has distinguished itself by its patriotism and services in this war. . . . Nevertheless one failed to note throughout the republic the patriotic fire, the enthusiasm of a