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# Notes and Documents

## Daniel Webster and the Oregon Question

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DANIEL WEBSTER'S approach to the Oregon question in 1842–1843, and especially the elusive “tripartite plan” that he advanced at that time, has often been criticized and misconstrued by scholars. Thomas A. Bailey, for example, expresses surprise that Webster considered yielding the region north of the Columbia River in return for nothing more than British support for the acquisition by the United States of part of California from Mexico.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, David M. Pletcher finds the tripartite proposal unsettling and even states that it was “probably just as well for long-range American interests” that Webster did not receive an appointment in 1843 as special envoy to Great Britain to negotiate about Oregon.<sup>2</sup> Webster's position on the Oregon question, however, has not been adequately understood. Moreover, it seems clear that he never had any intention of sacrificing the national interests of the United States.

In 1841, when Webster became secretary of state, the Oregon country, as it had come to be called, comprised the territory west of the Rocky Mountains and between the 42nd parallel in the south and 54° 40' in the north. It was a vast wilderness, incorporating about forty times the acreage involved in the northeast boundary dispute. Oregon also contained, as Frederick Merk has written, “the only frontage on the Pacific to which the United States had any undisputed claim prior to the Mexican War.”<sup>3</sup> The coastline between 42

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (10th ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 224.

<sup>2</sup>David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Mo., 1973), 100, 108.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York, 1978), 309.

degrees, the transcontinental boundary with Mexican California, and the Columbia River was American territory. Unfortunately for the United States, however, not a single good deep-water port was located in this area. "All of the good harbors between the Russian Settlements & California," as Webster wrote in 1842, were contained in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and that frontage on the ocean was claimed by Great Britain.<sup>4</sup>

In their boundary dispute with the United States, the British were willing to accept a line starting at the crest of the Rocky Mountains and running along the 49th parallel to its intersection with the Columbia River. From there, the line of demarcation would follow that river to the sea. The United States insisted on a boundary that ran true to the 49th parallel all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Thus, the region actually in contention was a triangle of territory between the Columbia River and the 49th parallel. Since the only safe and usable harbors were located from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Puget Sound, the disputed area held great commercial significance.

Unable to agree on a division of the Oregon country, Britain and the United States negotiated the convention of October 20, 1818. Under its terms, Oregon was declared "free and open" for ten years to the settlers and traders of both countries.<sup>5</sup> The next attempt to resolve the Oregon question was undertaken in 1826, when Albert Gallatin was selected by President John Quincy Adams as the American commissioner to treat with Henry Unwin Addington and William Huskisson, the plenipotentiaries chosen by Foreign Secretary George Canning. With Britain standing immovable at the Columbia River and the United States at the 49th parallel, the modest outcome was the convention of August 6, 1827. It extended indefinitely the agreement of 1818 with the added stipulation that either signatory could abrogate the pact by giving the other a twelve-month notice of its intention to do so.<sup>6</sup>

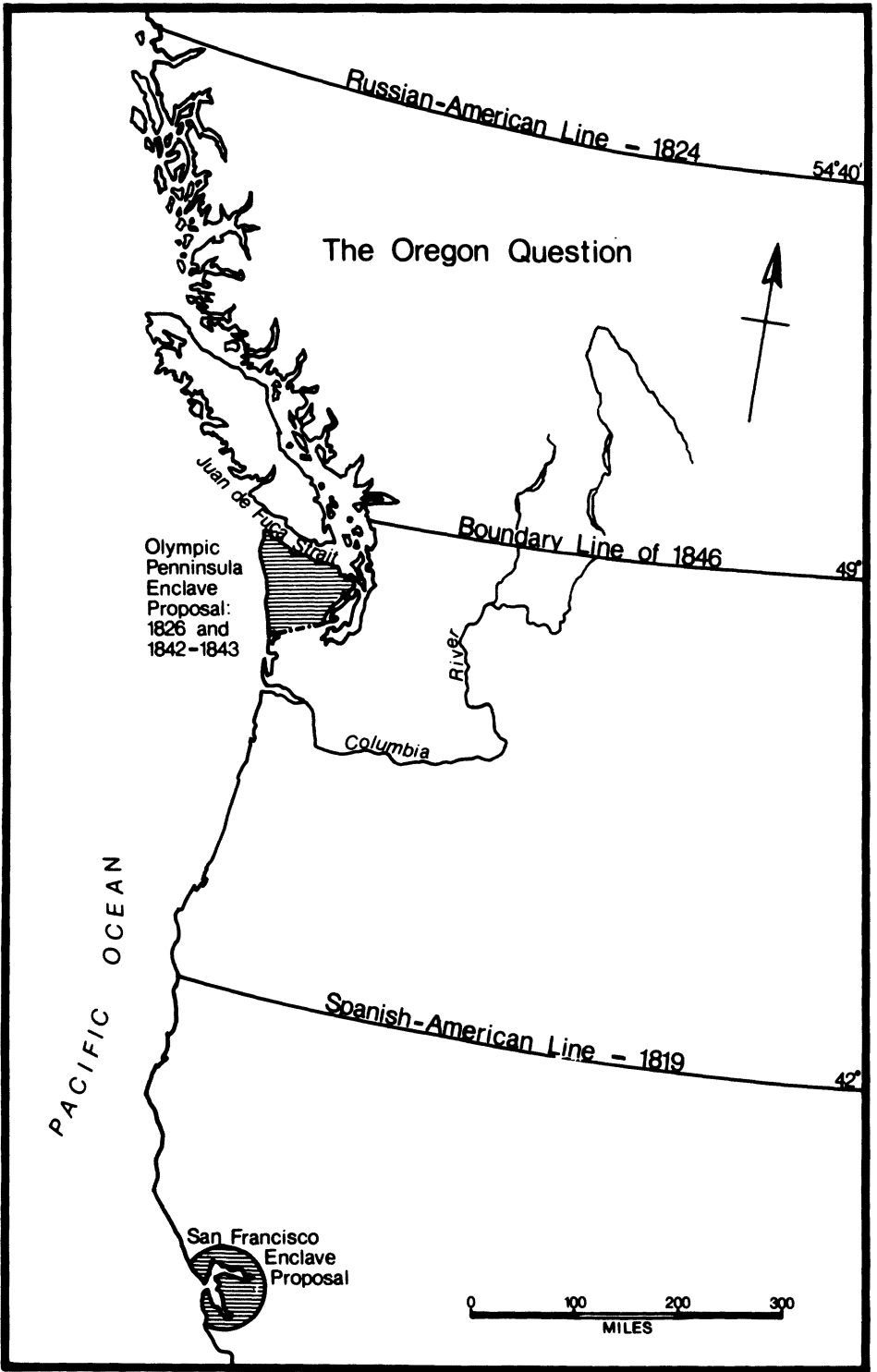
During the negotiations which led to the renewal of 1827, Canning authorized a proposal which had an important impact on the subsequent diplomacy. In order to meet the American demand for a deep-water port, Addington offered Gallatin a quadrilateral tract of land adjoining the Strait of Juan de Fuca, comprising what is known today as the Olympic Peninsula. Although rejected in 1826–1827, Canning's proposal was instrumental in the failure of the two parties to resolve the Oregon question in 1842–1843, and it may have served as a precedent for Webster's unusual tripartite plan.

The third attempt to resolve the Oregon boundary dispute was quickly aborted. In April 1842, shortly after his arrival in the United States, Lord Ashburton brought up the subject. Based upon his instructions of February 8, he proposed the line that had been repeatedly declined by the United States

<sup>4</sup>Webster to Everett, Nov. 28, 1842, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup>Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America* (8 vols., Washington, D.C., 1931–1948), II, 658–662.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 309–314.



in the past—the 49th parallel to the Columbia River and thence to the sea. Ashburton then informed Webster that such was the limit of his instructions, and he did not renew Canning's enclave offer of 1826. The only authoritative account of Webster's response is contained in a dispatch from Ashburton to Aberdeen dated April 25. After objecting that the line proposed would leave the United States without a harbor on the Pacific, Webster tentatively advanced what came to be known as the tripartite plan. If Mexico could be persuaded to relinquish San Francisco to the United States, Webster suggested, the United States might be inclined to accept the Columbia River boundary.<sup>7</sup>

Although Webster did not spell out his intentions, he apparently was attempting to break the logjam caused by Ashburton's anachronistic instructions and to acquire America's first Pacific outlet to the trade of East Asia. His project, it seems, would have merely required the British to refrain from any opposition to an American acquisition of San Francisco from Mexico. Although Ashburton stated that Britain "could take no part in any arrangement" with Mexico and that he had "no power to enter upon the subject at all," he told Webster that he did not anticipate any objection to a voluntary cession on the part of Mexico. Ashburton then referred the problem to his government.<sup>8</sup> Neither Ashburton nor Webster considered Oregon very important, and this one exchange constituted their only discussion of the Oregon question. The two men were soon deeply involved in negotiations to resolve the complicated northeast boundary dispute, and Oregon was forgotten.

Aside from relative indifference, the key to the failure of Webster and Ashburton to deal with the Oregon question in 1842 lies in the instructions of February 8. The part relating to Oregon was drawn up by Addington. He certainly was knowledgeable about the problem, having served as minister to the United States from 1824 to 1825 and then participated in the negotiation of 1826–1827. Addington became permanent under secretary for foreign affairs on January 16, 1842, just in time to help draft Ashburton's instructions. He made no reference to the enclave offer of 1826; he did not supply Ashburton with a copy of the minutes of what had occurred in that year; and he did not even inform Aberdeen of Canning's proposal, which Addington himself had presented to Gallatin. Lord Ashburton apparently remained unaware of Addington's negligence throughout his stay in the United States. Lord Aberdeen did not learn of the enclave offer until November 1843, when Edward Everett, who had been informed of it by Webster, told in turn the Foreign Secretary.<sup>9</sup> Although Merk considered the tripartite plan a "flight from reality," he argued persuasively that the inability of Webster and Ashburton to

<sup>7</sup>Ashburton to Aberdeen, April 25, 1842, Foreign Office 5/379, Public Record Office, London.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Webster to Everett, Nov. 28, 1842, Everett Papers.

resolve the Oregon question was preordained by the retrograde instructions of February 8, 1842, which had been drawn up by a high-ranking bureaucrat who was unfriendly toward the United States. That instruction, Merk wrote, "sent a chain reaction of confusion flowing through the negotiation." It misled both Ashburton and Webster, and prompted the secretary of state to advance the "misty and unrealistic intimation" which has puzzled historians to this day.<sup>10</sup>

Fatigue, the American climate, and the strained relations between the United States and Mexico also played a role in sidetracking the Oregon question in 1842. As early as April 26, with the thermometer registering 80°, Ashburton warned Aberdeen that he was "not good for any prolonged residence" in the United States.<sup>11</sup> By August, after enduring nearly four months of the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington and completing the exhausting negotiation of the northeast boundary dispute, Ashburton was more than ready to return to England.<sup>12</sup> In October, Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones seized Monterey, confirming Mexico's indisposition to consider the cession of any territory to the United States.<sup>13</sup>

In that same month, Aberdeen, still unaware of his own government's contribution to the deadlock over Oregon, expressed deep regret that the issue had not been resolved in the Treaty of Washington.<sup>14</sup> On October 18, he instructed Henry S. Fox to propose that negotiations on "the only remaining subject of Territorial Difference" between the two countries be conducted by Everett in London.<sup>15</sup> While Webster was considering how to respond to Aberdeen's initiative, President John Tyler sent to the Congress his annual message of December 6. Tyler's ill-chosen remarks about the Pacific northwest provoked the British. After referring to Oregon as "the Territory of the United States . . . to a portion of which Great Britain lays claim," he told Congress that he would "not delay to urge" upon the British the importance of an early resolution of the Oregon question.<sup>16</sup> Aberdeen told Everett that it was misleading for the president to insinuate that the United States had taken the lead in urging Britain to settle the Oregon boundary dispute when

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<sup>10</sup>Merk, *The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 211–215.

<sup>11</sup>Ashburton to Aberdeen, April 26, 1842, Aberdeen Papers, British Museum.

<sup>12</sup>See Ashburton to Webster, July 31, 1842, Webster Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

<sup>13</sup>On the Jones affair, see George M. Brooke, Jr., "The Vest Pocket War of Commodore Jones," *Pacific Historical Review*, XXXI (1962), 217–233, and Robert J. Hanks, "Commodore Jones and His Private War with Mexico," *American West*, XVI (1979), 30–33, 60–63.

<sup>14</sup>Everett to Webster, Oct. 17, 1842, Everett Papers.

<sup>15</sup>Aberdeen to Fox, Oct. 18, 1842, enclosed with Fox to Webster, Nov. 15, 1842, Notes from Foreign Legations, Britain, National Archives.

<sup>16</sup>James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897* (10 vols., Washington, D.C., 1896–1899), IV, 196.

in fact the opposite was true.<sup>17</sup> Privately, Aberdeen characterized Tyler's statements about Oregon as "most uncandid."<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, on January 29, 1843, Webster transformed his tripartite intimation of 1842 into a plan. If Mexico would sell Upper California, the United States would accept a division of the Oregon territory along the lines proposed by Canning in 1826. Mexico would use the money paid by the United States to reimburse both American and British claimants, and the United States would acquire two enclaves containing adequate harbors, the one from Britain and the other from Mexico.<sup>19</sup> Webster did not, as many scholars assume, contemplate simply relinquishing the territory north of the Columbia River in exchange for British acquiescence in a Mexican cession that included the port of San Francisco. Made aware of the perilous sandbar at the mouth of the Columbia River by the June 1842 report of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, Webster knew that the Strait of Juan de Fuca contained "all the good harbors" in the disputed area. A "line of Division" at the Columbia River, Webster wrote on November 28, 1842, would not be acceptable.<sup>20</sup> What the secretary of state seems to have had in mind was going back to Canning's enclave proposal of 1826, and he wanted to conduct the negotiation himself in London as a special envoy.

By the winter of 1842–1843, Webster was seeking a graceful exit from the Tyler administration. With the president moving toward the annexation of Texas and a political rapprochement with segments of the Democratic Party, Webster knew that his days as secretary of state were numbered. Hoping to follow the happy precedent of the Ashburton mission, on February 24, 1843, Webster confidentially asked Caleb Cushing to consult with John Quincy Adams to see whether the House Committee on Foreign Relations would recommend the appropriation of funds for a special commissioner to Britain to resolve the Oregon question.<sup>21</sup> On February 28, Adams moved that a bill under consideration be amended to provide funds "for a special Minister" to Britain, but the motion failed.<sup>22</sup>

Even if Congress had made provision for a special mission to Britain, it is doubtful that the tripartite plan would have fared well. When Adams discovered in March what Webster had in mind, he denounced the proposal as an abyss of duplicity.<sup>23</sup> Mexico remained firmly opposed to any territorial bargain with the United States, and Aberdeen, still oblivious to what Ad-

<sup>17</sup>Everett to Webster, Feb. 1, 1843, Everett Papers.

<sup>18</sup>Aberdeen to Croker, Feb. 25, 1843, in Louis J. Jennings, ed., *The Croker Papers: The Correspondence and Diaries of the late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker* (3 vols., London, 1884), II, 399.

<sup>19</sup>Webster to Everett, Jan. 29, 1843, Everett Papers.

<sup>20</sup>Webster to Everett, Nov. 28, 1842, Everett Papers.

<sup>21</sup>Webster to Cushing, Feb. 24, 1843, Cushing Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (12 vols., Philadelphia, 1874–1877), XI, 329–330.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 344–347.

dington had wrought, expressed “a decided repugnance” to becoming a party to the tripartite initiative. The foreign secretary was also decidedly lukewarm toward the idea of a special mission.<sup>24</sup>

In the absence of any resolution of the Oregon question, Webster was determined to uphold the interests of the United States. His last important state paper on the subject, a letter to the secretary of the navy dated March 21, 1843, requested that the commander of the Pacific Squadron be instructed “to maintain, by force, if necessary, the rights of American citizens” in Oregon.<sup>25</sup> Webster did not have a high regard for Oregon, which he characterized as “a poor country, in comparison with the U. States, or even with California.”<sup>26</sup> With his mercantile outlook, however, he was determined to try to acquire for the United States a harbor on the Pacific to facilitate access to the markets of Asia. As for the tripartite project, it lapsed with Webster’s resignation as secretary of state on May 8, never to be revived again.

With the benefit of hindsight, Daniel Webster may be criticized for underestimating the value of the Pacific Northwest. He also can be faulted for not having sufficient foresight to anticipate the importance that the Oregon question would assume in Anglo-American relations in just a few years. Webster’s tripartite plan, moreover, can be viewed as totally unrealistic. It would, however, be a mistake to maintain that Webster’s abortive tripartite proposal was a simplistic, one-sided concession to the British. In order to resolve the Oregon dispute, the British would have had to relinquish a deep-water port and surrounding enclave north of the Columbia River, and they also would have had to allow Mexico to sell one of the finest harbors in the world to their commercial rival for the markets of East Asia and the Pacific. In the absence of such arrangements, Webster stood ready to use military force to uphold the claims and interests of the United States in the Oregon country. Far from being a naive Anglophile, Daniel Webster was a calculating American nationalist.

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<sup>24</sup>Everett to Webster, Feb. 27, 1843, Everett Papers.

<sup>25</sup>Webster to Abel P. Upshur, March 21, 1843, Domestic Letters of the Department of State, National Archives.

<sup>26</sup>Webster to Everett, Jan. 29, 1843, Everett Papers.