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Author(s): WARD McAFEE

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A Reconsideration of the Origins of the Mexican-American War

BY WARD MCAFEE

In the last generation, historical scholarship has tended to conclude that President James K. Polk aggressively maneuvered Mexico into war. Supposedly, his motive was to acquire quickly the Mexican province of Alta California. Various interpretations have been presented in support of this thesis. One of these has claimed that in the Spring of 1845, Polk secretly directed Commodore Robert Stockton to manufacture a war along Texas's frontier with Mexico.¹ The speculation that pathfinder John Frémont received secret instructions from Polk to foment California's Bear Flag Revolution supports the same theme.² Both of these charges are only suspicions.³ Still others have offered a more widely accepted hypothesis, namely that Polk designed the Slidell mission as a high risk operation to provide an excuse for a war of conquest.

According to historian Charles Sellers, the Slidell mission was created in the following manner: In the Fall of 1845, the Polk Administration decided to send a Minister Plenipotentiary to Mexico. This act implied a reopening of full diplomatic relations, which had been broken earlier in the year over the annexation of Texas. Had Mexico immediately renewed full diplomatic relations, its bargaining position on the Texas issue would have been seriously undermined. Normally, peaceful intercourse would have been restored only after the cause of the disruption had first been resolved. Slidell was sent anyway, despite reports both from knowledgeable Americans and the Mexican government that only a Commissioner, a negotiator of much lower status, would be accepted to discuss the Texas issue alone. In short, Mexico was willing to engage in an ad-hoc negotiation on Texas; Slidell was not welcome as a Minister Plenipotentiary, and Polk created the Slidell

mission with full awareness of its possibilities for creating a diplomatic rejection which could be used as an excuse for war.

Sellers concludes:

All of this indicates that while Polk preferred peaceful coercion, he did not shrink from war to accomplish his purposes. If the Mexican government were weak enough and desperate enough to resume regular diplomatic relations—thereby surrendering the annexation issue even as a diplomatic counter—then the chances of negotiating the desired territorial acquisitions would be good. If, on the other hand, Mexico resisted at this point, it would be clear that sterner measures were required—and in the meantime the administration would have made a show of exhausting all peaceful alternatives.⁴

Historian David Pletcher is slightly more reserved in his interpretation of this episode. While relying on some of the same evidence as Sellers, Pletcher does not emphasize that Mexican officials clearly stipulated that only an ad-hoc negotiator would be acceptable. Indeed, he admits that at the time of Mexico's agreement to receive an American negotiator, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, the Mexican Foreign Minister, "seemed to attach more importance to the identity of the American diplomat than to his title." Nevertheless, Pletcher arrives essentially at the same interpretation of the Slidell mission as does Sellers. He writes: "Plausible evidence indicates that as early as the beginning of October he [Polk] understood Mexican intentions for the mission—an *ad-hoc* envoy to discuss an offer of indemnity to Mexico for the loss of Texas—and that he was prepared to take a firm stand."⁵

On January 12, 1846, Polk was informed of Mexico's likely rejection of Slidell, and on the following day he ordered General Zachary Taylor to move his army to the Rio Grande. If Polk knew from the beginning of the Slidell mission that its failure was probable, he truly manipulated Mexico into giving him an excuse for war. On the other hand, if Sellers' and Pletcher's account is faulty, other interpretations of Polk's behavior become plausible. This essay proposes that Polk designed the Slidell mission with high expectations for its success and that he reacted to its failure with disappointment and understandable anger in ordering General Taylor to the Rio Grande. No student of the era would deny that Polk's style was aggressive. He patterned himself after his

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mentor Andrew Jackson, who rightly has been characterized as the symbolic embodiment of heroic action for Americans of that age. In addition, Polk largely kept his own counsel, a fact that led his political enemies to portray him as a secretive, deceitful manipulator of people and events. This characterization as a Machiavellian schemer serves as the foundation of the view that Polk designed the Slidell mission to fail. Nevertheless, it is difficult for a reader of his diary to believe that Polk himself did not regard the mission as an honest attempt at negotiation. Also, the very length of Slidell's secret instructions possibly suggest that the mission was created with honest intentions.⁶

It is instructive to review the materials which led Polk to believe that Mexico was willing and ready to renew full diplomatic relations. The American president was fairly explicit in identifying these sources. His September 16, 1845, diary entry refers to the recent dispatches of Dr. William S. Parrott (confidential agent of the United States in Mexico), along with letters authored by John Black and Francis Dimond (U.S. consuls in Mexico City and Veracruz, respectively).⁷ Of the recent communications from Dr. Parrott which Polk had in his possession on September 16, one addressed to Secretary of State James Buchanan, dated August 26, 1845, was the most explicit. This letter said that Mexico was willing to receive a negotiator from the United States and referred to this hypothetical man as a "commissioner" on one occasion and an "envoy" in three other places. In one of the latter references, Parrott wrote: "I have good reasons to believe that an envoy from the United States would not only be well received, but that his arrival would be hailed with joy."⁸

Consul Black's letter of August 23, which Polk interpreted as supporting Parrott's communications, referred to rumors in Mexico that the United States would send a "commissioner." And Dimond's letter simply referred to the weakness of the Mexican government which was also noted by both Parrott and Black.¹⁰ Altogether, these letters portrayed Mexico as willing to negotiate and in full retreat from its earlier position of hostility to the United States over the Texas issue. Polk incorrectly surmised that this meant that the Mexican government was now willing to renew full diplomatic relations before specific negotiations on the Texas issue. Had he blindly proceeded with plans to send John

Slidell to reopen full diplomatic relations based on this information alone, he indeed would have been remiss, and the Seller-Pletcher interpretation of the origins of the Slidell mission would then appear more valid. However, this was not the case, as he had his Secretary of State instruct Consul Black to check whether the Mexican government was in fact willing immediately to restore the diplomatic relations which it had severed earlier in the year. The language used by Secretary of State James Buchanan in relaying the administration's intention was sufficiently clear:

Information recently received at this department both from yourself and others renders it probable that the Mexican government may now be willing to restore the diplomatic relations between the two countries. . . . The President has directed me to instruct you in the absence of any diplomatic agent in Mexico to ascertain from the Mexican government whether they would receive an envoy from the United States entrusted with full power to adjust all questions in dispute between the two governments. Should the answer be in the affirmative, such an envoy will be immediately dispatched to Mexico.¹¹

Upon receipt of these orders, Consul Black arranged a meeting with Manuel de la Peña y Peña, the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, in which he read aloud from Buchanan's letter and described the question which his government wanted answered. Treating the matter cautiously, but with polite correctness, Peña requested that Black communicate the American proposition in writing, which Black did several days later. Unfortunately, as events would later demonstrate, Black's written request lacked the clarity of Buchanan's letter. Quoting extensively from Buchanan's instructions, Black omitted the all-important reference to restoring diplomatic relations.¹² Whether he had referred to this key aspect of his administration's intentions in his earlier conversation with Peña is not known. Given subsequent events, it is most unlikely. The omission was most certainly innocently made, but it would result in a colossal misunderstanding, which as much as any other single event brought on the Mexican-American War.

Several days later, Peña replied to Black in writing, stating that "my government is disposed to receive the commissioner of

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the United States who may come to this capital with full powers from his government to settle the present dispute."¹³ Black thereupon communicated "a favorable result" to Buchanan and referred to the negotiator whom the United States government would now send to Mexico as a "commissioner," the same language used by Peña in accepting Black's offer.¹⁴ Of what significance was this? Months later, it became clear that what Peña apparently thought he had consented to was receiving an ad-hoc negotiator of a status commonly referred to as "Commissioner," a rank well below that of a negotiator reestablishing full diplomatic relations. Traditionally, the title of "Commissioner" was given to a negotiator sent to settle a discrete issue, such as a boundary dispute, or special problems relating to a treaty. On the other hand, a title such as "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary," which was that given to John Slidell, was reserved for a diplomat representing his government on continuing issues within the context of full diplomatic relations.¹⁵

The word commissioner also has a general meaning, being equivalent to a "negotiator." Indeed, the Polk administration was led to believe that it was used by Peña and Black in this latter sense. By Black's own accounting, Peña had had the American proposal thoroughly described to him in several confidential interviews, and the Mexican minister had accepted that proposition, his only qualifications being that the negotiator to be sent should be an acceptable individual and that the American squadron in the waters off Veracruz be withdrawn. Also Black's own use of the term commissioner without further clarification indicated to his superiors that the word was being used in a general sense, as he was aware of his government's intent to restore diplomatic relations and did not indicate that Mexico had rejected this offer.¹⁶ Given this evidence, one can see that the Polk administration had some reason to believe that the exact question that it had posed had been answered affirmatively and that Mexico had agreed to reopen full diplomatic relations.

Later on, Consul Black would witness his government's angry reaction to Slidell's rejection. Blame for what had come to pass had to rest somewhere, yet Black was unwilling to recognize openly his crucial role in the affair. Accordingly, he wrote to fellow consul Francis Dimond that their government should have

sent a Commissioner as the Mexican government desired. Indeed, Consul Black himself was one of the earliest proponents of the theory that Machiavellian scheming in Washington, D.C. had produced the confrontation. Black wrote in his letter to Dimond:

I am inclined to think with you that it would have been as well to have sent out a commissioner, and I presume such would have been the case had not someone pretended to know and understand more about the matter than he really did, and impressed our government with that idea, but I think that person will find out that simple, plain sailing is the safest in the long run.¹⁷

The truth is that Black's carelessness encouraged that "someone" to pretend to know more about the matter than he really did.

Recent scholarship has focused on policy makers in Washington, D.C., without full appreciation of the faulty information with which they had to work. The result has been an overly negative interpretation of the Polk administration's intentions. With much wisdom, Sidney Hook has written: "There is a natural tendency to associate the leader with the results achieved under his leadership even when these achievements, good or bad, have resulted despite his leadership rather than because of it."¹⁸ This tendency has been prevalent in recent portrayals of President James K. Polk's diplomacy before the Mexican-American War. A close examination of the evidence suggests that President Polk was far less the controller of events than these accounts portray.

Both Sellers and Pletcher rely heavily upon statements by former American agents that the Polk administration had prior knowledge that Mexico was not prepared immediately to renew full diplomatic relations.¹⁹ These men were Benjamin E. Green, a recent United States official in Mexico, and Joel Poinsett, a former American minister to Mexico. Benjamin Green's claim that he had made the Polk administration fully aware of the Mexican government's intention to receive only American negotiators of Commissioner rank was not made until 44 years after the supposed event. This is sufficient to cast some doubt on his account. It is also noteworthy that Green did not charge that Machiavellian scheming characterized Polk's ignoring the alleged advice.²⁰

Joel Poinsett's testimony was given within a year after the event and therefore is more reliable. But unlike Green, Poinsett

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did not claim that his warning was given *before* Slidell was sent on his mission. In fact, if Poinsett contacted the administration after Slidell's departure, his views would have been of little or no value in shaping Polk's policy. The ambiguous nature of Poinsett's evidence reduces its significance. Interestingly, Poinsett also did not claim that Polk's decision was based on duplicitous motives but rather charged it to the administration's "extraordinary degree of ignorance and presumption in relation to Mexico."²¹ Given the tenuous nature of this evidence, the charge that Polk knowingly arranged a possible diplomatic confrontation by sending Slidell to Mexico with an unwanted and exalted status is essentially unsubstantiated.

In years past, Polk's historical supporters have noted that on the eve of Mexico's initial rejection of Slidell, the Polk administration modified Slidell's instructions so as not to offend Mexican sensibilities. This was probably done in response to the first clear indication that Slidell would meet with failure. On December 7, 1845, Washington received a note from Foreign Minister Peña ostensibly complaining of the entrance of an American warship into the Mexican port of Manzanillo on the Pacific coast—an event which Consul Black later denied happening. The significant part of this letter was contained in its introduction, which read: "Although this is not to be understood, in any way, as an intimation of the reopening of the friendly relations at present interrupted between Mexico and the United States, I find myself compelled, by an occurrence which has recently taken place on our coast of the Pacific, to address myself to you."²² Assuming that Polk genuinely thought that the Mexican government had consented to reopening diplomatic relations, this curious note must have caused a stir in administration circles. It broadly hinted that the Mexican government was not then prepared to restore diplomatic relations. Five days later, Secretary of the Navy Bancroft wrote that the Slidell mission might yet succeed, but pessimistically noted: "But this may be too much to hope."²³

In this atmosphere, Buchanan penned Slidell additional secret orders on December 17. In cryptic language unintelligible to one not in possession of Slidell's original instructions, the Secretary of State wrote that the settlement of a west Texas boundary was of higher priority than negotiating the purchase of California. Clear-

ly, Polk was deemphasizing California, which had been prominent in Slidell's original instructions of a month before. "Instead of desiring to precipitate a war for the sake of obtaining California," Justin Smith wrote early in this century, "Polk was ready to let California go—or at least wait—for the sake of maintaining peace."²⁴ If Slidell were received, an event which must have begun to appear as doubtful after December 7, California's purchase could occur after a successful settlement of the Texas boundary. In short, a *prima facie* case exists that Polk was striving to save Slidell's mission, not sabotage it.²⁵

On January 13, 1846, immediately after receiving word of Mexico's probable rejection of Slidell, Polk was faced with an unwelcome choice. He could have sent Slidell revised instructions, reducing his status to that of a Commissioner, which the Mexican government now clearly explained it was willing to receive. Or he could pressure Mexico, by a demonstration of military might, to accept his original understanding of the agreement reached by Black and Peña the previous October. He chose the latter course, and on that date General Zachary Taylor was sent explicit orders to occupy the administration's territorial claim up to the Rio Grande. To have adopted the first option would have constituted a humiliating retreat for the proud American president, as Mexico was willing to negotiate only about the Texas issue, thereby ignoring the long-standing pecuniary claims of American citizens against the Mexican government.

One wonders why neither side suggested an obvious compromise—that the United States send a negotiator of Commissioner rank to discuss a number of concerns important to each nation. Apparently each government thought that such a revision of the divergently perceived original understanding would merely serve to encourage the acquisitiveness of the other. At the heart of Mexico's reluctance to negotiate with the United States was the belief that a policy of compromise would simply serve to encourage further American expansion into Mexican territories. That American policy makers were also fearful of the consequences of appeasement was indicated in a letter sent from John Slidell to Secretary of State Buchanan immediately after the American envoy's first rejection by the Mexican government:

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Should any concession be made by our government . . . , he [the American "Commissioner"] will come on a bootless errand. The desire of our government to secure peace will be mistaken for timidity; the most extravagant pretensions will be made and insisted upon, until the Mexican people shall be convinced by hostile demonstrations that our differences must be settled promptly, either by negotiation or the sword.²⁶

Would war have been avoided had Black and Peña originally negotiated to have Mexico receive a Commissioner to discuss a variety of issues? One can doubt whether either man possessed the necessary diplomatic skills to arrive at this compromise position. Like Black, Peña apparently lacked needed precision in the use of language, an unfortunate weakness which he displayed in his October communications with the American Consul. While it is true that Peña consistently used the word "commissioner" in his October references to the prospective negotiator, he did not then explain that his government was only willing to discuss the Texas issue. Black had asked whether Mexico was prepared to "receive an envoy from the United States entrusted with full powers to adjust all the questions in dispute between the two governments."²⁷ Peña had replied that his government was "disposed to receive the commissioner of the United States who may come to this capital with full powers from his government to settle the present dispute in a peaceful, reasonable, and honorable manner."²⁸ Why Peña did not then clarify that Mexico was only willing to discuss the issue of Texas, which was the meaning of his use of the singular tense ("the present dispute"), is not known. The most likely explanation is that he was negligent in this crucial matter. Indeed, this was implied by the Mexican Council of Government which later criticized Peña's handling of the affair.²⁹

Peña's mistakes did not end here. Informed by Black of the American intention to send a negotiator immediately to Mexico, Peña far too slowly carried out the program of political education he knew would be necessary to win even the acceptance of an American "Commissioner" on Mexican soil. Peña's strategy was first to seek the opinions of the Mexican Ministers of Finance and War concerning Mexico's resources to wage real war with the United States. Expecting their reports to show that Mexico was in no condition to support this alternative, Peña next planned to

contact the various departments comprising the Mexican republic about their resources for war. The answers he expected here were also predictable. Any reasonable man, when presented with these direct questions, would have to reply that Mexico was incapable of waging victorious war against the United States. Apparently, Peña reasoned that the Mexican government would then be psychologically conditioned to negotiate its differences with the United States.³⁰

Peña's time-consuming plan rested on several faulty assumptions. First, he presumed that the United States would not send a negotiator until after the first of the new year, when the American Senate would have had sufficient opportunity to confirm the anticipated Commissioner's appointment. Article II, section 2, of the United States constitution required that ambassadors and other public ministers and consuls could not be appointed without the Senate's consent. As the Senate would not be in session until December, Peña felt confident in his legalistic presumption.³¹ One can argue that he had no basis for this belief. Consul Black's letter to him of October 13 had clearly stated that if the Mexican answer was affirmative an envoy would "be immediately dispatched to Mexico."³² Also, *norteamericanos* were rather well-known for their uncivilized haste in conducting business. In short, Peña should have known that the Polk Administration would dispatch a negotiator and wait for confirmation of his appointment in season. Apparently the Mexican Foreign Secretary did not foresee this contingency. Slidell arrived at Veracruz on November 20. By December 6, he was in Mexico City. Peña's necessary groundwork had barely begun, as the Mexican Foreign Secretary's strategy came crumbling down amid charges that he was cowardly scheming to sell Mexico's birthright.

A little over a month after his October commitment to Black, Peña had received the Minister of Finance's statement of Mexico's inadequate resources for war. The Minister of War had taken two weeks longer to reply. By that time, the Herrera government was being showered with abuse related to Slidell's early arrival. Not until December 11 did Peña send his message to the departments querying their resources for war. On that same day, seeking to shed the charge of treason, he recommended to the Council of Government, a largely advisory body, that Slidell be

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rejected in his current status.³³ Pathetically, hope that his strategy might yet succeed joined with his sense of political realities to produce contradictory, simultaneous actions. One may easily sympathize with Peña. He faced a Mexican opposition looking for the slightest excuse to overthrow the Herrera administration of which Peña was a part. To be sure, Herrera was soon forced from office and replaced by General Mariano Paredes. It is quite possible that even had Peña and Black effectively communicated in October, their agreement to negotiate might yet have been rejected by Mexico's conservatives³⁴ While one may speculate on what might have occurred had Peña acted with greater speed, the fact remains that his policy failed amid his mistaken assumptions, and this failure brought war even closer.

This essay has reviewed the actions of Consul John Black and Foreign Minister Peña to provide greater understanding of the decisions of the Polk administration regarding its Mexican policy. Similar insight may be gained by closely examining the official exchanges between General Zachary Taylor and his superiors in Washington. This latter focus is especially relevant in that both Sellers and Pletcher have used instructions sent to Taylor at the time of the Slidell mission's inception to bolster their interpretations. In October of 1845, says Sellers, Taylor was strongly urged to advance to the Rio Grande from his base at Corpus Christi. Accordingly, Sellers writes of Polk's decision "to step up the pressure on Mexico" at the same time that the American president was ostensibly intending to seek peaceful negotiations. Here again, Sellers suggests, is evidence that Polk was really striving to bully Mexico into a situation in which it would have to choose between war or peaceful surrender.³⁵ He implies that Polk's secret motives can be divined not only by a close look at the Slidell mission but also by the administration's October instructions to General Taylor.

During the summer immediately preceding the creation of the Slidell mission, Taylor had been repeatedly ordered to move his force as close to the Rio Grande consistent with the health and safety of his troops.³⁶ At that time, he had been informed of the likelihood of a Mexican invasion of Texas, yet had been advised not to disturb any Mexican posts between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River as long as peace remained.³⁷ These communi-

cations of the summer preceded the penning of two documents used by Sellers to support the interpretation outlined above. One of these documents is a letter from Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General, dated October 4, 1845. In it, Taylor more or less requested specific orders to move his force to the Rio Grande, as he obviously felt uncomfortable under his summer instructions, which left much to his individual judgment of the situation. He wrote:

If our government, in settling the question of boundary, makes the line of the Rio Grande an ultimatum, I cannot doubt that the settlement will be greatly facilitated and hastened by our taking possession at once of one or two suitable points on or quite near that river. Our strength and state of preparation should be displayed in a manner not to be mistaken.

Yet, he added, he did not feel at liberty to move to the Rio Grande, given his earlier orders not to disturb Mexican posts on the "Texan side" of the river.³⁸

The other document used by Sellers is a letter from Secretary of War William Marcy to Taylor, dated October 16, 1845. It stated the following points: (1) Recent information suggested that a full Mexican invasion of Texas was now unlikely. (2) The administration stood by its claim to the Rio Grande boundary and its earlier orders to Taylor to move his force as close to the river as possible. (3) Taylor would have to rely on his judgment in selecting a specific site for his army, given his "superior knowledge of localities" and his easier access to news governing the situation.³⁹

Sellers assumes that Marcy's letter was not a reply to Taylor's communication of October 4. Indeed, in his narrative, Sellers treats Marcy's letter first, followed by a description of Taylor's letter. This assumption is crucial as it portrays Marcy's letter as an administration effort to encourage Taylor to move to the Rio Grande on the eve of Slidell's departure to Mexico. In fact, the matter is not open to much doubt. Taylor's letter was received in Washington the day before Marcy sent his reply.⁴⁰ Knowing this, the reader of Marcy's letter sees it in its proper context: Taylor first requested explicitly to be ordered to the Rio Grande; Marcy thereupon responded by telling him that while his earlier orders

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to uphold the Rio Grande boundary claim remained, Taylor had to rely on his own judgment of the situation. In short, Washington would not send specific orders and inject an unnecessary inflexibility into a most delicate diplomatic situation.

Unlike Sellers, Pletcher avoids treating Taylor's October 4 letter and Marcy's October 16 letter together. Nevertheless, his account implies, as does Sellers, that Marcy's letter was not in response to aggressive suggestions made by Taylor. Indeed, Pletcher portrays Marcy's October instructions to Taylor as reacting to a letter sent to Secretary of State Buchanan by Consul Thomas O. Larkin from Monterey, California. Larkin's letter, which was received five days before Marcy wrote Taylor's updated orders, spoke ominously of British imperialistic intentions toward California, then a part of Mexico which was closely eyed by American expansionists.⁴¹ While Pletcher does not explain how or why Taylor's orders of October 16, reflected the administration's concern for the fate of California, his implication is apparent: In mid-October, at the time when the Slidell mission was being formed, anxiety-producing information from California motivated an expansion-minded Polk administration to increase its pressure on Mexico.⁴²

Pletcher's and Sellers' generally balanced and thorough presentations have won the respect of scholars of the period. Indeed, it is this high reputation which makes their description of Polk's motives and actions during the weeks immediately preceding the creation of the Slidell Mission so damaging. Both historians largely acquit Polk of the charges that Commodore Stockton's behavior in Texas in the Spring of 1845 and John Frémont's subsequent activities in California reflected a presidential master plan to manipulate Mexico into war.⁴³ Yet they see the same general intention reflected in the evidence on the origins of the Slidell mission and substantiated by Taylor's orders of October 16. Hence, their readers come to roughly the same conclusion as held by Polk's more aggressive historical critics: that being that Polk was primarily responsible for the war between the United States and Mexico.

While one cannot deny the important roles played by both social forces and the decisions of President Polk, the actions of others must also be given due weight, for they did much to

fashion the diplomatic impasse that made war difficult to avoid. American Consul Black and Mexican Foreign Minister Peña failed to negotiate clear conditions by which the confrontation between the two nations might have been defused. Peña also failed to pursue with sufficient energy the necessary task of persuading his countrymen that negotiation was preferable to war. In addition, a close reading and reasonable construction of Taylor's October orders, given at the time of the Slidell mission's creation, do not suggest that the administration was trying to manipulate Mexico into a war in which California could be conquered. To the contrary, this evidence indirectly reflected Polk's willingness to adjust matters of difference with Mexico, albeit without weakening the American negotiating position. While Polk's decision to send General Taylor to the Rio Grande has received much emphasis, this event should not be abstracted from its historical context—a context that was partly forced upon Polk by the failings of others. Ultimately, when Polk was faced with the prospect of having to retreat in humiliation from his well-publicized attempt to negotiate, explicit orders were finally sent to Taylor to advance to the Rio Grande. Yet Polk had not deliberately sought this result, which we can now clearly see led directly to the outbreak of the Mexican-American War.

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NOTES

¹ Anson Jones, *Memoranda Relating to the Republic of Texas, Its History and Annexation* (New York, 1859), pp. 48ff; Richard Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigue of 1845," *Pacific Historical Review*, IV (1935), 39-68; Glenn W. Price, *Origins of the War with Mexico, The Polk-Stockton Intrigue* (Austin, 1967).

² Richard R. Stenberg, "Polk and Fremont, 1845-1846," *Pacific Historical Review*, VII (1938), 216-217, 220.

³ See David M. Pletcher's review of Price's book in *The Journal of American History*, LV (1968), 143-145; also see George Tays, "Fremont Had No Secret Instructions," *Pacific Historical Review*, IX (1940), 157-172.

⁴ Charles Sellers, *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 264-266, 331. It is interesting to note that Sellers regards his own interpretation of this episode as more moderate than those of Polk's most aggressive critics. Contrasting his own position with that of Stenberg, Sellers writes in a footnote: "While I agree that Polk was prepared to go to war if necessary to obtain California, he [Polk] seems to me to have believed that Mexico might well be coerced into parting with California without war." (Sellers, *Polk*, p. 338n). In short, Sellers' position is that Polk was willing to avoid war if he could bully Mexico into peaceful surrender. As a point of contrast, Stenberg portrays Polk as bent on war.

⁵ David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Mo., 1973), pp. 278-279, 290, 291n.

⁶ James Buchanan to John Slidell, November 10, 1845, located in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan* (12 vols., New York, 1908-1911; 1960 reprint), VI, 294-306.

⁷ Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (4 vols., Chicago, 1910), I, 33-35.

⁸ William Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860* (12 vols., Washington, D.C., 1932-1939), VIII, 746-747.

⁹ John Black to James Buchanan, August 23, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, VIII, 745-746.

¹⁰ Francis Dimond to James Buchanan, August 30, 1845, located in Diplomatic Branch, Civil Archives Division, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

¹¹ James Buchanan to John Black, September 17, 1845, *House Executive Documents*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, p. 8.

¹² John Black to Manuel de la Peña y Peña, October 13, 1845, *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 10-11.

¹³ Manuel de la Peña y Peña to John Black, October 15, 1845, *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, p. 11-12.

¹⁴ John Black to James Buchanan, October 17, 1845, *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ Sir Ernest Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (2 vols., London, 1917) I, 174; Marcellus Donald A. R. von Redlich, *The Law of Nations* (New York, 1937), pp. 302-307.

¹⁶ Black to Buchanan, October 17, 1845, *House Executive Documents*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 176, pp. 9-10. John Black to James Buchanan, October 18, 1845, located in Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence*, VIII, 766-767.

¹⁷ John Black to Francis Dimond, January 31, 1846, United States, Department of State, Foreign Affairs Section (Record Group 59) Post Records, Consulate Mexico City, Letterbook IV, 242.

¹⁸ Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History, A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (Boston, 1943), p. 4.

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¹⁹ Sellers, *Polk*, p. 265; Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, pp. 278-279.

²⁰ Statement of Col. Benjamin E. Green, August 8, 1889, located in Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *The Letters and Times of the Tylers* (3 vols., Williamsburg, 1896), III, 176-177.

²¹ Joel Poinsett to Martin Van Buren, May 26, 1846, Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress.

²² Manuel de la Peña y Peña to John Black, October 31, 1845, located in Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence*, VIII, 769-770.

²³ Mark Anthony De Wolfe Howe, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (2 vols., New York, 1908), I, 280.

²⁴ Justin H. Smith, *The War With Mexico* (2 vols., Gloucester, Mass., 1919; 1963 reprint), I, 127-128; James Buchanan to John Slidell, December 17, 1845, located in Moore, ed., *Works of Buchanan*, VI, 345-346.

²⁵ It is possible that Poinsett's warning that the Slidell mission was doomed to fail was given immediately prior to this redrafting of Slidell's instructions. In any case, even after Slidell's initial rejection, Polk continued to believe that Slidell might yet be received. As late as March 28, 1846, Polk proclaimed to his diary his faith that the Mexican government's need for funds would ultimately result in Slidell's acceptance. (See Quaife, ed., *Diary of Polk*, I, 305-309.) Only Slidell's second rejection, the news of which was shortly thereafter received, dissuaded the American president.

²⁶ John Slidell to James Buchanan, December 27, 1845, located in Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence*, VIII, 800-803. After the war was underway, it was finally suggested that Texas and claims be discussed concurrently on an ad-hoc basis. See John Black to James Buchanan, May 21, 1846, located in *Ibid.*, VIII, 852-853. Interestingly enough, the status of Nicholas Trist, who eventually negotiated the treaty to end the war, was that of an ad-hoc negotiator assigned to discuss all matters at issue.

²⁷ Black to Peña y Peña, October 13, 1845, *House Executive Documents*, 29th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 196, pp. 10-11.

²⁸ Peña y Peña to Black, October 15, 1845, *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁹ Gabriel Valencia (for the Council of Government) to Manuel de la Peña y Peña, December 16, 1845, located in Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, *La diplomacia mexicana* (3 vols., México, 1910-1913), III (Appendix), 11-16.

³⁰ In his Circular to the Departmental Governors, dated December 11, 1845, Peña completely revealed his strategy of avoiding war as described in this essay. See Antonio de la Peña y Reyes, ed., *Algunos documentos sobre el tratado de Guadalupe y la situación de México durante la invasión americana* (México, 1930), pp. 3-26.

³¹ Manuel de la Peña y Peña to the Council of Government, December 11, 1845, located in *House Executive Documents*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 49-51.

³² Black to Peña y Peña, October 13, 1845, *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

³³ Pedro Fernandez de Castillo (Minister of Finance) to Manuel de la Peña y Peña, November 19, 1845, located in United States Library of Congress, Division of Manuscripts, Photostats, H/252 (73:72)/70; Pedro Maria Anaya (Minister of War) to Manuel de la Peña y Peña, December 2, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, H/252 (73:72)/70; Peña y Peña to Council of Government, December 11, 1845, 29th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 196, pp. 49-51; Circular to the Departmental Governors from Manuel de la Peña y Peña, December 11, 1845, De la Peña y Reyes, ed., *Algunos documentos . . .*, pp. 3-26.

³⁴ Over a year and a half later, President Herrera would recall that his government was overthrown for considering negotiation with the United States even on an ad-hoc basis. See *Senate Documents*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., No. 1, p. 41.

³⁵ Sellers, *Polk*, pp. 330-331.

³⁶ George Bancroft (Acting Secretary of War) to Zachary Taylor, June 15, 1845, located in *House Executive Documents*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp.

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69-70; William L. Marcy (Secretary of War) to Zachary Taylor, July 30, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 70-71.

³⁷ William Marcy to Zachary Taylor, July 8, 1848, located in *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, p. 70; William Marcy to Zachary Taylor, August 23, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 72-72.

³⁸ Zachary Taylor to Adjutant General, October 4, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 93-95.

³⁹ William Marcy to Zachary Taylor, October 16, 1845, located in *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., No. 196, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁰ Inquiring by letter on this matter, I received the following reply from Robert W. Krauskopf of the Navy and Old Army Branch, Military Archives Division, National Archives and Records Service: "The register of letters received by the Adjutant General for the year 1845 indicates that General Taylor's official report dated October 4, 1845, was received in the office of the Adjutant General on October 15, 1845."

⁴¹ Thomas O. Larkin to James Buchanan, July 10, 1845, located in George P. Hammond, ed., *The Larkin Papers* (10 vols.; Berkeley, 1951-1968), III, 265-268.

⁴² Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, pp. 282-283. Clearly, Polk maintained a strong interest in California. However, available evidence indicates that in mid-October he was generally optimistic that time and circumstances were favorable to eventual American acquisition of the province. (See James Buchanan to Thomas O. Larkin, October 17, 1845, in Moore, ed., *Works*, VI, 275-278.) Most interestingly, this optimism was later discouraged by a letter from Consul Larkin, received on January 12, 1846, the day before Polk sent Taylor his fateful orders to advance to the Rio Grande. In this letter, Larkin reported that the earlier friendliness of California's Mexican population toward Anglo-Americans settling there had cooled considerably. In fact, he now predicted that hostilities might soon break out between the two camps. (See Thomas Larkin to James Buchanan, November 4, 1845, in Hammond, ed., *Larkin Papers*, IV, 86-87.) Simultaneously receiving news of Slidell's rejection, President Polk, angered by what he considered the duplicity of the Mexican government and most probably concerned by new developments in California, ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande.

⁴³ Sellers and Pletcher reject the Jones-Stenberg-Price claim that Polk sought to maneuver Mexico into war by Stockton's machinations in Texas in the Spring of 1845. Sellers largely ignores the question whether Polk gave Frémont secret instructions to foment war in California. However, Pletcher states that this latter charge against Polk is based on "inference from incomplete, circumstantial evidence." Sellers, *Polk*, pp. 225n, 335-336; Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, pp. 197-201, 285n.