

# A THREATENED INVASION OF CALIFORNIA

LETTER ADDRESSED TO MAJOR GENERAL McDOWELL BY  
GENERAL U. S. GRANT

HEAD QUARTERS ARMIES OF THE UNITED STATES,

City Point, Va. Jan. 8th, 1865.<sup>1</sup>

Maj. Gen. I. McDowell,  
Comdg. Dept. of the Pacific,  
General,

It is known that Dr. Gwinn, former United States Senator from Cal. has gone to Mexico and taken service under the Maxamillian Government. It is understood also that he has been appointed Governor General of Sonora. The Dr. is a rebel of the most virulent order. His being formerly a resident of California, and now getting to that state in Mexico bordering on the State of his former residence, portends no good to us. May it not be his design to entice into Sonora the dissatisfied spirits of California, and if the opportunity occurs, organize them and invade the State?—I write, without having discussed this question with any one, to put you on your guard against what I believe may prove a great danger. — Watch this matter closely and should you find these apprehensions well founded, prepare to meet them. You will find no difficulty in raising any number of volunteers that may be necessary in California to repel an invasion of the state. Especially will this be the case when the invasion comes from a country with which we are at peace.

In an event like the one alluded to I would not rest satisfied with simply driving the invader on to Mexican soil, but would pursue him until overtaken, and would retain possession of the territory from which the invader started until indemnity for the past, and security for the future, satisfactory to the Government, was insured.

This letter, which may have to be regarded as instructions for your guidance, is written entirely without knowledge of what the President would advise in case of an invasion of our territory from that of Mexico, but with a conviction that it is right and just.

The case supposed is a very different one from those that have occurred starting from Canada. In the latter case rebels have fitted out for the invasion of our Northern frontier, upon Canadian soil, secretly, and without the knowledge of Canadian authorities. In the threatened invasion it will be the act of officials of the usurpers of the Government of Mexico, and, in my

judgment, would justify direct assistance on our part to re-establish the legitimate government over that country.

This letter is intended as *private* until the exigency contemplated calls for action on your part, when it will be regarded as instructions for your guidance in the absence of more recent orders.

Very respectfully

Your obt. svt.

U. S. GRANT

Lt. Gen.

A BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF WILLIAM M. GWIN'S ACTIVITIES AND  
AN EXPLANATION OF THE UNDERLYING FACTS  
WHICH OCCASIONED GRANT'S LETTER

William McKendree Gwin, a native of Sumner County, Tennessee (1805-1885), was graduated in medicine from Transylvania University in 1828, removing to Mississippi in 1830. In 1833, President Andrew Jackson appointed him as United States Marshal for Mississippi. Between that date and 1841, when he served one term in Congress as Representative, Gwin was supposed to have acted as a go-between in Texan affairs between Sam Houston and President Jackson, whose intimate he was. On June 4, 1849, he reached California. In September and October, 1849, he served as a member of the Constitutional Convention at Monterey. Elected United States Senator for California, he served from 1850 to 1855 and from 1857 to 1861. He was acknowledged as the leader of the pro-slavery party in California.

"The Gwin party hoped to divide California into two States and hand over the southern to slavery; on the eve of the Civil War it considered the scheme of a Pacific Coast Republic."<sup>2</sup>

"After the election [Lincoln's], a number of southern sympathizers left the state to join the confederate army. . . . Senator Gwin, Calhoun Benham, and J. L. Brent were also arrested on board of a steamer [the *Orizaba*] for the east by General Sumner, for the same offence [treason], and placed in a New York jail. None of the parties were detained long."<sup>3</sup>

At the State Democratic convention held in San Francisco, June 19, 1872, Gwin was elected delegate to the National convention. Among the resolutions passed at the State convention was the following: "That we earnestly condemn and protest against the machinations, tyranny, extravagance and corruptions of the administration of U. S. Grant."<sup>4</sup>

"In October, 1863, Mr. Gwin being in Paris, met at a dinner given by Mr. Corcoran of Washington, the Marquis de Montholon. This interview, followed by others with the Marquis, proved the occasion of awakening an interest in the imperial government in the inauguration of a colonization scheme for Northern Mexico. The information, in answering the inquiries

of the Marquis, given by Mr. Gwin, concerning California, its settlement, mines, and general development, was communicated to the Emperor Napoleon, exciting a deep interest in his mind. By the emperor's desire, Mr. Gwin had several interviews with him with reference to a similar settlement in the northern states of Mexico, and the opening up of their mineral resources. At the request of the minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Gwin drew up a plan of colonization, including provisions for the protection of colonists by a military force of French troops against the jealousy of Mexicans towards all foreigners, especially Americans, and also against hostile Indians on the borders. The most liberal terms were offered as inducements to immigration. The Council of State, the emperor presiding, approved of, and adopted, the plan. It was also submitted to Maximilian, at the time in Paris, and accepted by him, whom Mr. Gwin met at the Tuileries, and who expressed a warm admiration for Americans, and gave every encouragement to the scheme, and declared that the Emperor Napoleon was enthusiastic in its favor, believing it would be a bulwark to the Mexican empire at its weakest point. Mr. Gwin shortly after went to Mexico bearing an autograph letter from the Emperor Napoleon, addressed to General Bazaine, commander of the French army in Mexico, instructing him to give all the military assistance required in the establishment of the proposed colony. Maximilian preceded him two weeks. Mr. Gwin, on arriving at the City of Mexico, was presented by the Marquis de Montholon to General Bazaine, to whom he handed the emperor's letter. The interview was not satisfactory to Mr. Gwin. It was evident there was no cordiality between the government of Maximilian and the French military government, as represented by General Bazaine. The latter warned Mr. Gwin to have no intercourse with the emperor's government, saying he himself was the only power in Mexico, and promising all aid under the Emperor Napoleon's instructions. Notwithstanding, Mr. Gwin addressed to Maximilian a note asking for an audience, and received a friendly reply from the emperor, stating that he was on the eve of departure on an excursion, and on his return he would see him, meanwhile referring him to his minister of foreign affairs, but without success, an evasion of the interview being apparently intentional on the part of that functionary. The collection of revenues, and other matters, were the occasions of disagreements between the imperial government and the French military authorities, which was the pretext for neglecting to afford the promised aid to Mr. Gwin; and having thus fruitlessly occupied the summer and autumn of 1864, in the beginning of 1865 he returned to Paris.

“Again Mr. Gwin had an audience with the Emperor Napoleon, and reported freely the condition of affairs in Mexico, and assured him that Maximilian had no power except that given him by the French, Austrian, and Belgian troops; that his title gave him no real influence, that he was, in

fact, a paper emperor, and should be so treated. Napoleon replied that Maximilian was an emperor and must be treated as such, and still expressed very great interest in the scheme of colonization, asked many questions drawing forth further information, and insisted on Mr. Gwin's preparing a new plan on a larger scale. A plan was accordingly drawn, including a larger portion of the country in the scheme, which met with Napoleon's entire approval. The emperor urged Mr. Gwin's return to Mexico, gave him another autograph letter, and issued peremptory orders to General Bazaine to enforce the execution of the plan. Thus provided, Mr. Gwin returned to Mexico. He mistrusted Maximilian; not his honesty, but his administrative ability. He was a bigoted Catholic, absorbed in imposing religious ceremonies, yet he was soon in open conflict with the church authorities in Mexico. He was extravagant and wasteful, fond of display, and exacted a salary of a million and a half dollars per annum while his people were in a starving condition. Mr. Gwin's worst fears, therefore, when he reached Mexico, were realized. General Bazaine, now a marshal, sixty years old, had become enamored of a Mexican lady of sixteen, and was engrossed with the festivities of his recent marriage. The emperor, on hearing of Mr. Gwin's arrival, left the city on an extended tour. The marshal constantly excused himself from obeying the Emperor Napoleon's new instructions. Mr. Gwin was attacked in the newspapers, and his authority from the Emperor Napoleon to establish a colony denied. In a final interview with Marshal Bazaine, the latter stated that he did not dare officially to contradict the statements of the newspapers, that the Emperor Maximilian would never return to the city as long as Mr. Gwin remained; that he considered the execution of the Emperor Napoleon's orders would be the surrender of the whole country to Mr. Gwin, and the death-knell of the Mexican empire, and if it were attempted he would quit the country. Mr. Gwin, perceiving no prospect of aid from any quarter, requested of the marshal a military escort to take him out of the country, which was promptly furnished. Mr. Gwin, upon his departure, remarked significantly that he hoped his escort would give him a safe delivery out of Mexico, and added, that unless the Emperor Maximilian and the French army started soon, it was doubtful if they would get safely away. Thus ended Mr. Gwin's connection with the French intervention in Mexico, the inception of which did not originate with himself. The idea of Napoleon, in attempting the scheme of colonizing the northern portion of Mexico, was to obtain from its mines material for the settlement of the Mexican national debt, guaranteed by France, and to establish in Mexico a stable government. It was a good idea, but the project failed through the incapacity of Maximilian (which Napoleon could not comprehend), and the ambition of Bazaine. To these two men may be attributed the downfall of the empire in Mexico, and ultimately of the empire in France, through the weakness of the one and the treachery of the other."<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES TO "A THREATENED INVASION"

1. This letter was written by General Grant from the Headquarters of the Armies of the United States while he was closing in on Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, three months before the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, which ended the struggle between the North and the South.

2. Article "California" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

3. Davis, Winfield J., *History of Political Conventions in California*, Sacramento, 1893, p. 180.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

5. Phelps, Alonzo, *Contemporary Biography of California's Representative Men*, San Francisco, 1881, pp. 238-39.

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