

## A PRIZE AND A NATIONAL POLICY: THE CONTEST FOR CALIFORNIA

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It was not until after American interests in California had been advanced to a considerable extent by means of commercial intercourse, by the entrance of trappers and adventurers into the territory, and by the actual settlement in the country of a number of homebuilders that the government of United States actively espoused a policy of acquisition. The skipper, the hunter, the settler,—these were private individuals, engaged in their private affairs; but sooner or later it was sure to dawn upon the mind of official Washington that where they went and what they did were matters of vast public concern. Furthermore, it was, to a large extent, the representations of certain commercial and other private interests that brought to focus the early attempts, on the part of the United States, to secure portions of California, including especially the harbor of San Francisco.

As the final conquest of California was an act in the drama of the Mexican War, so the early negotiations for its purchase were inextricably bound up with the acquisition of Texas. Therefore, any complete understanding of our early national policy with reference to California must presuppose knowledge of at least certain phases of the Texas question.

Little need be said of the negotiations of Anthony Butler, who, in 1829, was sent to Mexico by President Jackson to seek the acquisition of Texas by purchase. Butler has deservedly been denounced as "a man eminently unqualified for any position of trust."

In a letter he suggested that a mere bribe of half a million dollars would result in the acquisition of Texas not only, but also, would lead eventually to the dominion of the United States "over the whole of that tract of territory known as New Mexico, and higher and lower California, an empire in itself, a paradise in climate . . . rich in minerals and affording a water route to the Pacific, through the Arkansas and Colorado rivers." It is to the credit of Jackson that he endorsed on this letter:

. . . Nothing will be countenanced to bring the government under the remotest imputation of being engaged in corruption or bribery. . . A. J.

Nevertheless, the idea of acquiring Alta California had found entrance into Jackson's mind, and from that time to the day when Sloat raised the Stars and Stripes at Monterey, California was never lost sight of as a big, alluring prize. And it is no wonder, for the economic value of San Francisco with its matchless harbor and rich back country and the vast potentialities of an interior indefinitely great could not fail to be impressive wherever they became known.

As early as 1816, Otto von Kotzebue, captain of the Russian ship *Rurik*, entered the Golden Gate and was entertained by Comandante Luis Arguello. The Russian visitor thus referred to the country he beheld:

It has hitherto been the fate of these regions to remain unnoticed; but posterity will do them justice; towns and cities will flourish where all is now desert; the waters over which scarcely a solitary boat is seen to glide will reflect the flags of all nations; and a happy prosperous people, receiving with thankfulness what prodigal nature bestows for their use, will dispense her treasures over every part of the world.

Only two years later, J. B. Provost, acting as U. S. Commissioner in connection with the re-surrender of Astoria from England, in a report to Washington declared that "the port of St. Francis is one of the most convenient, extensive and safe in the world, wholly without defence and in the neighborhood of a feeble, diffused, and disaffected population."

Add to these early expressions others of like import, found in official reports and private correspondence of ever-increasing volume, then recall the geometric spread of influence of ardent admirers who had actually been in California and had returned to the United States, and it becomes easy to understand the growing intensity of the desire on the part of the successive administrations—not always steadily maintained, to be sure—to possess the coveted prize.

That California would almost certainly fall to some alien power, and probably before the lapse of many years, was clearly foreseen by keen observers. In transmitting an important despatch to England, for example, Mr. Barron, English consul at Tepic, made the significant comment,

. . . . that this fine country has been totally neglected by Mexico, and she must ere long see some other nation its protector, or in absolute possession of it.

Even Lord Aberdeen himself was compelled to acknowledge that California's separation from Mexico was probably inevitable. Who was to secure the prize?

While it may not be demonstrated that Russian policy contemplated the acquisition of the country, nevertheless the Russian advance to the southward gave cause, first to

the Spanish and the Mexican authorities, then to outside powers, for no slight degree of solicitude as to the real intentions of the northern bear. This source of anxiety was not wholly removed till, having sold the bulk of their belongings to Captain J. A. Sutter, then but recently established at New Helvetia, the Russian settlers at Fort Ross and Bodega took final leave of California. By treaty agreement entered into with the United States and England, respectively, Russia had already withdrawn her claims to territory south of 54° 40' in 1824 and 1825. Neither the Spanish nor the Mexican authorities had ever given official approval to any Russian claims to territorial possessions in California; but on the other hand both had repeatedly though ineffectually protested against their presence. When the representatives of the Russian-American Fur Company, about New Year's Day, 1842, set sail for Alaska, on the *Constantine*, there went with them the last vestige of hope for any Russian control of California. As a possible competitor, Russia was definitely eliminated.

There is no lack of evidence that three great powers entertained hopes of acquiring Alta California when—as it came to be quite generally believed—the slight tenure of Mexico should finally fail. These were France, England, and the United States. In support of the aspirations of France may be advanced the intangible but potent factors of religion and affinities of traditional manners, as well as a subtle distaste for the ways of the Anglo-Saxon. There is little doubt that France, while perhaps having no well-defined policy of acquisition, did entertain the hope that in the fullness of time the prize might fall into her lap. The somewhat haughty attitude of Captain Sutter, exhibited now and again in his professions of being a Frenchman and his hints of French colonization, lent color to the suspicions of certain Californians. "There is little doubt," wrote General Vallejo to Governor Alvarado in 1841, "that France is intriguing to become mistress of California."

Duflot de Mofras, in his account of his explorations, carefully notes the Frenchmen residing at different points, lays emphasis on the essentially French character of Sutter's New Helvetia, and calls attention to the identity of French and Spanish religion and temperament. It seems that the Governor offered him a large land grant for a colony and that he advanced the opinion that "a French protectorate offers to California the most satisfactory way of escape from the dangers that threaten its future."

During the early part of the eventful decade 1840-49, France maintained in the Pacific waters eight vessels with

242 guns, while the British fleet consisted of four vessels, of superior type, with 104 guns, and Commodore Thomas Ap Catesby Jones was given command for United States of the Pacific squadron of five vessels mounting 116 guns. A formidable obstacle that ever stood athwart the pathway of France as a contender for California—as indeed of England—was the Monroe Doctrine, which European powers had ample reason for believing would be maintained by the United States unless overthrown by superior force,—and at that time California, however earnestly desired, was not deemed worth a war with the great American Republic.

While certain representatives of England had come to have some appreciation of portions of California at an early date and a few Englishmen had actually settled in the country,—to say nothing of the annual expeditions of trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company,—there was no manifestation of real interest on the part of the British Government prior to the Graham affair of 1840, which involved the arrest and deportation of a number of Englishmen and Americans. Attaching perhaps unwarranted international significance to the episode, Consul Barron of Tepic, and later his superior, Sir Richard Packenham, as Minister to Mexico, urged upon the government a considerable increase of British naval strength in the Pacific waters.

This official interest was deepened as the great value of Upper California began to be better understood and especially as a result of the visit of Mofras, which apparently aroused suspicions of French designs on the Pacific Coast. On the 30th of August, 1841, Packenham addressed a dispatch to Palmerston, which definitely recommended a plan looking toward the ultimate acquisition of California by Great Britain. He wrote, in part, as follows:

It is much to be regretted that advantage should not be taken of the arrangement some time since concluded by the Mexican Government with their creditors in Europe, to establish an English population in the magnificent Territory of Upper California . . . by all means desirable, in a political point of view, that California, once ceasing to belong to Mexico, should not fall into the hands of any Power but England; and the present debilitated condition of Mexico, and the gradual increase of foreign population in California render it probable that its separation from Mexico will be effected at no distant period; in fact, there is some reason to believe that daring and adventurous speculators in the United States have already turned their thoughts in that direction.

Admiral Sir George Seymour, who commanded the British squadron in the Pacific,—especially following the premature seizure of Monterey by Commodore Jones,—manifested much interest in California and exchanged many

letters with the British Admiralty. Much has been written about his activity having for its object the acquisition of California and finally of his exciting race with Commodore Sloat to Monterey in 1846, in the hope of seizing the prize. That Seymour, like Pakenham and Barron, personally desired to see steps taken to acquire California, there can be no doubt.

In the light of these conditions, when British officials from the English Minister at Mexico City to James Alexander Forbes,—a little later appointed vice-consul at Monterey,—were pointing out the great value of California to England, and the apparent ease of its acquisition, and the commander of the British squadron was manifesting unwonted activity and watching every movement of the French and the Americans,—it was but natural for Americans in California to impute to the British Government a policy leading to acquisition or at least to an English protectorate; likewise it is easy to understand the interpretation of the course of history given by writers, who of course had no opportunity to consult the secret records of the British Foreign Office.

It must now be recorded that when Pakenham so earnestly advocated that California should not be permitted to "fall into the hands of any Power but England," he stated his own opinion, based on reports from Barron and Forbes, and did not express the views of the Foreign Office nor the British Cabinet. The reply to the English minister was written by Aberdeen, who had succeeded Palmerston; it was of such a character as to put an end to Pakenham's "dream of a British colony in California." It had come to be the "almost unanimous opinion of English statesmen that the day for colonial enterprise had passed."

Barron in Lower California and Forbes in Upper California, on whom English officials depended for first-hand information, were fully cognizant of the exceedingly slight tenure of Mexico and quite confident that even slight activity on the part of their government would result in the acquisition of Upper California. When the query was put to Forbes, whether the country could be received under the protection of the British flag, but "still remain for the present under the direct government of one of its natives," he replied that he felt unauthorized to answer, but added, in his report to Barron,

I feel myself in duty bound to use all my influence to prevent this fine country from falling into the hands of any other foreign power than that of England. I repeat that it is impossible for Mexico to hold California for a much longer period, and if the Govt. of Great Britain

can with honor to itself, and without giving umbrage to Mexico, extend its protection to California, reaping those benefits which by proper management, would infallibly attend that protection, I should presume that it would be impolitic to allow any other nation to avail itself of the present critical situation of California for obtaining a footing in this country.

The reply of Lord Aberdeen, bearing the date of December 31, 1844, is pronounced the most definite instruction upon California emanating from England throughout the entire period under consideration. Taking the position that no foreign nation had the right to interfere in any prospective movement by the Californians themselves toward establishing independence, he did not even deem it necessary to speculate as to the possible future course of events with respect to the province. Said he:

The present position of California is evidently very critical; and it appears to be pretty clear that unless the Mexican Government bestir themselves, an outbreak will in no long time take place in that Province, which may end in its separation from Mexico. Her Majesty's Government can have nothing to do with any insurrectionary movement which may occur in California; nor do they desire that their agents in that part of the world should encourage such movement. They desire, on the contrary, that their agents should remain entirely passive.

While California continues subject to Mexico it would be obviously contrary to good faith on the part of England to encourage a spirit of resistance or disobedience in the inhabitants of the Province against their Mexican rulers. It is therefore entirely out of the question that Her Majesty's Government should give any countenance to the notion which seems to have been agitated of Great Britain being invited to take California under her protection.

Her Majesty's Government do not pretend to determine as to the propriety of any step which may be taken by the inhabitants of California towards establishing their independence. In such matters no foreign nation has any right to interfere, except it be bound to such interference by Treaty with the Mother country; which is not the case with Great Britain. It is, however, of importance to Great Britain, while declining to interfere herself, that California, if it should throw off the Mexican yoke, should not assume any other which might prove inimical to British interests. It will therefore be highly desirable that at the same time that it is intimated to the persons of authority in California that the relations which exist between Great Britain and Mexico prevent us from taking part in any proceedings of the Californians which may have for their object the separation of that province from Mexico, those persons should be clearly made to understand that Great Britain would view with much dissatisfaction the establishment of a protectoral power over California by any other foreign state.

I do not think it necessary to enter into any speculative discussion or opinions as to the possible future course of events with respect to California, but confine my observations and instructions to the aspect of affairs, and occurrences of the present moment.

Still it must not be supposed that the English Government was indifferent to the question, what was finally to become of California? At this point it is well to recall the Texas question. It became evident early in 1844 that the

United States definitely intended to annex Texas and admit her to the Union. England deemed this expansion of the American Republic inimical to her interests, and therefore earnestly advised Mexico to recognize independence in Texas, "in order that by some sort of joint diplomatic action France, Mexico, and Great Britain might guarantee the independence of the Texas State." England's advice was wasted,—Mexico obstinately refused to listen and Santa Anna declared over and over again that "an army is now being gathered in Mexico for the immediate reconquest of that province," when in reality it would seem to be preposterous for any sane man to believe the reconquest at all possible.

Aberdeen's consequent change of attitude is indicated in his determination to let Mexico shift for herself; he perceived that the Texan republic was hopeless, and—what is more to the present purpose—that California also was practically ready for separation from Mexico. Summarizing the situation, he wrote minister Bankhead at Mexico City:

It is however for the Mexican Government alone to take measures for providing against such a contingency; nor have we any ground for interposing to preserve California to Mexico, or to prevent that Province from asserting its Independence. We have, undoubtedly, no right to excite or encourage the Inhabitants of California to separate themselves from Mexico; but if the Mexican Government chooses to be wilfully blind we should in vain attempt to enlighten them.

But it may be a matter of serious importance to Great Britain that California, if it shake off the rule of Mexico, should not place itself under the protection of any other Power whose supremacy might prove injurious to British Interests.

Thus it appears that Aberdeen was opposed to any act that might tend to stir up revolution in California but was not unwilling "to accept the fruits of that revolution if they should fortunately fall into British hands." "Such a passive policy," says Professor E. D. Adams, "was wholly inadequate to the situation," and nobody felt this more keenly than the British agents in Mexico and California.

Barron and Forbes however still fondly believed that a British protectorate might easily be secured. Even when they realized their cherished plans were crushed by Aberdeen's instructions, they still entertained hopes of thwarting American designs. When at length Forbes' protest to his government against the presence of J. C. Frémont in California brought disavowal and reprimand, it becomes clear that the British Cabinet had no aggressive policy for the acquisition of California.

Again, while Admiral Seymour without doubt would have been personally pleased by definite designs looking to annexation, he felt compelled under his instructions to place strict limitations upon his activities. It is certain that he received no instructions to occupy any California ports, and he had no authorization to race Commodore Sloat to Monterey to seize California for England.

It would be a serious mistake to conclude from what has been written that England had no real interest in California. The sentiment of the local agents for acquisition has been noted; the powerful head of the Hudson's Bay Company pointed out the great natural advantages of the country and its value as an outlet to surplus British population; the McNamara scheme to colonize California with Irish immigrants made such headway as thoroughly to arouse Thomas O. Larkin, American consul at Monterey. But when Packenham in 1844 had reported his conviction "that the United States, should it determine upon the annexation of Texas, would not be deterred therefrom even by a threat of war by England and France," Aberdeen concluded not to persist in opposing annexation to the extent of making it a *casus belli*. Moreover, it must be remembered that the Oregon question had at the same time developed a critical situation between England and the United States. With the Texas annexation, the California acquisition, and the Oregon settlement all trembling in the balance, at almost the same moment, and all closely interlinked in important aspects, it is obvious that no merely detached recital of events can correctly express national policy. It may be said that there was no aggressive English policy to acquire California: it may likewise be said that many Englishmen very earnestly, and quite naturally, desired the acquisition.

Finally, the belief in and fear of English designs unquestionably had a distinct bearing upon the development of the American policy and particularly that of President Polk. To Polk's mind the possibility of British designs amounted to a strong probability.

In the meantime, what of the United States as a competitor for the prize? We have seen that while President Jackson had spurned Butler's corrupt suggestion, the idea of acquisition had found entrance into his mind.

Two significant events during the administration of President Van Buren were the arrival in California of Captain J. A. Sutter, soon followed by the founding of his fort at New Helvetia, and the Graham affair, one result of which was the prompt recognition by the Secretary of the Navy of



the request for permanent naval representation in California waters. A little later Commodore Jones was given command of the enlarged Pacific squadron.

Under President Tyler the movement for the acquisition of California by purchase was definite and pronounced. Indeed, Waddy Thompson, the American Minister, was filled with enthusiasm, permitting himself to believe that Mexico would be willing to part with both Texas and California as an exchange for the cancellation of American claims. He pointed out the great advantages that would accrue to his country from possession of San Francisco Bay, "capacious enough to receive the navies of all the world," and felt certain that control of California would in the end mean nothing less than the ascendancy of his nation over the entire Pacific.

But Thompson's vigilant eye did not fail to see signs of English designs on California. In July, 1842, he professed to be in possession of reliable information to the effect that "an agent of this government is now in England negotiating for the sale or what is precisely the same thing, the mortgage of Upper California for the loan of fifteen millions;" a year later he was certain that England had made a treaty with Mexico securing important land rights to British creditors, and he predicted that in ten years England would own the country. As Packenham was extremely solicitous that California "should not fall into the hands of any Power but England," so Thompson, for the United States, pointed out that great as were the advantages of acquisition "they sink in comparison with the evils to our commerce and other interests, even more important, from the cession of that country to England." Thompson did not at all share the sentiment that California was not worth fighting for. In one of his dispatches, he wrote:

I will not say what is our policy in regard to California. Perhaps it is to remain in the hands of a weak power like Mexico, and that all the maritime powers may have the advantage of its ports. But one thing I will say, that it will be worth a war of twenty years to prevent England from acquiring it.

While he did not fail to call attention also to alleged French aggressions, France gradually receded as a factor, while England appeared to loom more and more formidable as a contender for the prize. By the time President Polk came into office practically all observant Americans, both in and out of California, had settled down to the conviction that California would go either to the United States or England.

In the meantime it is of the utmost significance to remember that virtually at the same time when Lord Aber-

deed was settling back into a passive policy of watchful waiting,—partly as a result of his failure to induce Mexico to recognize independence in Texas,—President Polk was preparing to enter upon his administration with the definite resolution to secure the acquisition of California as one of the four great measures clearly set before him. What was to be the outcome? Could it be expected that a passive policy emanating from a professedly indifferent Cabinet sitting on the other side of the world would be able to stand against an aggressive policy, which admittedly was one of the very foundation stones of a new administration in a land where a “Manifest Destiny” of continental boundaries had captured the American imagination?

Since the efforts of Jackson and Tyler to acquire California by purchase had resulted in failure, it was incumbent upon Polk to consider additional methods of annexation. Therefore without neglecting whatever possibilities there remained for direct purchase, earnest consideration was given to three other courses: (1) that of quiet, watchful delay until American immigrants in California should rise and declare the independence of the province, with or without the consent of the Californians themselves; (2) that of capitalizing a possible revolt of the Californians—encouraged if not actually inspired by resident Americans—and the not improbable request for admission into the American Union; and (3) that of definite seizure of the province in the event of war with Mexico.

Polk earnestly desired California, not merely to bring fame to his administration, but because he sincerely believed it would be a great national asset. His conscientiousness and his religious nature would seem to be beyond question.

When the admission of Texas had become finally assured, the Mexican minister demanded his passports, and thus diplomatic relations with United States were broken off. Some semblance of re-established relations having been effected by William S. Parrott, as confidential agent, John Slidell was selected for an important mission to Mexico. There is no doubt that the chief thing expected of Slidell was to effect the purchase of Upper California and New Mexico. According to his instructions, “Money would be no object when compared with the value of his acquisition.” The President supposed the territory could be had for from \$15,000,000 to \$20,000,000, “but he was ready to pay forty millions for it if it could not be had for less.”

It is not necessary to record the details that resulted in the failure of Slidell's mission. President Herrera stood in abject fear of being overthrown by revolution,—this is the real reason for refusing recognition to Slidell, which was done ostensibly on purely technical grounds. In spite of this, however, Herrera was the victim of a bloodless revolution, which swept Paredes into power. Renewing his attempt to open negotiations with the Paredes government, Slidell was again rebuffed, and before a new dispatch from Washington could reach him, he was on his way home, discouraged and disgusted. Thus ended Polk's earnest attempts to purchase California. It is probably accurate to state that this final attempt failed for the same reason as those of Jackson and Tyler, "the fear of the ruling faction in Mexico that any alienation of territory would be followed by a revolution before which they would go down in ruin."

Polk's policy of acquisition was far broader than any one method. He was aware of emigration of Americans—increasing annually—to California, he understood their strong attachment for American institutions, he was fully cognizant of the enfeebled hold of Mexico on this remote province. With every passing year the chances of the United States for winning the prize were strengthened by patient but vigilant delay. Americans would be so numerous and so strongly entrenched in California that they would be able, on any provocation they chose, to assert and maintain their independence. Indeed, it was not in the least preposterous to believe that leaders among the Californians, who had already on more than one occasion displayed disloyal tendencies, might openly revolt against Mexican authority and under the inspiration of resourceful American advisers apply for admission into the American Union.

Polk's main reliance for detailed information and knowledge of the ever-changing posture of events in California was Thomas O. Larkin, who had come to Monterey in 1832, gaining during the years of his residence there a high standing with prominent Californians as well as all the leading foreigners. In 1843, he was given the appointment which made him the first—and last—United States consul to California. So valuable was the information he furnished, so important the services to his government, that—in striking contrast to Aberdeen in the case of Barron and Forbes—Secretary of State Buchanan's instructions allowed him wide discretion in handling the local situation. The United States was to refrain from fomenting a revolution among Californians, but Larkin was free to "assume that his government would play the rôle of protector in case they

sought to separate from Mexico." He was advised that any attempt made to transfer California to a European power would cause the United States promptly to invoke the Monroe Doctrine to prevent the cession. In a word, the real function of Larkin as American Consul was to prepare the way for peaceful annexation by the way of peaceful penetration. Even failing this, however, there remained the method of forcible seizure in the event of war with Mexico,—and war was fast becoming inevitable.

The stage was set for a grand climax. "Manifest Destiny" had decreed the winner of the capital prize. Not that Polk's policy succeeded in every important respect, though it did succeed by and large, but that the American program of expansion, the conquest of a continent,—mightier than any presidential policy—was destined to go forward to ultimate completion.