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Suggested Citation:

Graebner, Norman A. "James K. Polk's Wartime Expansionist Policy." *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 23 (1951): 32-45.

JAMES K. POLK'S WARTIME EXPANSIONIST POLICY

By Norman A. Graebner

On May 14, 1846, the conservative *National Intelligencer* apprised its public of the outbreak of the Mexican War: "Our readers will learn, nine-tenths of them with well-founded alarm and dismay, that the Congress of the United States have adopted the War with the Republic of Mexico . . ." Although months of semi-obscure diplomacy with Mexico had been leading the nation towards war, the actual war message caught the politicians by surprise and threw the Whig party into confusion. For a year Whig spokesmen had predicted conflict over the annexation of Texas, but in a lapse of mind they upheld the war when it came. Then quite as suddenly they sobered, reconsidered, took stock of the war's political capital, and shortly made it the most bitterly criticised war in American history. Zachary Taylor's presence on the Rio Grande, not regarded by President James K. Polk as an act of aggression, left sufficient doubt in the minds of his opposition to elicit an unending review of the war's circumstances. Gradually the abuse settled on the President. Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia termed it an "Executive war" resulting from Polk's "imprudence, indiscretion, and mismanagement."¹ Joshua Giddings of Ohio declared that no sophistry could disguise the fact that "the President obviously intended to involve us in a war with Mexico," while Thomas Corwin averred in a letter to William Greene in June that he would hold the guilty authors of the war to a strict account.² These men spoke the sentiments of a party.

Undaunted by Whig hostility and the gross dissention within his own Democratic party, Polk not only assumed the burdensome business of conducting victorious war, but never relented from a determination to achieve his specific war aims. These objects he often made known privately to his cabinet and friends in both conversation and letter. While Congress debated the war message, Polk informed the cabinet that although the war had not been undertaken "with a view to acquire either California or New Mexico or any other portion of Mexican territory," in any treaty the United States "would, if practicable, obtain California and such other portion of the Mexican territory as would be sufficient to indemnify our claimants on Mexico, and to defray the expenses of the war . . ."³ When late in June

¹*Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess. (1845-46), Appendix, 946.

²Joshua R. Giddings, *Speeches in Congress* (Boston, 1853), 188, 282-83; Corwin to Greene, June 16, 1846, L. Belle Hamlin (ed.), "Letters of Thomas Corwin to William Greene, 1841-1851," *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* (Cincinnati), XIII (1918), 16.

³James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk*, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1910), I, 397.

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cabinet members Robert J. Walker and James Buchanan debated the relative merits of the 26th and 32nd parallels as war objectives, the President declared his preference for the southernmost limit, but would accept the 32nd if necessary. More significant, however, he now revealed a determination to accept no treaty which would not transfer New Mexico and Upper California to the United States. In private conversations with Senators Thomas H. Benton and George McDuffie in July, William S. Archer in September, and John J. Crittenden in January, Polk reaffirmed these war aims.⁴

Before the end of May, 1846, Polk had proposed an expedition to the Pacific Coast to acquire "California, New Mexico, and perhaps some others of the Northern Provinces."⁵ In July Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft explained the administration's purpose to Commodore J. D. Sloat upon ordering him to seize the California ports: "The object of the United States has reference to ultimate peace with Mexico; and if, at that peace, the basis of the *uti possidetis* shall be established the government expects, through your forces, to be found in actual possession of Upper California."⁶ Upon the triumph of American arms in California, the President wrote to his brother, William Polk, in October: "You may calculate I think that *California & New Mexico*—being now possessed by forces—will not be given up, but will be retained—to indemnify our claimants upon Mexico & to defray the expenses of the war. Indeed you need not be surprised if other Provinces also are secured in like manner. The longer the war shall be protracted by the stubbornness of Mexico, the greater will be . . . the indemnity required."⁷ Late in January, 1847, Secretary Buchanan was somewhat less sanguine when he assured the perturbed A. J. Donelson that annexation would not go beyond New Mexico and California, and that even for these territories the United States would pay liberally.⁸ During the early months of the Mexican War the executive policy varied little from the instructions issued to John Slidell in October, 1845.⁹ Now, however, the principle of indemnity made them the *sine qua non* of any peace.

Although Polk's territorial ambitions enjoyed wide approval and California enthusiasts over the nation anticipated and lauded his every move, the President hesitated to declare his war aims publicly. The principle of in-

⁴*Ibid.*, 496-97; II, 16, 50-51, 56, 115-16, 349-50.

⁵*Ibid.*, I, 438; II, 15.

⁶For Bancroft's instructions of June 8, July 12, and August 13, 1846, see *House Executive Document* 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess. (1847-48), 237-41.

⁷Polk to William H. Polk, October 2, 1846, Polk Letter Books (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

⁸Buchanan to Donelson, January 29, 1847, Donelson Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

⁹Through the Slidell mission of November, 1845, Polk attempted to purchase California and New Mexico from the Mexican government. The Mexican president, however, refused to treat with Slidell because of the violent anti-American feeling in the Mexican capital. For his instructions see Buchanan to Slidell, November 10, 1845, Instructions to Mexico (Department of State, National Archives), Vol. XVI.

demnity, clearly recognized under the law of nations, was acceptable only to those Americans who placed responsibility for the war on Mexico. On the academic debate over Taylor's instructions rested the decision whether California would constitute indemnity or conquest. Obviously the opposition to war and the opposition to expansion would become synonymous. Polk noted the attacks on the war and did not wish to add the connotation of conquest to the struggle by revealing his territorial aims. To the American public, therefore, he remained silent on the subject of California.

One day in December, 1845, several months before the outbreak of the Mexican War, while Slidell in Mexico was armed with specific instructions, a correspondent of the New York *Herald* approached the President to learn his intentions regarding California. "This I did not choose to communicate to him," Polk records. "My answers were general and indefinite . . ." ¹⁰ He could not have written a more cogent description of his tactics. Even when diplomacy receded before the force of arms, the President maintained the same guarded attitude, although in cabinet meetings he always discussed his objectives quite frankly. In his war message he simply declared it his desire "not only to terminate hostilities speedily, but to bring all matters in dispute between this Government and Mexico to an early and amicable adjustment." ¹¹ The official policy was that of seeking peace through war, noted the Washington *Union*. ¹² A few days later a public circular to American ministers and consuls reiterated the military objectives as the conquest of an "honorable and permanent peace." Only Polk's vehement objections prevented Buchanan from inserting a statement that the United States had no designs upon either New Mexico or California. Polk preferred the risk of European intervention to a public pronouncement that would broach the subject of territorial aims. ¹³

The President then assured Senator John A. Dix, a member of the disaffected Van Buren clique of New York, that he had no intention of holding Mexican territory beyond the guarantee of peace. ¹⁴ Polk's public declarations at least bore the merit of consistency. The object of the war was peace and not territorial indemnity.

Such noncommittal declarations of policy did not satisfy the opposition. Declared Daniel Webster: "The people . . . appear to me to demand, and with great reason, a full, distinct, and comprehensive account of the objects and purposes of this war of invasion." ¹⁵ Whigs were quick to guess the aims of the administration. "The conquest of Mexico and California is the prize for

¹⁰Polk, *Diary*, I, 126-27.

¹¹*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 783.

¹²Washington *Union*, May 13, 21, 1846.

¹³Polk, *Diary*, I, 397.

¹⁴Dix to Silas Wright, July 10, 1846, Morgan Dix (ed.), *Memoirs of John Adams Dix*, 2 vols. (New York, 1883), I, 202.

¹⁵Daniel Webster, *The Works of Daniel Webster*, 13th ed. 6 vols. (Boston, 1864), V, 160.

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which the game has been played," thought Giddings.¹⁰ The action of Congress authorizing a call for 50,000 volunteers led the New York *Morning News* to remark, "Are we going to swallow Mexico at one gulp?"¹¹ During May and June the questions of the press became increasingly embarrassing. Quite pointedly the St. Louis *New Era* noted that the prosecution of war when no territory was desired merely confirmed the charge of conquest. Similarly the editor of the Augusta *Chronicle* announced that he would willingly withdraw every expression for peace if anyone could show good cause for prolonging the war.¹² There was danger, moreover, that continued advance of American arms would nullify all prospects of peace. "If the United States were to take the whole or the half of Mexico," warned the Richmond *Times*, "the Government would be compelled to keep the country under military law until the enterprise of Anglo-Saxon Americans should push off the Mexicans, as they have done the Indians." Everywhere Whigs demanded either a declaration of war aims or an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Increasingly the Mexican War placed Polk in a dilemma. While Whig pressure against expansion prevented any public statement of objectives, he could not terminate the war until his objectives were won. In his diplomacy with Mexico he had hoped to secure California by treaty. In his eagerness to expedite such a settlement, he had sent Taylor to the Rio Grande and provoked a clash of arms. As a result, his administration was forced to conduct a bitterly assailed war which it did not want, while it insisted upon using that war to achieve its objective. Benton of Missouri knew the administration well and saw its predicament clearly when he wrote:

It is impossible to conceive of an administration less warlike, or more intriguing, than that of Mr. Polk. They were men of peace, with objects to be accomplished by means of war; so that war was a necessity and an indispensability to their purposes. They wanted a small war, just large enough to require a treaty of peace, and not large enough to make military reputations, dangerous for the presidency. Never were men at the head of government less imbued with military spirit, or more addicted to intrigue. How to manage the war was a puzzle. Defeat would be ruin: to conquer vicariously, would be dangerous.¹³

So anxious was the President to be rid of the war, provided his goals could be attained, that he initiated an intrigue for peace before the war had fully commenced. He knew well that at the bottom of his earlier inability to negotiate with Mexico was the want of a Mexican government that dared to recognize an American emissary and which possessed sufficient stability

¹⁰Giddings, *Speeches*, 190-91.

¹¹Quoted in *National Intelligencer* (Washington), May 15, 1846.

¹²Newspapers quoted in *ibid.*, June 20, 1846.

¹³Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, 2 vols. (New York, 1854-1856), 11, 680.

to guarantee any contract which might be consummated. Polk recalled opportunely that a Colonel Atocha had informed him in February that Santa Anna intended to return to Mexico from Havana during the early summer of 1846 to resume power. This naturalized Mexican, moreover, informed him that Santa Anna favored a boundary adjustment which included American possession of both the Rio Grande and San Francisco Bay.²⁰ The President acted quickly. On May 13 Bancroft addressed an order to Commodore David Connor anchored off Vera Cruz: "If Santa Anna endeavors to enter the Mexican ports, you will allow him to pass freely." The President, moreover, promised Santa Anna liberal compensation for any satisfactory settlement.²¹ The Mexican chieftain's subsequent perfidy thwarted Polk's expectations for an immediate peace. Meanwhile, as part of the President's peace offensive, Taylor in northern Mexico was instructed "to conciliate the inhabitants, and to let them see that peace is within reach the moment their rulers will consent to do us justice."²²

Less than three months after the outbreak of war Polk embarked upon a second peace venture. His war message, in which he had professed a willingness to accept any Mexican peace proposal, prompted Webster late in June to recommend a formal embassy to Mexico. Such an overture, the Senator believed, would convince the world that the United States had no ulterior motive. And well might the United States initiate a peace since she was the stronger nation. He could see no alternative. "The people of the United States cannot wish to crush the republic of Mexico," he declared with conviction, "it cannot be their desire to break down a neighboring republic. . . ."²³ Polk was attentive to concrete proposals. On July 27 Buchanan's brief despatch informed the Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations that President Polk desired to terminate the war and assured the Mexican government that a minister would be assigned to Mexico City upon the knowledge of the offer's acceptance.²⁴ The official explanation to Congress a week later followed Webster's reasoning. The obvious superiority of American arms removed any question of honor. But Polk saw clearly that his problem of making peace would be far more difficult than the Whig pacifists were willing to concede. Privately Polk understood that the real crisis would occur when the Mexicans received the American boundary proposals.

²⁰Polk, *Diary*, I, 224-25, 228-30.

²¹Bancroft to Connor, May 13, 1846, *House Ex. Doc.* 60, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 774; Mackenzie to Buchanan, July 7, 1846, Polk Papers.

²²Marcy to Taylor, July 9, 1846, Marcy Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

²³Remarks in the Senate, June 24, 1846, *Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1015-16. See also *Niles' Register* (Washington), June 27, 1846.

²⁴Buchanan to the Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations, July 27, 1846, Communications to Foreign Sovereigns and States (Department of State, National Archives), Vol. II.

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Polk's real aims. Its purpose to describe or inquired of Buchanan to Mexico?"²⁵ had not disclosed have the truth perplexity: "the cause of the right?"²⁶ He on the Pacific

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²⁵See Polk, 190.

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Polk knew that no administration in Mexico City could long remain in power if it ceded territory unless it could receive, at the moment of the treaty, sufficient funds to support an army. Lewis Cass viewed Mexican politics much as did the President: "Her Government is ephemeral. Its members are born in the morning and die in the evening. Administrations succeed one another, like the scenes of a theatre, rather than the events of life, and still less of events in the life of a nation."²⁵ Even before the failure of Slidell's mission during the spring of 1846 Polk's appraisal led him to consider the feasibility of securing a grant from Congress to aid in the establishment of a settlement. Convinced of the wisdom of that course, he followed his proposal to the Mexican government with a request to Congress for \$2,000,000 to assist in overcoming the chief obstacle to peace, "the adjustment of a boundary between the two republics."²⁶ Congress did not fully recognize the significance of the solicited appropriation. The bill was talked to death in the closing minutes of the session.

Polk's request for funds increased the confusion in Congress over war aims. Its purpose, he admitted, was to adjust the boundary, but he refused to describe or even to hint at the boundary he desired.²⁷ Richard Rush shortly inquired of Buchanan, "What may be the executive plans precisely in regard to Mexico?"²⁸ On the House floor David Wilmot regretted that the President had not disclosed his views, for he disliked to work in the dark. Better to have the truth and if necessary go into secret session. Wilmot revealed his perplexity: "We claim the Rio Grande as our boundary—that was the main cause of the war. Are we now to purchase what we claim as a matter of right?"²⁹ He assumed quite logically that the President desired territory on the Pacific.

During the summer of 1846 the President found his efforts at peace complicated by the actions of Great Britain. Upon the settlement of the Oregon controversy in June, Pakenham, British minister in Washington, followed the logical step of proposing British arbitration in the Mexican War. Then for several months his policy evinced hesitation. The British Foreign Office had determined to render Mexico no assistance in holding California, but its British representative in the United States opposed American expansion sufficiently to be distressed by his personal conclusion that Polk would demand San Francisco Bay. This would not only make negotiations difficult, but would also be "painful to the mediating Power

²⁵See Polk, *Diary*, II, 76-77; *Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess. (1846-47), Appendix, 190.

²⁶*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1211.

²⁷See Polk's message to Congress, August 8, 1846, *ibid.*

²⁸Rush to Buchanan, August 18, 1846, John Bassett Moore (ed.), *The Works of James Buchanan*, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1908-11), VII, 66.

²⁹*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1214.

to be a Party to the bargain."⁸⁰ A British offer of arbitration was equally disturbing to the American press. British policy, warned the *Missouri Reporter*, would hew to the "Balance of Power" and must therefore be cast aside. The New York *Sun* agreed that British mediation would be a limiting factor. England never tolerated such interference in her affairs, never compromised her rights, observed the New York *Journal of Commerce*, and the argument struck home.⁸¹ When Pakenham presented formal arbitration proposals in September, the President's answer was definite. It concluded that until a reply from Mexico was received, "the formal acceptance by the United States of the mediation of a Foreign Power might rather tend to protract the War than to facilitate an adjustment."⁸² British sentiments toward American expansion were well known to Polk.⁸³ He preferred to seek his objectives unhindered by European restrictions.

Mexico's response to the peace overture in September prompted the President to reverse completely his conduct of the war. The Mexican executive refused to assume responsibility, but agreed to present the American note to the Mexican Congress when it convened in December.⁸⁴ Such delay Polk interpreted as a complete refusal to negotiate, and he informed the Secretaries of War and Navy of his intention to change the character of the war. Instead of conciliating the Mexican people and paying liberally for all supplies, he was now determined "to quarter upon the enemy by laying contributions upon them, or seizing the necessary supplies for the army without paying for them, making proper discriminations in favour of such Mexicans as were ascertained to be friendly to the U. States."⁸⁵ His immediate desire to seize Tampico led eventually to the capture of Vera Cruz and the "rapid crushing movement" on Mexico City.⁸⁶ He informed the Mexican government by a second despatch late in September that he would await final decision of the Mexican Congress. A warning, however, was clear. His intimation that a long war would entail heavy expenditures was a hint to the wise. Yet in this communication Polk again hesitated to mention the matter of boundary adjustments. Although acquisition of territory was essential to an acceptable peace, he believed that "to announce the fact now that Mexico was to pay the expenses of the war, would excite that stubborn and impracticable people and prevent them from entering into negotiations."⁸⁷

⁸⁰Pakenham to Aberdeen, June 28, 1846, Foreign Office, America, Vol. 497 (Smith Transcripts, Vol. II); Polk, *Diary*, II, 129-30, 132.

⁸¹*Missouri Reporter*, June 9, 1846; New York *Journal of Commerce*, July 10, 1846; New York *Sun*, August 10, 1846.

⁸²Pakenham to Palmerston, September 13, 1846, Foreign Office, America, Vol. 450 (Smith Transcripts, Vol. II); Polk, *Diary*, II, 129-30, 132.

⁸³See John Charles Fremont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 1 vol. pub. (Chicago, 1886), I, 554-55.

⁸⁴Mannuel Rejon to Buchanan, August 31, 1846, Notes from the Mexican Legation (Department of State, National Archives), Vol. IV.

⁸⁵Polk, *Diary*, II, 145.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 222-23.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 157-58.

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Eventually national leaders realized that the greatest barrier to a successful termination of the war was the Mexican government, not the opposing army. Webster as early as August, 1846, expected no more hard fighting, but he saw no prospect of peace. "Mexico is an ugly enemy," he wrote to his son. "She will not fight—& will not treat."³⁸ He admitted that even the President desired peace but did not know how to achieve it. So anarchical was the Mexican nation that only those in the lines of combat felt the pressure of war. American victories thus had little effect on peace sentiment, and the slightest intimation that Mexico might lose territory was enough to invoke cries from the Mexican press that the war should rather continue.³⁹ The *London Times* observed in November that the Mexican War presented "the strange picture of a victorious army in a foreign country which is more nearly reduced to the necessity of effecting a peace than the State that it has conquered and subdued."⁴⁰ The prospect of never finding a government in Mexico with which to conclude peace presaged the eventual reasoning of the *Democratic Review* that there could be no peace short of annihilation of the Mexican nation.⁴¹

Still Polk, if he would gain his objectives, was confronted by only one choice. In September he had warned Mexico that until she evinced a disposition to treat the United States would "prosecute the war with vigor."⁴² Quickly Secretary of War William L. Marcy informed Taylor of Mexican procrastination and instructed him to push the enemy until it begged for peace. By Marcy's own admission Taylor could have known nothing of these instructions before his lenient treatment of the Mexicans following the battle of Monterey. Yet so severe and complete was the reversal of military policy that, according to General Winfield Scott, Taylor was very nearly recalled for his generosity. Only his high reputation saved him.⁴³ This new offensive Polk was prepared to announce publicly when Congress reconvened in December, 1846. In his message he called for action: "The war will continue to be prosecuted with vigor, as the best means of securing peace."⁴⁴ He did not, however, voice his private apprehensions which he revealed to Donelson a few weeks later: "Such is the distracted state of things in that

³⁸Webster to D. Fletcher Webster, August 6, 1846, C. H. Van Tyne (ed.), *The Letters of Daniel Webster* (New York, 1902), 343.

³⁹*El Republicano* (Mexico City), February 24, 1847, Polk Papers.

⁴⁰*London Times*, November 9, 1846.

⁴¹*Democratic Review* (New York), XX (February, 1847), 101.

⁴²Buchanan to Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations, September 26, 1846, *Communications to Foreign Sovereigns and States*, Vol. II.

⁴³Marcy to Taylor, September 22, October 13, 1846, Marcy to Wetmore, October 16, 1846, Marcy Papers; Scott to Crittenden, October 19, 1846, Crittenden Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

⁴⁴*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 9.

unfortunate country, that I fear no party in power, will feel secure in making such a Treaty as ought to be satisfactory to the U. States."⁴⁵

Obviously it was Polk's desire to force extensive territorial concessions from Mexico that prompted his vigorous military policy. To Congress, however, he again declared his purpose to obtain "an honorable peace and thereby secure *ample indemnity* for the expenses of the war, as well as to our much injured citizens. . . ."⁴⁶ Yet he cleverly avoided any precise definition of such indemnification. In fact, his entire December message revealed extremely careful preparation in its discussion of policy without disclosing objectives other than an honorable peace. Polk admitted the need of establishing civil government in New Mexico and California without declaring any intention of retaining them. In requesting again an appropriation from Congress, he referred to the reasons given in his August message.⁴⁷ The famous Three Million Bill of January, 1847, the product of this request, merely stated as its purpose the defrayment of "any extraordinary expenses which may be incurred in order to bring the existing war with Mexico to a speedy and honorable conclusion."⁴⁸

Much of the confusion and vituperation of the second session of the Twenty-ninth Congress resulted from Polk's veiled generalities. In utter disgust Giddings attacked the President's message: "The people of the nation are demanding of the Executive a statement of the objects of the war. What are the ulterior designs of the government in its prosecution?"⁴⁹ The Ohioan recounted the deeds of American arms in Mexico, professedly done in the name of defense, and continued: "What estimation must the author of this message have placed upon the intelligence of this body, and of the nation, when he penned these statements? Such absurdities defy argument." Again it was the total absence of logic in pressing a defensive war on a defeated foe that brought forth a caustic diatribe of Thomas Corwin: "I am not willing to scourge Mexico thus, and the only means left me is to say to the commander-in-chief, 'Call home your army, I will feed and clothe it no longer'"⁵⁰

No less perplexed in its effort to solve the general puzzle of war aims was the American press. Such organs as the *New York Journal of Commerce* assumed early that the coastal regions would never be given up, but other editors had different views. The *Richmond Enquirer* predicted that the United States would hold California only until Mexico had paid all indemnity owed American citizens and had defrayed the cost of the war. The *New*

⁴⁵Polk to Donelson, December 29, 1846, Donelson Papers.

⁴⁶*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 9. (Italics mine.)

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 305.

⁴⁹Giddings, *Speeches*, 266-67.

⁵⁰Josiah Morrow (ed.), *Life and Speeches of Thomas Corwin* (Cincinnati, 1896), 300.

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Orleans *Picayune* pictured a similar future for California and other Whig presses agreed.⁵¹ Such mistaken notions were not corrected by Polk's December message.

Since California was a logical military target, the actions of S. W. Kearny, John C. Fremont, and Commodore Sloat did not expose the President's hand. But the authorization of the New York Volunteer Regiment, which began its voyage to California by way of Cape Horn in November, 1846, under the command of Marcy's political crony, Colonel J. D. Stevenson, offered some tangible evidence of Polk's true purposes. This regiment consisted of mechanics who had agreed to remain in California at the end of the war. The anti-expansionist governor, Silas Wright, understandably looked askance at the arrangement. It bespoke annexation. Marcy assured the Van Burenite, however, that in the interest of economy the government had sought to avoid a return trip.⁵² In February, 1847, Alexander H. Stephens also challenged on the floor of the House the motivation behind the sending of the New York Volunteers. He admitted that he doubted the sincerity of the President's continued insistence that the war was not being waged for conquest. He wondered whether Polk's friends could suppose that anyone familiar with the "duplicity" of the administration would do the President the injustice of believing him. Stephens pointed to the New York regiment as proof infallible that Polk intended the dismemberment of Mexico.⁵³

As the Twenty-ninth Congress wore on during the early months of 1847, evidence was accumulating despite Polk's public denials that the United States would insist upon certain portions of Mexico's northern frontiers. Administration spokesmen in Congress increasingly argued the need of requiring territorial indemnity. Alexander Sims of South Carolina sought to counter the Whig opposition by insisting that for the United States to take nothing would make of the war an idle joust and would challenge national honor. Democrats proceeded to delineate the areas of proper indemnification. John Tibbatts of Kentucky informed the House early in January that California, New Mexico, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas would, in his estimation, suffice as territorial compensation. Several days later Ambrose Sevier of Arkansas, Polk's chief support in the Senate, admitted that he could not speak precisely for the President but supposed that no senator would agree to any treaty which conveyed to this nation less than New Mexico and California. Cass referred to "certain territorial acquisitions," important to the United States and not held permanently by Mexico, which would furnish satisfactory indemnity.⁵⁴ Such declarations of leading Democrats, plus the

⁵¹Richmond *Enquirer*, May 28, 1846; New Orleans *Picayune*, June 12, 1846; New York *Journal of Commerce*, May 25, July 16, November 30, 1846.

⁵²See New York *Herald*, February 26, 1847.

⁵³*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 401; *ibid.*, Appendix, 353.

call for additional arms, provided some evidence of war aims. The American people were learning by inference in 1847 what many had suspected at the opening of military action, that the Mexican War was a war of expansion in which the minimum goals were California and New Mexico. Polk's declared objective of peace with indemnity carried rather specific overtones discernible to all astute observers. This became even more evident when, during the summer of 1847, the nation learned of the Trist mission.

Nicholas P. Trist's strange mission to Mexico was the only rational conclusion to Polk's wartime expansionist program. While Mexico, defeated but stubborn, continued to rebuff all peace efforts, congressional opposition threatened to decelerate the war effort. "I am the more solicitous to open negotiations & conclude a peace with Mexico," he noted in January, "because of the extraordinary delay of Congress to act upon the War measures which I have recommended to them."⁶⁵ If bitter partisanship alone was insufficient to negate the President's perpetual demands upon Congress, the reintroduction of the Wilmot Proviso by Preston King early in 1847 challenged all military progress. Polk was soon dismayed by the ceaseless debates over slavery. "The state of things in Congress is lamentable," he wrote two weeks later. "Instead of coming up to the mark as patriots and sustaining the administration and the country in conducting a foreign War, they are engaged in discussing the abstract question of slavery. . . ."⁶⁶ The President concluded that he would be forced to discontinue the war for lack of legislative support.

Equally dangerous to Polk's purposes was the violent opposition to national expansion created by the slavery issue. Conservative Whigs were motivated in their growing denunciation of expansionist sentiment by their intense desire to preserve the nation and their party from an endless debate on that divisive issue.⁶⁷ Soon sectional spokesmen, fearing that the benefits would accrue to another section, became quite as abusive in their attacks on expansionism. Giddings, like many abolitionists, believed that slavery would reach the Pacific to degrade the "freemen of Ohio . . . to the level of Mexican slaves."⁶⁸ Waddy Thompson, giving evidence of southern fears, similarly condemned all expansion which might find "southern men madly rushing upon destiny by the acquisition of another cordon of free states. . . ."⁶⁹ Con-

⁶⁴*Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 148, 290-91, 306.

⁶⁵Polk, *Diary*, II, 340.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷The conservative program was expressed in John M. Berrien's amendment to the Three Million Bill which declared that "the war with Mexico ought not to be prosecuted by this Government with any view to the dismemberment of the republic, or to the acquisition by conquest of any portion of her territory." *Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 326.

⁶⁸Giddings to Oran Follett, July 26, 1847, L. Belle Hamlin (ed.), "Selections from the Follett Papers, III," *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, X (1915), 31. See also Giddings, *Speeches*, 210.

⁶⁹*Greenville (S. C.) Mountaineer*, October 15, 1847, in *Niles' Register*, October 30, 1847; *Washington Union*, October 25, 1847.

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gressional trifling, added to the implications of the slavery debate, again forced the President to seek an early peace. In mid-April he quietly dispatched Trist, weighted down with instructions, to join the army of General Winfield Scott in Mexico.

Since Polk had still avowed publicly no objective beyond peace, the indemnity clauses in Trist's instructions dictated absolute secrecy. Trist, thoroughly impressed, took every possible precaution to hide his identity en route to Vera Cruz.⁶⁰ Polk's indignation was boundless, therefore, when two letters published shortly after Trist's departure, showing remarkable accuracy of detail, appeared in the *New York Herald* and the *Boston Post*.⁶¹ Soon the *National Intelligencer* reprinted the news and the mission became common knowledge at the capital. Polk interrogated his cabinet. He threatened removals. Buchanan even accused Mrs. Trist of revealing the information.⁶² Although little mention was made of Trist's departure from New Orleans, a correspondent at Vera Cruz not only noted Trist's arrival for the American public, but also predicted his subsequent movements. Before the middle of June the *New York Herald's* Washington correspondent had secured for his paper Polk's boundary proposals.⁶³ While Polk and his cabinet fumed, the metropolitan press continued to condemn, praise, question, and out-guess Trist at every turn. Any further effort of the administration to deny its war aims now became futile.

In his message to Congress of December, 1847, Polk gave public avowal of his territorial objectives for the first time since the inception of the war eighteen months earlier. During the autumn the Mexican disinclination to treat had not only forced the recall of Trist and the subsequent capture of the Mexican capital by the army of General Scott, but also deepened a general conviction in the United States that Mexico be punished for her past offenses. In assuming this general argument the President reminded Congress that "the doctrine of no territory is the doctrine of no indemnity; and, if sanctioned, would be a public acknowledgment that our country was wrong, and that the war declared by Congress with extraordinary unanimity was unjust, and should be abandoned."⁶⁴ While he again urged Congress to wage the war with increased energy as the only means of securing a treaty, he now gave the call for arms real meaning by pressing the need and value of acquiring California and New Mexico.

⁶⁰See Polk, *Diary*, II, 478; Trist to Mrs. Trist, April 18, 25, 28, May 6, 1847, Trist to Denis Prieur, April 28, 1847, Trist Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

⁶¹*New York Herald*, April 20, 21, 1847; *Boston Post* in *Niles' Register*, April 24, 1847.

⁶²*Niles' Register*, May 22, 1847; M. J. R. (Trist's sister) to Trist, May 22, 1847, Trist Papers.

⁶³Letter dated at Vera Cruz, May 7, 1847, published in *New York Herald*, May 27, 1847, quoted in *Niles' Register*, May 29, 1847. The correspondent represented the *New Orleans Times*. For Polk's boundary proposals see *New York Herald*, June 13, 1847.

Nor was Polk alienated from his limited, though realistic, objectives by the growing "all-of-Mexico movement." During the winter of 1847-1848 the prolongation of war because of the ephemeral qualities of the Mexican government had produced among Democratic expansionists a strong feeling that the United States must meet its destiny and annex the entire Mexican Republic. The President assured Congress that he had not entered the ranks of the annexationists when he declared: "It has never been contemplated by me, as an object of war, to make a permanent conquest of the Republic of Mexico, or to annihilate her separate existence as an independent nation."⁶⁵ During January Polk refused, despite expansionist pressure, to alter his official stand. As late as February 4, Sevier, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, informed his colleagues that the President desired only a fair indemnity, that California and New Mexico would be sufficient.⁶⁶ Polk's private belief that increased military expenditures might eventually require additional indemnity was never made public. To the end of the Mexican War the two Mexican provinces alone remained the official objectives of the administration.

Unfortunately Polk's tardy admission of war aims brought them no nearer fulfillment. In fact, the Presidential message threw the political arena of Washington into wild confusion. With considerable truth *Niles' Register* observed in January that "never before were there half as many contradictory issues to divide and distract the people."⁶⁷ The Mexican War, with its mounting costs and casualties, presented enough conflicting and far-reaching topics for debate to tax the oratorical energies of any Congress. Week after week the so-called Ten Regiment Bill supplied the vehicle for Whig invectives against the administration and the Mexican War. The Wilmot Proviso still held its terrors. Webster spoke for all conservatives when he charged various groups in the United States with trying to induce the Senate "to take any bit of parchment, or any bit of paper, which could be called or concluded to be a treaty, to clench it, and confirm it, with our eyes blindfolded; no, Sir, with our eyes dead sightless as the eyes of a marble statue, to all the future."⁶⁸ News from Mexico was even less hopeful for American expansion. John P. Gaines of Kentucky declared in January that he had met no one in Mexico who placed any hope in the Trist mission. In December John Parrott assured the administration from Vera Cruz that Mexico would not be ready for peace until more of her territory had been subdued.⁶⁹ While the conquest of peace called for further military action,

⁶⁵*Cong. Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 2.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁷*Cong. Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 302.

⁶⁸*Niles' Register*, January 15, 1848.

⁶⁹Speech in the Senate, March 17, 1848, Webster, *Works*, V, 266.

⁷⁰*Niles' Register*, January 8, 1848; *Washington Union*, January 27, 1848; Parrott to Marcy, December 20, 1847, Marcy Papers.

Congress now threatened to scuttle the war effort completely. As late as February, 1848, Polk could foresee no final triumph for his expansionist program.

It was finally Trist's superior analysis of Mexican politics that achieved both peace with Mexico and the President's war aims. His decision to remain in Mexico without official sanction, however, followed by the long days of silence while his tireless efforts produced the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, served only to alienate the administration completely. "Mr. Trist has acted very badly," Polk recorded upon receipt of the treaty. But as he paged through the neatly-written manuscript, he reflected that "if on further examination the Treaty is one that can be accepted, it should not be rejected on account of his bad conduct."⁷⁰ While the President became so embittered that he never again recognized Trist publicly or privately, he revealed no inclination to disqualify the product of Trist's endeavors, for the treaty contained the required indemnity clauses. The New York *Herald* predicted with truth that Polk would be content with the "dazzling object of his ambition," California and New Mexico.⁷¹ The government might feel chagrin at Trist's insubordination, observed the New Orleans *Picayune*, but it would "ultimately swallow its disappointment, and California and New Mexico at the same time."⁷² So long had the administration extended the war, moreover, that peace had finally become a prime requisite. Polk's hope of acquiring Mexican territory through a little war had gone awry. "It was not brief, cheap, and bloodless," wrote Benton, "it had become long, costly, and sanguinary . . ."⁷³ Peace was the only escape from the endless attacks on the administration in Congress and, despite the irregularities in Trist's diplomacy, was gladly seized by the President. That the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transferred California and New Mexico to the United States cannot be attributed simply to chance or destiny, but must rather be assigned to Polk's persistent policy of sustaining a war against Mexico, though hampered by bitter opposition in Congress, until his precise objectives could be secured.

⁷⁰Polk, *Diary*, III, 345-46.

⁷¹New York *Herald*, February 3, 1848.

⁷²New Orleans *Picayune*, February 16, 1848; Washington *Union*, February 23, 1848.

⁷³Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, 710.