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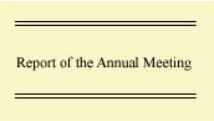

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F. H. Soward

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PRESIDENT POLK AND THE CANADIAN FRONTIER

By F. H. SOWARD

The " Roaring Forties " well deserved their name. During that decade the American people reached out greedy hands towards Oregon, Texas and California, pleading all the while like true Anglo-Saxons the call of " Manifest Destiny." A steady stream of people moved into Southern Michigan and Wisconsin, on to " Ioway, Ioway, that's where the tall grass grows," and by covered waggon into Oregon or across the Great American Desert to Utah and California. As the native American answered the call of the West the European heard the call of free Republic across the sea. In ten years 1,500,000 immigrants entered the United States, thrice as many as in the previous decade. Of these 49 per cent were Irish.[1] The country was humming with activity and offered to the common man a better lot than anywhere else in the world. Proud of their success in having made republicanism and democracy workable over a larger area than at any other time in history, certain of their indefinite advance, it is little wonder that the Americans of the Roaring Forties were " full of bounce and bluster, contemptuous of old-world monarchies."[2] The spirit which inspired Daniel Webster to inform the proud Hapsburg Monarchy in one of the most undiplomatic notes in history that " the power of this Republic at the present moment is spread over a region, one of the richest and most fertile in the world and of an extent in comparison with which the possessions of the House of Hapsburg are but as a patch on the earth's surface " was exactly the same which impelled the voter of 1844 to cheer the " pure Yankee bluster "[3] of " Fifty-Four Forty or Fight."

In view of the numerous unsolved problems which disturbed the United States and Great Britain at the opening of this decade and the sentiments just described, it is not surprising that Anglo-American relations were for a time more critical than at any time since the war of 1812. This paper is an attempt to describe the political background of one episode, the Oregon settlement which caused the greatest tension during this decade.

Historians are now generally agreed that the claims of both the United States and Great Britain to all of the Oregon area under dispute, i.e., the land lying between 42° and 45° 40′, were extravagant and unsound. Dr. Keenleyside, the most recent student of the subject, has summed up the evidence in his verdict " Neither nation had a perfect or even a strong case."[4] In fact between 1818 and 1844 each side put forth a compromise claim to the territory which left in dispute only a small section between the Columbia river and the Forty-Ninth parallel, the central and western third of the present state of Washington.[5]

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1 Statistical abstract of the United States (1915), p. 90. Quoted in Morison, Oxford History of the United States (London, 1927), Vol. I, p. 424.

2 Morison op. cit. Vol. I, p. 415.

3 Meany, History of the State of Washington (New York, 1909), p. 137.

4 Keenleyside, Canada and the United States (New York, 1929), p. 205.

5 Merk "The Oregon Pioneers and the Boundary," American Historical Review, Vol. XXIX, p. 681

The British Government was willing to extend the Forty-ninth Parallel beyond the Rockies but from the point where it touched the Columbia river wished that river to be the dividing line. This insistence upon the Columbia was based upon the conviction that the Columbia was as vital to the welfare of British possessions in the North West as the St. Lawrence river was in the East[6] and was buttressed by the eagerness of the Hudson's Bay Company to retain the fur posts along its banks.[7]

For its part the American government insisted upon the Forty-Ninth parallel being the boundary to the ocean in order to give it a firm hold upon the Puget Sound waters and surrounding country. Yet, believing that Time was its best ally, the United States were prepared to accept joint occupation until settlers had made the question of more immediate importance. Hence the Conventions of 1818 and 1827. By the close of the Thirties Oregon was commencing to become an object of interest to the people of the old North West and their Congressmen raised the question at Washington in 1838 and 1842. The migration of settlers after 1840 intensified the feeling and was partly responsible for Lord Ashburton not attempting to settle the matter.[8] In July of 1843 an Oregon convention was held in Cincinnatti which was attended by ninety-six delegates from states of the upper Mississippi Valley. At this gathering a resolution was passed demanding the whole of the territory up to 54° 40'.[9] The agitation found its echo in Washington and in the Senate a motion was presented calling for the termination of joint occupation. After several days of debate it was defeated by 28 to 18, the Senators from the South and some of the Eastern states being generally opposed.[10]

The growing dissatisfaction with the status quo did not pass unnoticed in London. Early in 1844 the new British Minister, Richard Pakenham, arrived in Washington empowered to carry on negotiations with a view to reaching a settlement. His official instructions repeated the old formula but in a private letter to him dated March 4, 1844 Lord Aberdeen suggested a solution which anticipated that reached in 1846. "You are to endeavour without committing yourself or your gov't to draw from the negotiator a proposal to make the 49th degree of latitude the boundary with which the proviso that the ports to the south of that parallel to the Columbia inclusive, shall be free ports to Gt. Britain."[11]

Sir Robert Peel disliked this proposal as being unnecessarily generous, since no American settlers lived north of the Columbia River, so it was never officially advanced. The best that Pakenham could do was to offer on two occasions to submit the question to arbitration.[12] These offers President Tyler and Secretary of State Calhoun refused in the belief that the "true policy" was "to do nothing to excite attention and to leave time to operate."[13]

In the meanwhile the question had become a political issue in the campaign of 1844. The Democrat party which had been defeated in 1840

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[6] As late as January, 1846, the London Times expressed this opinion.

[7] Cf. the remarks of Sir George Simpson in 1826, quoted in Merk, op. cit., and his correspondence in Shafer "Letters of Sir George Simpson, 1841-43," American Historical Review, Vol. XIV.

[8] Cf. his remark to Lord Aberdeen, "the public are at present busy with this subject and bitter in temper." Quoted in Mowat, The Diplomatic Relations of Great Britain and the United States (London, 1925), p. 132.

[9] Shafer, History of the Pacific North West (New York, 1918) p. 177.

[10] Benton, Thirty Years' View (New York, 1883) Vol. 2, p. 625.

[11] Quoted in Shafer "The British Attitude towards the Oregon Question," American Historical Review, Vol. XVI, p. 296.

[12] Merk, op. cit. p. 695.

[13] Quoted in McCormac, James K. Polk (Berkeley, 1922), p. 562.

after twelve years in office was eager to regain the spoils of victory and had good reason for believing it might return to office in view of the Whig defeat at the mid-term elections. The chief issue of the campaign seemed likely to be the annexation of Texas, which was ardently desired by the South and West and opposed by anti-slavery elements in the East, convinced that the South were after bigger pens to cram slaves in and that it would upset the balance. It was clear that Henry Clay would be the Whig nominee while the Democrats were generally expected to rally around ex-President Van Buren, Jackson's favourite lieutenant, who had gone down to defeat when seeking re-election in 1840. On the eve of the Democrat convention both Van Buren and his rival were drawn into declaring their opposition to the annexation of Texas. This staggered the Democrats who knew that only willingness to annex Texas would capture Southern votes. Andrew Jackson at once repudiated the declaration of his disciple but more in sorrow than in anger. The other chief aspirant for the Democratic nomination, Lewis Cass of Michigan was willing to annex Texas but the rivalry between Cass and Van Buren was so intense that it was feared his nomination would split the party. At the convention Van Buren commanded a majority but not the required two-thirds and on each succeeding ballot his lead decreased. In desperation political managers sought for an available candidate who would not be distasteful to Van Buren but who would accept the Southern position. The choice fell upon James Polk of Tenessee, Jackson's leading supporter in that state, who had seemed the certain nominee for Vice President. He was "sound" on Texas and had declared in April, before the views of Van-Buren were known, that he hoped that "the fixed policy of the government would be not to suffer Great Britain or any other foreign power to plant a colony in or hold dominion over any portion of Oregn or Texas"[14] So was chosen the first "dark horse" for the Presidential sweep-stakes, a man not widely known, of whom a Southern Whig wrote scornfully: "The Democrats here cry 'hurrah for Polk' in the street and come round to ask me who the devil he is."[15]

Having chosen their candidate the delegates turned to draft the platform. In response to the popular interest in both Texas and Oregon and in a natural desire to please Democrats in North and South alike the following significant resolution was endorsed by the Convention. "Resolved that our title to the whole of the Territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable; that no portion of the same ought to be ceded to England or any other power, and that the re-occupation of Oregon and the re-annexation of Texas at the earliest possible moment are great American measures which this convention recommends to the cordial support of the Democracy of the Union.[16] Very wisely the delegates did not discuss the exact meaning of "re-annexation" or re-occupation" but returned to their districts to cheer for "Texas and Polk" and "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight".

When the ballots were counted Polk has won by a large majority in the Electoral college but by a narrow one in the popular vote. Historians differ as to the reasons for his success. It is generally agreed that Clay lost New York because Abolition votes went against him after he attempted late in the campaign to "straddle the fence" on the Texan question. Rhodes claims that a "key" state like Pennsylvania was won by the promise of a higher tariff expressed in the slogan "Polk, Dallas and the Tariff of 1924."[17] A contemporary historian of the Whig party declares

[14] Quoted in McMaster, People's History of the United States (New York, 1910) Vol. VII, p. 346.
[15] Quoted in Morison, op. cit. Vol. 2, p. 74.

that British money was circulated openly in the campaign to win votes for Polk in the belief that he would favour a lower tariff than Clay the advocate of the American System.[18] Professor Garrison says flatly that "Polk won because the people of the United States wanted Texas".[19] Against his opinion should be placed the weighty testimony of A. J. Beveridge in his recent life of Abraham Lincoln. "Indeed as a practical influence on voters the American title to the Oregon country was quite as strong a political factor in the campaign of 1844 as the annexation of Texas".[20] An analysis of the election figures between 1832 and 1848 in the states most interested in Oregon helps to confirm this statement. Missouri, which sent a great many settlers to Oregon and was consistently Democratic gave the Democrat ticket in 1844 the largest majority in any of the five elections during this period under analysis. In Ohio the Whig majority of almost 24,000 in 1840 was reduced to 6,000. Indiana turned a Whig majority in 1840 of about 13,500 into a Democrat majority of over 2,000. Lincoln's home state, Illinois, gave the Democrats an increased majority of over 10,000. Michigan, voting for the first time, went Democrat by over 3,000.[21]

Probably because he was the first "dark horse" candidate, American historians have been slow to admit the success of Polk as President. It is only since, the bias on account of the Civil War has declined, the publication of his diary, and the appearance of an able study of his career by Professor McCormac, that the Tennessean has received the credit which to his services entitled him. In England Polk is still regarded somewhat in the light of a character out of "Martin Chizzlewitt" because of his Oregon policy. A recent biography of Peel refers to Polk as "an ignorant and a violent man"[22] while even as able a critic as Algernon Cecil dismisses his as "a President of the baser sort".[23] Both of these descriptions are but caricatures of that "stiff angular person with sharp grey eyes in a sad lean face and grizzled hair overtopping a back coat-collar".[24] James Polk though a dark horse was not an ignoramus. He had served fourteen years in Congress, part of the time as Speaker and had been Governnor of Tennessee for one term. A staunch party man, who was nominated as "the bossom friend of Gen. Jackson, and a pure whole-hogged Democrat, the known enemy of banks and distribution",[25] he was generally trusted. As President, Polk ruled as master of his supporters and his Cabinet, despite the number of men superior to him in ability who were in its ranks. John Quincy Adams might sneer at him as "just qualified for an eminent county-court lawyer"[26] but the Boston Brahmin never achieved a tithe of Polk's success while President. The student, who never missed a lecture, was the President, who insisted upon regularity of attendance at Cabinet meeting and assiduous attention to departmental duties and who literally wore himself out during his four years at the White House. There have been abler Presidents and many more likeable ones but none left the White House having carried to completion more of his policies than President Polk.

When Polk assumed his duties he did so as an expansionist rather that slave-holder despite his Southern origin and convictions.[27]. The

[16] National Party Platforms, compiled by Kirk H. Porter, quoted in Cunningham "The Significance of 1846 to the Pacific Coast", Washington Historical Quarterly, Vol. XXI, p. 31.
[17] Rhodes, History of the United States, 1850-1877 (New York, 1919 ed.) Vol. 1, p. 83.
[18] Ormsby, History of the Whig Party (Boston, 1859), p. 300.
[19] Garrison, Westward Expansion (American Nation series, New York 1906), p. 137.
[20] Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln (Boston, 1928), Vol. I, p. 368.
[21] These election figures are taken from Stanwood, A History of the Presidency (Boston, 1898).
[22] Ramsay, Peel (London, 1928) p. 255.

annexation of Texas had been completed in the dying hours of the Tyler Administration. Deprived of that opportunity, he was eager to round off American territory in California and Oregon and suspicious of British policy in both quarters, largely because of Lord Aberdeen's fumbling policy towards the Republic of Texas and the tactless efforts of British subject in California. He shared the conviction of "Old Hickory" that the British must be treated firmly since they confuse moderation with weakness in diplomacy. As Polk later told a Congressman "the only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye."[28] Accordingly in his inaugural address Polk took pains to re-assert his acceptance of the Democratic platform and spoke of "my duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the counry of Oregon is clear and unquestionable and already our people are preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children."[29]

The news of this unequivocal endorsation by the new President of the extreme American claim aroused considerable irritation in London where the manner of presenting the claim was probably resented as much as the claim itself. Mr. Greville fumed and scolded that "it is a nuisance to have in such a post as that of the Presidency of the United States a man who is neither a gentleman nor a statesman and who does not know how statesmen and nations ought to and must behave to one another."[30] The London press was full of annoyed comments and the Peel government arranged on April 4 a full dress debate upon the subject for both Houses in which only the chief party leaders participated, a fact which Dr. Newton interprets as indicating how seriously the government regarded the situation.[31] Peel told the House of Commons: "We consider we have rights respecting this territory that are clear and unquestionable. We trust still to arrive at an amicable adjustment... but having exhausted every effort to effect that settlement if our rights should be invaded we are resolved and are prepared to maintain them."[32] In the House of Lords Lord Aberdeen used almost precisely the same language. "We too, my Lords, have rights which are clear and unquestionable and these rights, with the blessing of God and your support, we are fully prepared to maintain."[33] Following the debate two British men of war were despatched to Puget Sound and two British Officers, Warre and Vauvasour were sent overland from Canada to examine the defenses.[34] While they were examining defenses, Lieutenant Peel of the Royal Navy a son of the Prime Minister, was detailed to report upon the nature of the American occupation of Oregon.[35] It was well that he should have been despatched as the Governors of the Hudson's Bay

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23 Cecil, British Foreign Secretaries (London, 1927), p. 124.

24 Morison, op. cit. Vol. 2, p. 74.

25 McCormac, op. cit., p. 239.

26 Nevins, (editor), The Diary of John Quincy Adams (New York, 1928), p. 446.

27 McCormac, op. cit., p. 612.

28 Nevins, (editor), Polk, The Diary of a President (New York, 1929), p. 42. This is an abridgment of the original four volume diary edited by Quaife and will hereafter be cited as "Diary."

29 Richardson, Messages and Papers of the Fresidents, vol. iv, p. 381 quoted in Cunningham op. cit., p. 32.

30 Quoted in Ramsay, op. cit., pp. 255-56.

31 Ward and Gooch, (editors), The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy (Cambridge, 1923), Vol. 2, p. 258.

32 Hansard third Series. LXXIX, p. 199, quoted in Ward and Gooch, op. cit., pp. 258-59.

33 Quoted in Gordon, Lord Aberdeen (London, 1905), p. 180.

34 Their official report is published in the Oregon Historical Review, Vol. X.

35 Carey, History of Oregon (Chicago 1922), p. 493.

Company were just embarking upon a vital change of policy which destroyed most of the argument for the retention of the Columbia. Alarmed by the steady incursion of American settlers into the Willamette valley, although none settled north of the Columbia river until October, 1845,[36] Sir George Simpson gave orders on January 1, 1845, to Doctor McLoughlin to abandon Fort Vancouver as the base for furs and trade and transfer it to Fort Victoria which was just getting under way.[37]

Meanwhile, having kept faith with the party platform President Polk, rather reluctantly, if we may judge from his later remarks, opened negotiations with the British Prime Minister along the lines of those of his predecessors. On July 11, 1845, he had his Secretary of State submit an offer to Pakenham that the 49th parallel to the sea be the boundary line. His offer was less favourable than those made to his predecessors, who had been willing to concede navigation rights on the Columbia. It was rejected on his own responsibility by the British Minister who expressed the hope that a future offer would be "more consistent with fairness and equity and with the reasonable expectations of the British government."[38] Pakenham was not happy in Washington and two years later while on leave in England "preferred to retire on pension rather than return to the United States." The effect of this tactless attitude was distinctly unfortunate as it angered Polk and gave him an opportunity to escape from following the policy of his predecessors, of which he was not slow to avail himself. At a Cabinet meeting on August 26 which discussed what steps should be taken, the President summarized his policy as "let the argument of our title to the whole country be full, let the proposition to compromise at latitude 49° be withdrawn, and then let the matter rest unless the British Ministers chose to continue the negotiation."[39] The Secretary of State Buchanan was distinctly nervous at this bold stand and tried to frighten the President by conjuring up the spectre of war but Polk refused to be alarmed and said "if war was the consequence England would be in the wrong" and he was confident "the people would be prompt and ready to sustain the government in the course which he proposed to pursue."[40] Even a hint of the danger of trouble with Britain when war with Mexico seemed in the offing did not shake the President's determination.

In October Lord Aberdeen expressed to the American Minister in London his regret at Pakenham's blunder and intimated that the British Government would like to discuss again the situation. In Washington Mr. Pakenham was also endeavouring to re-open negotiation on the basis of the July offer. But the President was inflexible and was by now contemplating a statement of the Monroe Doctrine to meet the situation. Events had shown that the people did favour a firm stand on Oregon and, according to Senator Benton, Congress "came together under the loud cry of war in which Mr. Cass was the leader, but followed by the body of the democracy, and backed and cheered on by the democratic press, some hundreds of papers."[41]

In his first annual Message to Congress Polk did state his interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, being the first President to make use of that

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[36] Merk, op. cit., p. 683.

[37] Ibid, pp. 692-93. The transfer was only gradual however. James Douglas did not assume direct administration of Fort Victoria until June 1849.

[38] McMaster, op. cit., p. 416.

[39] Diary, p. 2.

[40] Ibid, p. 3.

[41] Benton, op. cit., p. 562. The rumours of war caused an interesting visit to Polk from the Boston agent of Baring Brothers.

celebrated obiter dictum. He deserted the right of any independent state to join the United States " without any foreign interposition," a reference to the Texan situation and then went on with reference to Oregon to declare that " no further European colony or domination shall, with out consent be planted or established on any part of the North American continent."[42] Besides this statement of principle, the Message contained an elaborate review of the negotiations to date and an explanation of the reason for the withdrawal of the compromise offer. The President proposed to ask Congress to pass the necessary resolution calling for the abandonment of joint occupation of Oregon, and also requested legislation to extend American laws and jurisdiction over American citizens in Oregon, to erect block-houses along the Oregon Trail, and to raise regiment of mounted riflemen to protect the emigrants en route to Oregon. These measures of practical policy had in October been discussed with Senator Benton who exercised considerable influence in Congress and who had for some time favoured the termination of joint occupation. In succeeding months Benton gave valuable aid to the Administration, while never abandoning his own conviction that the 49th parallel was a satisfactory boundary and that the British already had a valid claim to the Fraser valley based on its occupation by British settlers.

This bold stand was popular both in Congress and throughout the country. Even the cautious Buchanan who had deprecated the stiffness of the phrasing admitted that it " was better received than any other similar communication to Congress in my day.[43] In his diary Polk comments upon the favourable comments and seems to have been especially pleased by the remarks of Senator Archer of Virginia, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations who was a Whig but laughingly avowed himself " a half Polk man."[44]

Three weeks after the Message to Congress Polk and his Cabinet held a " grave discussion " on the possibility of war with Britain. For once the President and the Secretary of State were agreed that the government should make vigorous preparations for defence. The Cabinet were unanimous in agreeing to reject any proposal of arbitration which they expected, quite correctly would come from the British Minister.[45] This unanimous rejection of arbitration is in interesting contrast to the insistence upon British arbitration of disputed territory with Venezuela that another Democratic president stressed so emphatically in the Nineties. At the close of the meeting Polk did drop one hint of compromise which foreshadows his later policy. In response to a question from Buchanan, concerning what reply he should give the British Minister if he asked that the southern tip of Vancouver Island should be left to the British if they conceded the 49th parallel as the frontier, Polk announced that, in the event of an offer of this nature " I would consult confidentially three or four Senators from different parts of the Union and might submit it to the Senate for their previous advice."[46] Buchanan regarded this intimation of collaboration with Senate as so important that he took it down in writing.[47]

The debates in Congress over the measures proposed by the President lasted until April and presented a puzzling situation. In brief there were

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[42] Quoted in Cunningham, op. cit., p. 36.
[43] Schuyler, "Polk and the Oregon Convention of 1846," Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 26, p. 452.
[44] Diary, p. 31.
[45] Pakenham twice suggested arbitration.
[46] Diary, p. 36.
[47] McCormac, op. cit. 582.

three factions whose views differed sharply. The first, composed mainly of Southerners, disliked pressing Britain too vigorously and was ready to compromise considerably especially since Texas was safe. Calhoun even at first deprecated the cancellation of the convention for joint occupation. Their attitude exasperated the expansionists of the North West in sympathy with the Senator from Indiana, who would hear of nothing but Fifty-Four Forty, and who told his Southern colleagues. "Now when you have got Texas, it means just so much of Oregon as you in your kindness and condescendation think proper to give us. You little know us if you think the mighty West will be trodden on in this way."[48] A third group including Benton favoured compromise on the Forty-ninth Parallel and held the balance of power. The President was annoyed by the wrangling, which he rather unfairly described to purely presidential aspirations. In a rare flash of humour, referring to the election year 1848, he remarked, "Forty-eight has been with them the great question, and hence the divisions in the Democratic party."[49] Polk also lamented in his diary the absence of "any certain or reliable support in Congress,"[50] but steadily refused to permit any Senator to present his views. Senator Crittenden well described the President's difficulties when he wrote "If he don't settle and make peace at Forty-nine or some other parallel of compromise, the one side curses him; and if he yields an inch or stops a hair's breadth short of 54 degrees 40 minutes, the other side damns him without redemption. Was ever a gentleman in such a fix? He might almost say, like Satan, that "Hell was around him."[51]

It was not until April 23, that a Resolution passed both Houses, which authorized the President, at his discretion, to give notice of abrogating the Convention, and which contained in its preamble a clause explaining that such action did not preclude "any further negotiations for an amicable settlement." Polk was not altogether pleased at the insertion of this clause in the preamble even although the Mexican situation was growing rapidly more critical.[52] However, he was well aware that it would evoke an offer from the British Government, and he informed the American Minister in London that the awaited proposals from Great Britain. At the same time he dropped a hint to Senator McDuffie of South Carolina, that any offer from Great Britain which suggested the 49th Parallel "or what was equivalent to it or with slight modifications"[53] would be submitted to the Senate for advice before any action was taken.

The centre of interest now shifts to London where Peel and Aberdeen were well aware of the gravity of the situation. Both men had had intimations by various means, from Webster, Everett the previous American Minister, and McLane the present Minister, that a settlement could be reached with the 49th Parallel as a basis of compromise.[54] Lord Aberdeen was especially anxious to reach a solution before the Government, which was in difficulties over the Corn Laws, should fall from power. As he wrote to Everett "I told Sir Robert Peel, I had no other desire than that our Government should last long enough for him to carry the Corn Bill,

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[48] Benton, op. cit., p. 665.
[49] Diary, p. 73.
[50] Ibid, p. 59.
[51] Quoted in McCormac, op. cit., p. 599.
[52] Diary, p. 74.
[53] Ibid, p. 75.
[54] Benson, Daniel Webster (New York, 1929), p. 308.
Schuyler, op. cit., p. 453.
Schafer, op. cit., p. 297.

and for me to settle Oregon."[55] Although there is no mention of it in Polk's diary, Lord Aberdeen seems to have dropped a hint to the American Government that it would do well to conclude negotiations with him, rather than delay and be faced by a new Government with Palmerston as Foreign Secretary.[56] Moreover the British Ministry was now acquainted with the change of heart of the Hudson's Bay Company and had heard in February from Lieutenant Peel in person that the American settlements were growing in the Willamette Valley.[57]

On May 10 Lord Aberdeen communicated to Mr. McLane the offer which finally proved the basis of the treaty. As far as the Coast, the boundary should be the 49th Parallel, but there it should swing southward so as to leave Vancouver Island in British hands. The Hudson's Bay Company should be left in undisturbed possession of its properties, and should be allowed free navigation of the Columbia river for itself and for British subjects trading with it. This offer reached Polk on June 3, almost a month after the declaration of war on Mexico. Although he was aware that if it were rejected a war might ensue with Great Britain, it was only reluctantly that the President decided to lay the correspondence before Senate.[58] The old belief that the war with Mexico frightened Polk into a hurried sacrifice of American rights, does not hold water when his diary is examined. Two days after the declaration of war on Mexico, for example, Polk was discussing with the Secretary of State the possibility of European intervention to prevent the United States from acquiring California, upon which he had set his heart. The President told Buchanan that if either England or France should attempt to exact a promise not to annex California, that before he would make such a promise "I would meet the war which either England or France, or all the powers of Christendom might wage, and I would stand and fight until the last man among us fell in the conflict."[59] As Professor Morison has pointed out, Polk could have dragged on negotiations with Great Britain until hostilities had ended with Mexico; and then turned to face Great Britain with a strong army and with an excited public opinion behind him.[60]

When the President discussed the British offer with his Cabinet on June 6th, four of them recommended its submission to the Senate. To the annoyance of his colleagues, Buchanan, Secretary of State, reversed his position, and declared "the Fifty-Four Forty" men were the true friends of the Administration, and he wished no backing out on the subject."[61] Polk felt that Buchanan was attempting to play politics, and was scheming to evade any responsibility for the decision. He decided to ask the advice of Senate, making it clear in his covering letter that if they did not offer an opinion he would revert to his previous position and reject the compromise.[62]

On June 10 the President forwarded the British offer to the Senate, with a request for their advice. In the intervening four days Senator Benton had discussed the situation with a number of Whig Senators, and

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55 Balfour, The Life of George 4th Earl of Aberdeen (London, n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 135.
56 c.f. Gordon op. cit., p. 181. Balfour, op. cit., p. 134. Ramsay, op. cit., pp. 255-256
57 Shafer, op. cit., p. 184.
58 Diary, p. 109.
59 Diary, p. 91.
60 Morison, op. cit., p. 85.
61 Diary, p 112. As early as March Buchanan had shown signs of supporting the extremists' position. (Diary, p. 63.)
62 Ibid, p. 112. Benton claims (p. 671) that he suggested the reference of the offer to Senate.

received assurances of their support. After two days of debate the Senate passed a resolution advising the acceptance of the Aberdeen offer by a majority of 38 to 12.[63] Senator Benton was naturally pleased with the settlement, and claimed with pride that the Senate resumed the "whole responsibility" of peace or war, giving the President "a faithful support against himself, his cabinet and his peculiar friends." In the debates the Western Senators struggled hard to defeat the motion, but the bulk of the Senate were peacefully inclined, and respected the conciliatory attitude of the British Government. The voting was on sectional rather than on party lines, only one Southern Senator voting against the offer; and only three western Senators voting for it. Daniel Webster, who had steadily pleaded for a moderate policy, later could not resist the temptation of launching a final gibe at the President; "in the general operation of Government, treaties are negotiated by the President and ratified by the President, but here is the reverse—here is a treaty negotiated by the Senate and ratified by the President."[64] The President signed the Treaty without comment, and it was promptly ratified by the Senate with an increased majority of 41 to 14.

In Great Britain the news was received with relief. Lord Aberdeen was able to announce the successful conclusion of negotiations on the eve of the fall of the Peel Government. Queen Victoria heartily approved of the settlement, and commented "This is an immense thing for the peace of the world and reflects such credit on Lord Aberdeen."[65]

In following the course of negotiations it is clear that the lion's share of the credit for the Treaty must go to the British Government for its wise and conciliatory attitude. The American Senate deserves commendation for doing a statesmanlike thing, rather against the popular clamor for expansion. We must acquit President Polk of sacrificing a national interest to a sectional slavery policy, or of hastily retiring from an untenable position. It was he who had made the British Government properly appreciate the feeling behind the American demand for the entire country. It must be remembered that the President never entirely shut the door to British offer, although for a time only a narrow crack was left open. It is also unfair to criticise Polk for not assuming full responsibility for the Treaty. In view of the campaign promises of 1844, he could scarcely be expected to undertake single handed the responsibility for compromise. In referring the issue to Senate, he was able to avert too serious a split in the Democratic Party. No one who reads his Diary, cannot but respect his courage and dogged determination. The opinion of Richard Rush, joint author of one of the wisest conventions in the history of Anglo-American relations, the Rush-Bagot agreement, is a fitting epitaph upon the policy of the President.

"For one I am unshaken in the belief that it was the President's opening message to the first Congress . . . that produced the settlement of the Oregon difficulty. It was like a great bomb-shell thrown in the British Cabinet. It took them by surprise, and first roused them to the unavoidable necessity of a settlement. I thought, when it appeared, that it would lead to war—so bold was it, though every word was just; whereas it led to peace."[66]

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63 Benton, op. cit., pp. 675, 676.

64 Quoted in Meany, op. cit., p. 136.

65 Balfour, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 135. Hudson's Bay resident officers thought the settlement more generous than was necessary but some, like Douglas, expected "nothing short of an utter sacrifice of our interests." c.f. Sage, Sir James Douglas and British Columbia (Toronto, 1930), p. 139.

66 Quoted in McCormac, op. cit., p. 611.