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By Anna Kasten Nelson

Secret Agents and Security Leaks: President Polk and the Mexican War

President Polk's attempts at secrecy in negotiations during the Mexican War were frustrated by leaks to the press.

► If misery loves company, then harassed contemporary Presidents could find comfort in a history of the administration of President James K. Polk. Not only did Polk find himself fighting a war on foreign soil which became increasingly unpopular as it lengthened; he was plagued by serious "security leaks" within his own administration.

With an eye for posterity, Polk left in his diary one of the most complete accounts of any presidential term of office in American history.¹ This has perhaps obscured the fact that Polk as President had a decided proclivity for secrecy. After meeting the 11th President, George Bancroft wrote his wife, "He is withal the closest man I ever met with, keeping his mouth as effectively shut as any man I know..."² It was a source

of continual irritation to Polk that others did not share his closeness of mouth. His diary contains many angry passages castigating the press and throwing suspicion upon his closest advisers.

Nowhere was his irritation with publicity more evident than in his diplomatic dealings with Mexico. In May 1846, Polk became the second President to go to war. The relationship between the United States and Mexico had been precarious since the earliest days of Mexican independence.³ By the time Polk reached the presidency, a series of conflicts had further exacerbated relations between the two countries: the United States had sent a series of incompetent ministers to Mexico; Mexico in the distress and confusion of her internal political strife had been unable and unwilling to pay the claims of American citizens against her government; and finally, the United States annexation of Texas had caused the withdrawal of the Mexican minister from Washington and a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. Polk added another ingredient to the smoldering kettle. An avowed expansionist, he told George Bancroft, his secretary of the navy, that before the end of his four-year term of office, he meant to gain California for his countrymen.⁴

Unable to achieve his aims through peaceful diplomacy, Polk resorted to force. He assumed that a war with Mexico would be brief as that divided, bankrupt country would quickly see the folly of fighting the colossus to the North. His

¹ Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849*. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910 (hereinafter referred to as *Polk, Diary*)). There is also an abridged edition of the diaries edited by Allan Nevins entitled *James K. Polk, the Diary of a President* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1929).

² Bancroft to Mrs. Bancroft, February 1845. Acc. 3476, Add. 10, Box 1, The Papers of George Bancroft (Library of Congress).

³ Information on the origins and events of the Mexican War may be found in the following: Justin Smith, *War With Mexico* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919); Jesse S. Reeves, *American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1907); Otis A. Singletary, *The Mexican War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation* (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1973).

⁴ Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 213.

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assumption was erroneous, but it must be said in his defense that as Polk moved the nation into war, he immediately set out to obtain peace. Because his methods were unorthodox to say the least, the first requisite for their success was complete secrecy.

Aside from his personal preferences, there were other factors which indicated to the President that secrecy was an absolute necessity to making peace. First of all, the President was eager to keep information out of the hands of the British and French. The British maintained an active interest in the affairs of the Mexican Empire, especially the coast of California. Polk often wrote that absolute secrecy was necessary so that the foreign ministers in Washington would not be informed of the peace moves and thus be in a position to thwart the United States objectives.

Secondly, the President was most concerned about keeping his objectives secret from his political enemies—his Whig opponents, whose accusations against him for fomenting a war for empire gathered ever more force as the war lengthened. Polk's mature years had been spent entirely within the fold of the Democratic Party. He had been Andrew Jackson's hand picked speaker of the House, and had dutifully forfeited his promising career as a national figure when his party urged him to run for governor of Tennessee. His great loyalty to his own party made him greatly doubt the loyalty of his Whig opponents. His diary reflects his belief that his political enemies were so eager to thwart him in his attempts for peace, they would stoop to treason.⁵

A final reason for secrecy revolved around the nature of negotiations with Mexico as conceived by Polk and Secretary of State James Buchanan. The Polk administration did not enter official negotiations with Mexico as one would with another sovereign state of equal or greater strength (as in fact Polk did in his negotiations with Britain over Oregon). Instead it assumed that Mexico's reluctance to part with her empire or admit

defeat in war was a matter awaiting the simple solution of bribery. Having little respect for the Mexicans or their rulers, Polk engaged in executive diplomacy by secret agent. As these agents were often promising money for land, Polk did not want their activities known to the world at large—most particularly not to the Whig members of that world.

It was President Polk's misfortune to attempt deep secrecy in an age of expanding newspaper circulation. Newspapers were avowedly partisan, not above printing every rumor and quite willing to quote each other in detail. Adding yet another dimension was the development of the telegraph. War correspondents in Mexico sent their news to New Orleans where it could then quickly reach the newspapers in the East by telegraph. Rumor, speculation and conjecture were just as widely distributed as the news of victorious battles. Attempting secret diplomacy under such conditions proved hopeless.

The Return of Santa Anna

Polk's first peace move involved returning to Mexico from his Cuban exile the wily General Santa Anna. Several months before the outbreak of war, Santa Anna had sent as an emissary to Polk, Alexander J. Atocha. Atocha had suggested to the President that under certain circumstances and with sufficient money, the exiled dictator would agree to United States demands. The Americans need only agree to help Santa Anna return to power.⁶ Polk did not trust Atocha and did not decide to pursue this offer until after war was declared. The need for secrecy was obvious. For rea-

⁵See for example, Polk, *Diary*, I, p. 34; Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 482-3. For information on Polk as a Jacksonian Democrat, see Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957); Eugene McCormac, *James K. Polk, A Political Biography* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1922).

⁶Polk, *Diary*, I, pp. 223-5, pp. 227-30. Polk noted that Atocha did not specifically say that he had been sent by Santa Anna and some historians have subsequently doubted that Atocha had even come from Havana. See for example Wilfred Callcott, *Santa Anna* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936). However Atocha had been in Cuba because records indicate that he arrived in New Orleans on the *Alabama* from Havana on Dec. 22, 1845 (*Passenger Lists Taken from Manifests of the Customs Service, Port of New Orleans, 1845.*)

sons known only to himself, President Polk determined that the surest way to protect the secret negotiations was to mask them with an open meeting.

Accordingly, in July 1846, Commander Alexander Slidell Mackenzie arrived in Cuba with official instructions to investigate the possibility that certain ships were being outfitted as privateers.⁷ Incidental to this "important" mission, (which could easily have been accomplished by the United States Consul in Havana), Mackenzie was to pay a courtesy visit to General Santa Anna. The commander held his secret closely—not even taking the American Consul in Havana into his confidence—but unfortunately he could not resist a bit of harmless pageantry. It was reported that he traveled to his meeting with Santa Anna in full uniform and in an open carriage.⁸

Meanwhile, the "cover story" concerning the privateers fooled no one. On July 3, the New Orleans *Picayune* was already reporting that Commander Mackenzie was on his way to Havana to perfect some arrangements with Santa Anna. By the end of June the French language paper publishing in New York City, the *Courrier des Etats Unis* was reporting the specifics of Mackenzie's mission. By the time Mackenzie returned to the United States, he had to retreat from New Orleans to a "more sequestered spot upon the Mississippi

coast" in order to escape attention long enough to translate his Spanish documents and prepare his report.⁹ There is no record of Mackenzie's instructions but he reported on his conversations with Santa Anna in lengthy letters to Secretary of State Buchanan.¹⁰ Evidently he had been instructed to inform Santa Anna that he would be allowed to pass the American blockade of Mexican ports if he would then agree to American peace terms on his return to Mexico. Mackenzie, who was quite impressed with the Mexican General, assured Buchanan that Santa Anna was agreeable to such a bargain. He described Santa Anna as willing to "conclude peace by means of a treaty of limits."

The following August, Santa Anna did return to Mexico—carrying with him a box of Cuban cigars as a gift from the consul in Havana to the commander of the United States naval squadron.¹¹ He sailed right past the United States Navy which was effectively blockading the Mexican ports from everyone else. Speculation as to the ease of his return immediately filled the newspapers. On Sept. 5, the *National Intelligencer* wrote, "The mysterious mission of Capt. Slidell Mackenzie to Havana, not many weeks ago, is supposed to have had some connexion (*sic*) with all of these events." Rumors of the agreement with Santa Anna began to permeate the press. Even the Savannah *Republican* had comments. As usual the *Picayune* was the most detailed in its accounts and the most quoted in other newspapers around the country. Then, in November 1846, copies of the New York *Herald* arrived in Mexico, spelling out in some detail for their Mexican readers the supposed agreement between Santa Anna and the United States. By accident or design, the events of the two preceding months corroborated the charges in the printed account and accusations of treachery were too strong for the general to dismiss. By the end of November 1846, Santa Anna could not have made peace under any

⁷ Bancroft to Mackenzie, Washington, June 6, 1846, Confidential Records, pp. 192-3, T-829, R-359, NR/NA.

⁸ Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years View* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), II, p. 561.

⁹ New Orleans *Picayune*, July 3, 1846; *Courrier des Etats Unis*, June 20, and June 27, 1846. Translation from the newspaper can be found in Vol. 21, Papers of Nicholas P. Trist (Library of Congress); *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 1st Session, Vol. 17, Jan. 19, 1848, p. 205.

¹⁰ Mackenzie wrote three letters to Buchanan. There are no copies in the State Department Archives, however. Probably in an effort to preserve secrecy, Polk placed them among his own papers. Mackenzie to Buchanan, July 7, 1846, Series 2, Vol. 105; Mackenzie to Buchanan, July 7, 1846, Series 3, Box 1, File 11; Mackenzie to Buchanan, July 11, 1846, Series 2, Vol. 105, The Papers of James K. Polk (Library of Congress). The Polk papers are now completely available on microfilm.

¹¹ Campbell to Conner, Havana, Aug. 7, 1846, Box 10, Papers of David Conner (New York Public Library); Conner to Mrs. Conner, Oct. 4, 1846, Papers of David Conner (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York)

circumstance without being accused of treason.¹²

The President of the United States was painfully aware of the fact that he had been played for a fool—and that this information was public knowledge due to the “news coverage” of Mackenzie’s mission. As General Santa Anna rallied the Mexicans to continue fighting, the President’s role in his return to Mexico became a subject of greater and greater interest in the press and in the Congress. Finally in January 1848, 18 months after the fact, Congress requested that the President send to them the communications concerning Mackenzie’s mission. This request prompted Polk finally to mention Mackenzie in his diary—deprecating the importance of his mission in his brief account. Needless to say, he failed to turn over to Congress the requested documents.¹³

The beginning of 1847 found Polk completely frustrated in his attempts to bring the war to a successful conclusion. Congress, he complained, was unwilling to pass the appropriation bills he had requested; his generals were all Whigs and therefore among his enemies; and the stubborn Mexicans who were clearly being overwhelmed and defeated did not seem to know that, and hence refused to make peace.¹⁴ Perhaps this frustration accounts for his next venture into the world of secret diplomacy.

In January 1847, Alexander J. Atocha reappeared on the Washington scene. Meeting with Secretary Buchanan and Senator Thomas Hart Benton, he convinced both men that he was such an important friend of the rulers of Mexico, he could certainly help bring about the elusive peace. Specifically, he suggested that as he was returning to Mexico on private business in the next month, he would—in the name of peace—be happy to carry with him a letter to Santa Anna and other Mexican leaders. When approached by his secretary of state, Polk expressed some misgivings about once again asking the Mexicans for peace. It was dishonorable for the United States to constantly suffer public rejections

from the chaotic, weak nation of Mexico. Finally, as a compromise, Polk agreed that Atocha could unofficially—and secretly—carry a letter to Mexico simply suggesting the desirability of a peace commission.¹⁵

Since Atocha was not an official agent of the United States, but only a “bearer of dispatches,” the President evidently felt he could cause no harm. Polk could not have been more mistaken. This seemingly unobtrusive business visit of Mr. Atocha’s to Mexico kept the press of both countries busy for at least three months. Here, the difficulty clearly lay with Mr. Atocha himself. Atocha was a naturalized American citizen, a Spaniard by birth and a “businessman” in Mexico by profession.¹⁶ He was hardly a modest man and immediately let everyone know of his important mission—embellishing on the details when necessary. Then in order to facilitate his mission he requested and obtained permission to travel to Mexico on a United States revenue cutter which landed at Vera Cruz under a flag of truce—an event duly reported by the press.¹⁷ It was naturally assumed and widely reported that Atocha carried with him the terms of peace and a formal offer for a peace treaty. Widely reprinted from the Mexican press was a letter which Atocha reportedly wrote in Mexico describing a set of peace terms which were fairly accurate in their boundary details, but

¹² *National Intelligencer*, Sept. 5, 1846; *Niles Register*, Sept. 5, 1846, and Sept. 12, 1846; New Orleans *Picayune*, Aug. 26, 1846; New York *Herald*, Sept. 2, Sept. 7, Oct. 10, 1846; Bankhead to Palmerston, Mexico City, Nov. 28, 1846, FO 50/201, No. 172.

¹³ Polk, *Diary*, III, p. 291. This diary is by no means a complete history of the Polk administration. There are often events of note which go unmentioned by the President.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 307; Black to Buchanan, Mexico City, Oct. 17, 1846, Consular Dispatches, Mexico City, Vol. 9, M-296, R-5, DS:NA. See also, letter from James K. Polk to George Bancroft, Jan. 30, 1847, Series 4, Reel 58, Polk Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁵ Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 323-7.

¹⁶ Alexander J. Atocha, *Statement of the Case and Claim of Alexander J. Atocha Against the Government of the Mexican Republic* (Washington, 1845).

¹⁷ Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 337-8; Atocha to Buchanan, New Orleans, Jan. 30, 1847, Box 64, Buchanan Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); *Niles Register*, March 20, 1847; New Orleans *Picayune*, March 9 and 10, 1847; New York *Sun*, March 19, 1847; Washington *Union*, March 17, 1847.

which also named Atocha as the man authorized to negotiate the peace until Secretary Buchanan could arrive with an official peace commission. The respectable *Niles Register* reprinted that story and the British minister in Washington regarded it of enough importance to forward it to his Foreign Office in a memorandum.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Atocha was in fact *persona non grata* in Mexico. He was not even allowed to remain in Mexico City long enough to wait for an answer to Buchanan's note. Expelled from that city, he was forced to wait on a neighboring hacienda while the Mexicans wrote yet another "no" to the American overture. Reporting on his sudden arrival, Atocha was described by one Mexican newspaper as "an official pimp, a treasonable pander, a perfidious miscreant, and indeed the concentration of baseness." No wonder the *National Intelligencer*, representing the vocal Whig opposition to the Democratic Polk, commented gleefully upon the "lunacy" which seemed to overtake his administration when it decided to negotiate with Mexico.¹⁹

Trist Negotiates Peace

Finally, in April 1847, after the successful American invasion of Vera Cruz, President Polk decided to send to Mexico an official peace commissioner who would travel with General Scott's army and thereby be ready to make peace at any time. Every history book records this mission of Nicholas P. Trist, who remained in Mexico to conclude the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo even though an annoyed President Polk had recalled him several months earlier. But whatever Trist's ultimate fame—his original mission was that of a secret agent.

¹⁸ Bankhead to Palmerston, Mexico City, March 2, 1847. No. 16, Gt. Br. FO 50/208. Also see Memorandum from Palmerston, April 9, 1847, Gt. Br. FO 50/126. *Niles Register*, May 15, 1847, quoting *Courrier des Etats Unis* of May 1, 1847.

¹⁹ New Orleans *Picayune*, April 6, 1847. Quoting the New York *Journal of Commerce*, March 24, 1847; Mexican newspaper article reprinted in *Niles Register*, May 22, 1847; *National Intelligencer*, April 22, 1847.

²⁰ Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 466-8; Reeves, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-11.

²¹ Polk, *Diary*, II, p. 468, p. 480.

Having decided upon sending a peace commissioner, Polk carefully impressed upon his cabinet that this peace venture above all others would be a success only if shrouded in secrecy. The President's every move was calculated to protect the secrecy of the mission. He consulted with Buchanan on the choice of agent, and it was decided that the unobtrusive, non-political, chief clerk of the State Department—Mr. Trist—would be just the person. Trist knew Spanish, was a loyal Democrat, was diligent in his duties, would never be a political threat if his mission were successful, and presumably his absence would not be widely noticed.²⁰

No sooner had Trist agreed to undertake the trip to Mexico than the President impressed upon him the importance of secrecy. As Polk wrote in his diary, if the "federal papers" learned of it, they would use "every means in their power" to thwart the peace attempt "by discouraging the enemy to accede to the measure." When Trist and the secretary of state requested the help of an additional clerk to aid in the preparation of the treaty draft, Polk called the clerk, Mr. Derrick, into his office in order to personally impress upon him the necessity for absolute secrecy. Except for the cabinet, only this clerk and the President's private secretary knew of Trist's appointment. On the day of his departure, however, Polk also confided the secret to Mr. Ritchie, editor of the administration newspaper, the *Washington Union*, "because it was necessary that he should know it in order to shape the course of his paper in reference to it."²¹

Trist certainly carried out his end of the bargain. Traveling to Atlanta and New Orleans, he tried his best to travel incognito, although he reported from Atlanta that it was hard to avoid the great hotels because "the omnibus's there all belonged to some hotel or other." Once in New Orleans he wrote that he was "perfectly well, and perfectly well *escondido* at an obscure French auberge . . . under the name of 'Docteur Tarro'."

Mrs. Trist, meanwhile, was dutifully telling their friends that Nicholas had gone to visit his brother in Louisiana.²²

It was effort expended for nothing. On April 19, three days after Trist left Washington, the Baltimore *Sun* reported that a messenger had been sent to Mexico to make peace. The next day, the New York *Herald* reported the departure with what Polk described as "remarkable accuracy and particularity." The papers then reported that Trist reached New Orleans on April 26, and departed for Vera Cruz on April 28. Next, they noted his arrival at that Mexican port on May 6. By June, the *Democratic Review* was publishing with some accuracy the terms of the proposed peace treaty, and a few days later it was reported that Trist did in fact have full diplomatic powers. Finally there were so many rumors, *Niles Register* on July 3, 1847, decided to publish a synopsis of all the rumors being printed in newspapers around the country. So much for secrecy.²³

By July, Polk had perhaps adjusted to his fate, but his anger knew no bounds when the press reports first came to his attention. He was apparently genuinely convinced that the peace mission could only be successful if it remained a secret. The opposition press was so eager to give aid to the enemy, he felt, they would surely send a courier to the Mexicans just to discourage them from making peace with Mr. Trist. "I have not been more vexed or excited since I have been President than at this occurrence," he wrote.²⁴

Because of its accuracy, he was particularly outraged by the April 20 article in the New York *Herald*. The story clearly came from "sources" with first hand information. Perhaps because President Polk had to rely on such primitive methods of investigation as personal interrogation, he never did satisfactorily solve the mystery of this most important of his "security leaks." He interrogated the poor State Department clerk, Mr. Derrick, at length—whose misfortune it was to be a Whig—but could find

no proof of his guilt.²⁵ Nevertheless, Polk continued to be convinced that the information had come from the State Department. This could only mean that he continued to suspect either his secretary of state or his peace commissioner of this almost treasonous act. In either case, such suspicions were unfortunate for the future well being of his administration as well as the formulation of a peace treaty.

President Polk did, in fact, manage to send one agent to Mexico whose mission remained an absolute secret. This agent was Moses Y. Beach, the owner and publisher of the New York *Sun*. In November 1846, Beach informed Buchanan that he was on his way to Mexico and had certain secret connections there which might allow him to be helpful in making peace. He was given an official letter by the secretary designating him as a "confidential agent," and on his return the following May filed his official report and collected the money for his expenses.²⁶

Traveling with Beach and his daughter was his chief editorial writer, Jane McManus Storms, whose journalism was partly responsible for the expansionist, almost bellicose views of the paper. As they made their way from New York to Mexico, Storms wrote a series of sketches for the *Sun*, a travelogue describing the scenes of Charleston, Havana and Vera Cruz. Never once did she intimate the purpose of their journey, but never
(Please turn to page 98)

²² Trist to Mrs. Trist, Atlanta, April 18, 1847, and New Orleans, April 25, 1847, Vol. 23, Trist Papers (Library of Congress); Mrs. Trist to Trist, Washington, April 29, 1847, Vol. 23, Trist Papers (Library of Congress).

²³ Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 482-3; New Orleans *Picayune*, April 28, 1847; *Niles Register*, April 24, May 22, May 29, June 12, 1847; *National Intelligencer*, June 7, 1847; *Niles Register*, July 3, 1847. Synopsis included quotes from the St. Louis *Republican*, Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, New Orleans *Commercial Times*. New York *Herald*, April 20, 1847.

²⁴ Polk, *Diary*, II, pp. 482-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ List of Bearers of Despatches, 1829 to —. See last page for list of Special Agents, RG 59, DS/NA; *Special Missions*, Vol. I and Vol. 15, RG 59, DS/NA. Instructions from Buchanan to Beach and the report submitted by the latter may also be found in William R. Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1937), Vol. VIII—Mexico, pp. 195-6 and pp. 906-7.