

# Calhoun's Attitude on the Oregon Question

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ON  
THE OREGON QUESTION.

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What is known as the Oregon country was claimed by both the United States and England on the basis of discovery and settlement. In addition each country claimed to have acquired the rights of Spain, England by the Conventions of 1790 and 1794, and the United States by the treaty of 1819. The attempts to adjust the conflicting claims, in 1806 and in 1814, failed. But the line of the forty-ninth parallel as far west as the Rocky Mountains was acceptable to both countries. The convention of 1818, which was an outgrowth of the treaty of Ghent, provided for joint occupation of the country west of the Rocky Mountains. This agreement was to last for ten years and was "not to be construed to the prejudice of any claim" that either party had to the territory in question. In 1819 Spain surrendered to the United States her claim to all territory north of the forty-second parallel. In a treaty with Russia, 1824, it was provided that "no settlement shall be made hereafter on the northwest coast of America -----, north of fifty-four degrees, forty minutes of north latitude, by citizens of the United States ----- nor by the Russian subjects south of the same parallel of latitude". A similar treaty was concluded between Russia and Great Britain the next year. Thus the north and south limits of the Oregon country were placed at fifty-four forty and forty-two respectively.<sup>2</sup> The negotiations carried on by Rush and Canning, in 1824, failed, but the claims of each country were set forth.

The United States offered the forty-ninth parallel to the Pacific Ocean as the boundary, denying to England the free navigation of the Columbia. But England was willing to accept that parallel only to where it struck the "northeasternmost branch of the Columbia, and thence down the middle of the Columbia to the Pacific". Negotiations on the subject were resumed by Gallatin, in 1826--27. He renewed the offer of Rush, and, in addition, conceded the free navigation of the Columbia. The result was the renewal of the agreement for joint occupation for an indefinite period, terminable upon a twelve month's notice by either party. Thus the matter rested until the administration of President Tyler. No reference was made to it in the Webster-Ashburton treaty of 1842, but immediately thereafter Lord Aberdeen urged that the remaining dispute be taken up. Preparations for doing so were being made by Mr. Pakenham and Secretary of State Uphur when the sad accident on board the Princeton took place.

In selecting Calhoun as the successor of Upshur, it is apparent<sup>3</sup> that President Tyler had in mind the settlement of the Texan and the Oregon questions. The position of Calhoun on the latter question had been set forth by him at length in a speech<sup>4</sup> in the Senate, Jan. 24, 1843. Stated briefly it was a "let alone"<sup>5</sup> policy. Time and westward emigration were the all-powerful means by which the Oregon territory would be preserved for the United States. All this country needed to do in order to effect

its object was to maintain a "wise and masterly inactivity". The less the question was agitated the better. To this course Calhoun was thoroughly consistent until compelled to assume a different attitude by the stress of the Mexican question.

In his letter <sup>6</sup> of acceptance Calhoun agreed with Tyler that the Texan and the Oregon questions were sadly in need of attention. Both seem to have regarded them as critical, and Calhoun declared that their critical condition was the only consideration which induced him to accept the appointment. And he entered upon the work of the office with a firm conviction that he could conclude the negotiations concerning both questions.<sup>7</sup> However, it was with some reluctance that he again took up the work of public life and only on condition that, when the negotiations were successfully concluded, he would be relieved of the office. Although Calhoun entered the cabinet with the avowed purpose of settling both the Oregon and the Texan questions, he seems to have given all his attention to the latter. This course has led to the charge that he would have sacrificed Oregon for the sake of Texas. Texas would mean another slave state; Oregon a free one. But Calhoun justified himself on the ground that the question of the annexation of Texas was a pressing one, while Oregon could wait. As a matter of fact this was Calhoun's theory that the longer the Oregon question was delayed, the more favorable would be its final settlement to the United States. But if it could wait then its condition was not

critical. Calhoun, however, believed it to be critical only to the extent that it was tampered with. On the other hand the Texan question could not wait. England had been manifesting a friendly interest in Texas and was desirous of making it a free state. There was fear that she was using her influence against the annexation movement and that Texas, if the United States should reject her offer, would make a similar proposal to England.<sup>8</sup>

Calhoun, therefore, wished to anticipate such a possibility by making sure its annexation to the United States.

Thus by hastening the Texan negotiations, difficulties would be avoided just as by pressing the Oregon question, they might arise. The idea of Texas a free state was unthinkable to Calhoun. Should such a plan be consummated slavery would be cut off from all further extension and would be surrounded by a wall of freedom. Therefore Calhoun did not take up the Oregon question until forced to do so by the suggestion of Mr. Pakenham and the order of President Tyler. Pakenham offered the line of the forty-ninth parallel to the Columbia and down it to the Pacific. Calhoun rejected this offer and demanded the valley of the Columbia. His defense of the American claim to the forty-ninth parallel as the boundary is masterly and dismisses all doubt as to his patriotism. He believed that the claim of the United States to the forty-ninth parallel was clear and unquestionable. But the fifty-four forty claim was to him idle and unfounded.

Pakenham then suggested arbitration, but Calhoun believing firmly that the question could be settled by negotiation, rejected this plan also. President Tyler shared the same belief.

Thus Tyler's administration closed with the Oregon question still at issue. However Calhoun seems to have been well satisfied with the state of the negotiations when <sup>he</sup> left office. Writing to Mrs. T. G. Clemson, May 22, 1845, he says: "While conducting the Texian question successfully by bold and decisive measures, I was conducting the Oregon with equal success, by a quiet, amicable, but firm course. I - - - - would have terminated the negotiations last winter in time to be laid before Congress, had Mr. Pakenham received instructions from his government as early as he had expected." In another letter <sup>9</sup> he writes to the same effect: "I saw my way clearly through it (Oregon negotiation), and left it in a good way." However these utterances may be due more to the customary suspicion with which most men look upon the work of their successors than to any real basis. As to the instructions which Mr. Pakenham was to have received from his government, it is difficult to say. Leastwise he seems not to have received them by the next summer at the time of the negotiation with Mr. Buchanan. But it is true that Sir Robert Peel was so much interested in home matters that he for a long time neglected the foreign affairs of his country.

Whatever may have been Calhoun's hopes for the adjustment of the Oregon dispute by his "quiet and amicable" course, they were rudely shattered by the attitude of President Polk. In keeping with the popular sentiment



he declared that our title to the Oregon territory was "clear and unquestionable". During the preceding campaign there had been great excitement in the west over the Oregon boundary and the cry of "fifty-four forty or fight" had been rife. Polk either yielding to the popular clamor or to serve some purpose of his own took an emphatic and advanced position on this question. His declarations in his inaugural address and in his first annual message to congress caused great indignation in England and lead many on both sides of the Atlantic to believe that war was inevitable. Calhoun especially professed great alarm<sup>9</sup>. He believed that a war with England would be a fatal calamity and would result in the loss of all the territory in dispute; that it was unnecessary and avoidable if the right course were pursued, but inevitable if Polk continued his threatening attitude; England did not desire war, but would not refuse it, if forced upon her; if war resulted, it would be because of Oregon, not Texas; moreover Mexico was directly under the influence of England and a war with the latter country would destroy all hope of a peaceable adjustment of the Texan boundary. Polk would have to retract or war was inevitable.

So great was Calhoun's fear of war that he returned to the senate to stem, if possible, the strong current flowing towards hostilities<sup>11</sup>. President Polk in his message had recommended the serving of the years notice as provided for in the convention of 1827, thus bringing to an end joint occupation. A resolution<sup>12</sup> to this

effect was soon introduced. Calhoun at first was strenuously opposed to its adoption<sup>13</sup>. His hope of defeating it lay in getting a majority in the senate against it. He relied<sup>14</sup> upon the Atlantic states and on the south. The adoption of the resolution would mean an end to the policy of "wise and masterly inactivity". It would also mean war unless Polk retracted or England backed down. For the sake of peace Calhoun would have amended the resolution by offering the forty-ninth parallel as a basis of a compromise, or even reference to arbitration<sup>15</sup>, if nothing better could be done. (However he had refused arbitration when Secretary of State). Writing to James Hammond January 23, 1846, he says: "The odds are against me. The South, most unfortunately, is divided. The Whigs are timid, jealous and distracted. The administration professing to desire peace acts to the contrary."

As time went on Calhoun became more hopeful. The war sentiment in the United States gradually died down and news from England became more encouraging. However a new danger loomed up in the southwest. Relations with Mexico were becoming more strained and a war seemed probable. This probability caused Calhoun to change quite materially his attitude towards the Oregon question. If war with England alone was to be dreaded, much more so was a double war with both England and Mexico. In order to prevent such a complication, it became necessary to settle the Oregon dispute as speedily as possible. With that out of the way, war with Mexico would be less likely. Calhoun

therefore, favored passing the resolution in some modified form and thus open the way for a resumption of negotiations, which had been suspended (August 1845). In his famous<sup>16</sup> speech on serving notice, March 16, 1846, he declared that the time was ripe for a compromise. Assurances were received on both sides of the willingness of the other to treat. Sir Robert Peel disapproved of Pakenham's hasty rejection of Buchanan's offer. According to new instructions from Lord Aberdeen, Pakenham offered the forty-ninth parallel to the channel separating Vancouver Island from the continent, retaining the free navigation of the Columbia, and the treaty was signed June 15, 1846.

Calhoun took great credit to himself for this happy solution of so serious a problem; and no doubt his efforts had great weight. Professor Von Holst goes so far as to say that this is his chief claim for his country's gratitude<sup>17</sup>. However, equal credit must be awarded to the determined opposition of Webster, the skillful diplomacy of Buchanan, and the good sense and moderation of Lord Aberdeen.

For the most part Calhoun's extreme fear of a war with England was justified by the seriousness of the situation. But there are other reasons which account for his fear. The fact that the negotiations were in other hands than his own and the ignorance of everyone as to what was Polk's real plan and purpose explain much of Calhoun's uneasiness. It may be that Calhoun secretly wished to remain at the head of the Department of State.

At any rate he criticised very severely the administration and its conduct of both the Oregon and the Texan negotiations. He speaks of the "folly and weakness" of the administration and charges that the negotiations were "wretchedly managed". He finally realized<sup>18</sup> that Polk's inaugural address and message were in a large degree of a diplomatic character, a "blustering announcement" as Lord Russel characterized the former. It seems that he did not doubt that Polk and his cabinet desired peace. In his advocacy of the Resolution of Abrogation he believed he was creating for Polk an honorable means of getting out of the dilemma in which he had placed himself. And he held in abeyance his opposition<sup>19</sup> to the Mexican War that he might not embarrass the President in his Oregon negotiation.

The Oregon question was settled amicable, but war with Mexico ensued. Just how far the Oregon trouble influenced Mexico to go to war with the United States, it is difficult to say. It is hardly probable that England held out any hope to Mexico either of intervention or of a war with the United States over Oregon. But it is not so difficult to believe that Mexico entertained such a hope. While England did not wish herself to go to war with the United States, yet she might have been willing to make trouble for her with Mexico. But it is not probable that England wished a war between the United States and Mexico knowing as she surely did that its inevitable

result would be the acquisition by the former of California and New Mexico; unless perchance she was convinced that Polk was determined to have that territory at any cost.

Calhoun regarded the war with Mexico as unnecessary and without justification. He maintained that if he could have remained in office for a longer tenure the Oregon and the Texan questions would have been amicably settled. He denied that the annexation of Texas was a casus belli with Mexico. Proper diplomacy would have prevented hostilities<sup>20</sup>. If the Oregon question had been kept in the background, there would have been no trouble with Mexico. This position is supported by McLane who gave it as his opinion that if the declaration of war against Mexico had been known by the British Cabinet, Pakenham would not have been authorized to offer such liberal terms. As it was, it was decided by a bare majority.

Why did Calhoun so greatly fear a war with England? One reason is suggested by a statement in his speech of March 16, 1846, to which reference has already been made. In this he said: "I am, on principle, opposed to war and in favor of peace, because I regard peace as a positive good and war as a positive evil!" But his record is to the contrary. As chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations in 1812 he had taken a leading part in the war movement. It is probable that he would have gone to war over Texas rather than have seen it annexed by England<sup>21</sup>.

At least he would have resisted intervention by any European Power to prevent its annexation to the United States. However, Calhoun justifies himself in this attitude by assuming that either the annexation of Texas by England or its existence as a free and independent state would have sooner or later led to war. On the other hand he was vehemently opposed to the war with Mexico declaring it unnecessary and the result of folly and incompetence.

Calhoun clearly perceived that a war with England would probably result in the loss to the United States of the territory in dispute. England could defend her claim more effectively than could the United States. He also saw that a war would destroy all hopes for free trade which were then so bright as a result of the efforts of Sir Robert Peel.

Another compelling reason was the fear that increased power would accrue to the National Government as a result of war. Its authority and influence would be vastly enlarged. The doctrine of states' rights would become a thing of the past. "If we avoid war," said he, "and adhere to peace all this (prosperity, etc.) will be effected, I trust, without the loss of our free popular institutions. ) ) ) War may make us great; but only peace can make us both great and free."

But more important than all these Calhoun dreaded a war with England because of its probable effects upon slavery. In a letter to James E. Calhoun, January 16,

1846, he says: "To defeat the war in my opinion is to gain everything and to fail to defeat it is to lose all. It would leave us of the South little worth having." Writing to James H. Hammond a little later he is more definite: "The abolitionists are all for war, with the avowed intention of crushing us and our institutions." England's interest in securing the abolition of slavery was well known. It was the nightmare which haunted Calhoun during the Texan negotiations, and, like Bagn<sup>qu</sup>'s ghost, it reappeared with the Oregon dispute. During the discussion over Polk's inaugural address the London Times sounded a note of warning: "Have they forgotten in their anxiety to extend their "domestic institutions" to the whole continent of America that in the event of war they will have to encounter the most novel of all dangers--- that arise from the presence of the standard of freedom among a population of slaves?" Lord Palmerston expressed himself as having little fear that the United States would undertake a war in which the fate of slavery might be an issue. Therefore it required little imagination on Calhoun's part to picture the worst for the South in case of war; and he easily foresaw that, if the United States was worsted, the abolition of slavery might be a sine qua non of peace. Such a fear was, no doubt, very real to the mind of Calhoun, wrought up as it was by the anti-slavery agitation in the United States and keenly sensitive to whatever affected in the least the

"domestic institution" of the South. On the other hand if the United States was successful, Canada might be won, and the power of the free states thereby greatly enlarged.

Calhoun's attitude, therefore, was this: He favored a policy of "wise and masterly inactivity" as the surest and best for the United States and certain to win in the long run. By keeping the Oregon question in the background there was little fear of English intervention in Texas. But after Polk had forced the Oregon question to the front, its speedy settlement became necessary in order to avoid complications with Mexico and England. As long as it was unsettled war with either country would involve us in war with the other. In either case war was unjustifiable, unnecessary, and easily avoidable by proper diplomacy. And permeating his whole attitude and largely directing his course was his undying devotion to the South and his aggressive defense of its "peculiar Institution".



1. Reeves, ch. VIII.
2. Reeves, ch. IX.
3. Letter from Tyler to Calhoun, March 6, 1846/  
Rept. Amer. Hist. Assc. 1899, Vol. II.
4. Works, Vol. IV, pp. 238 - 248.
5. Gallatin had advocated this policy in 1827.
6. Calhoun to Tyler, March 16.
7. Letter to Hammond, August 30, 1845.  
For opposing view see Von Holst's Calhoun, page 261.
8. Letter to Wise May 11, 1844.
9. Letter to F. W. Pickens, May 6, 1845.
10. Letter to J. E. Calhoun, December 14, 1845.
11. Letter to Clemson, September 18, 1845.
12. In the Senate December 18; in the House January 5.
13. Clemson, December 26, 1845.
14. Hammond, September 28, 1845.
15. A. P. Calhoun, January 16, 1846.
16. Works, Vol. IV, pp. 248 - 290.
17. Von Holst's Calhoun, page 268.
18. Letter to Clemson, March 25, 1846.
19. Speech in Senate, February 12, 1847.
20. See Trent's "Southern Statesmen of the Old Regime", page 189.
21. Von Holst's Calhoun, page 270.