RIPE FOR FALLING: THOMAS O. LARKIN AND THE ACQUISITION OF CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

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The late Frederick Merk, perhaps the most respected historian of American expansion, once remarked ruefully that the study of territorial expansion was not an especially uplifting experience. Expansion, Professor Merk admitted, necessarily involves "elbowing owners of property rudely to one side and making away with their possessions." Living in a post-war world that has renounced colonialism and imperialism (ostensibly at least), Americans understandably might ponder the methods by which their nation carved out one of the world's greatest empires. No matter how one tries to rationalize or qualify American expansion during the 1840's, undeniably the United States resorted to aggression to extend what it considered the "area of freedom." From the war on Mexico the United States reaped a vast southwestern domain—a princely realm dominated by the Mexican province of Alta California. To achieve this great gain, many Americans accepted war as a legitimate last resort, while others did not consider aggression a creditable alternative.

The military heroes of the war have received the most "credit" for the conquest of California. Continued research and evaluation by

historians, however, has restored the reputation of a relatively unknown and unappreciated figure in American expansion—Thomas O. Larkin. A prosperous American merchant in California, Larkin served as United States Consul at Monterey and later as a confidential agent to the President. Consul Larkin worked for the acquisition of California not by force, but by the consent and approval of the people of the Mexican province.

Believing the acquisition of California to be both desirable and inevitable, Thomas O. Larkin strove to advance the expansionist campaign to obtain the province. To the United States government he reported the unsettled status of Mexican California. To the American expansionist press he praised its magnificent harbors and fertile valleys. And he began to persuade the people of California to accept willingly the transition to United States rule.

Consul Larkin's firsthand reports from Monterey became a vital ingredient of the expansionist campaign to win California. President James K. Polk embraced Larkin's program to secure the aid of the people of California for the coming of United States rule. Larkin and Polk intended to insure that California was indeed won for the "area of freedom." In July, 1845, the Consul warned the United States government and public against the danger of European interference in the province. Reacting to Larkin's warnings in October, the Polk administration moved to neutralize supposed European interference by obtaining California first. As part of this response, Polk authorized Larkin to encourage a movement of independence in California. If the

Californians would take the first steps, Larkin would offer them United States protection and quick entrance into the American Union.

Beginning in April, 1846, Consul Larkin's effort to secure California through a movement of independence steadily made progress. Then the outbreak of the Bear Flag Revolt (instigated without proper authority by John C. Frémont), and the military occupation of the province rendered Larkin's mission hopeless and obsolete. Still the Consul attempted to restrain both sides, hoping to prevent needless bloodshed. Thomas O. Larkin played a vital, active role in bringing United States hegemony to the Pacific, but his efforts failed to avert the bloody conflict of the Mexican War and the conquest of California.

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CHAPTER I

THE CONQUEROR OF CALIFORNIA

To all but specialists and California historians, Thomas O. Larkin is a forgotten figure in the history of the westward expansion of the United States. For many years following the acquisition of California, Larkin was buried in obscurity and cloaked in controversy. In the last century, however, historians have recognized Larkin's contributions and have begun to rescue him from historical oblivion. Many historians have accorded Larkin lavish praise for his role in the acquisition of the Mexican province. The resurrection of Thomas O. Larkin began nearly forty years after Mexico "ceded" her northern provinces to her "neighbor to the north." Josiah Royce, a noted philosopher but also a talented historian, sounded the loudest trumpet for Larkin. In 1886 Royce unequivocally proclaimed Larkin to have been "in every way by far the foremost among the men who won for us California."[1] Admitting that Larkin had been overlooked, Royce prophesied that "history will give him the credit of having been his country's most efficient instrument in California at the period of the conquest."[2] In the same year, Hubert Howe Bancroft, in his monumental history of California, provided additional documented support for

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[1]Josiah Royce, California, From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study of American Character (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), p. 161.

[2]Ibid., p. 39.

Royce's claims in behalf of Larkin.[3] Unreserved praise for Larkin continued into the twentieth century. George P. Hammond, editor of The Larkin Papers, pronounced that "more than anyone else, he [Larkin] was responsible for the acquisition of California by the United States."[4] Following the same well-worn path, Western historian John A. Hawgood professed that were it not for Larkin, millions of Californians "might never have settled or been born in the Golden State," and California might never have become a state of the American Union.[5]

Thomas O. Larkin commanded no navies and led no armies, not even a "battalion of volunteers." By no means a well-known political figure, Larkin filled an obscure post as United States Consul at Monterey, California. Why then did renowned historians consider him the most important person in the acquisition of California? Indeed, if Larkin was such a vital figure, why was it necessary that these historians stridently announce his importance to the world? Why did history not, as Josiah Royce and his successors believed, give Larkin his proper credit? The answers to these questions lay in the man who

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[3]Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of California, Vol. V (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft and Company, 1886).

[4]George P. Hammond, ed., The Larkin Papers, Vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. viii.

[5]John A. Hawgood, ed., First and Last Consul: Thomas Oliver Larkin and the Americanization of California (Palo Alto, California: Pacific Books, Publishers, 1970), p. xxv. Not all writers have lauded Larkin. Commodore Sloat's biographer, Major Edwin A. Sherman, dismissed Larkin's course as self-serving. Sherman, however, was attempting to defend the Commodore from charges of timidity for not occupying Monterey as soon as possible. Sherman evidently ignored the work of Royce and Bancroft. The Life of the Late Rear Admiral John Drake Sloat (Oakland: Carruth & Carruth, printers, 1902), pp. 92-93.

was initially acclaimed as the "conqueror" if not "liberator" of Mexican California for the United States.

Instigator and self-appointed leader of the Bear Flag Revolt, John C. Frémont received virtually the entire popular acclaim for the conquest of California. Due to the popularity of his role, the ambitious young officer was ensconced as a national hero, selected as senator for the new state of California and nearly elected president. With the national domain—the "area of freedom"—effortlessly extended over a bountiful province, few Americans cared to consider the implications of Captain Frémont's belligerence against the native Californians.[6] Most Americans failed to realize that Frémont's warlike course was unprovoked by the native Californians and undertaken before the Captain knew of the outbreak of the war with Mexico.[7] For years it was popularly assumed that Frémont had acted in accordance with directions from the

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[6]The term "native Californian" refers to those of Spanish or Mexican extraction. In California parlance all other nationalities, including Americans, were known as "foreigners." The distinction is essential. For example, Shomer S. Zwelling misinterpreted Larkin's use of the word "foreigner," believing it to refer particularly to British or French. This caused Zwelling to overemphasize Larkin's warning of "foreign influence" in California in his dispatch of January 25, 1845. Expansion and Imperialism (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), pp. 85-86. For a discussion of the ill-effects of Frémont's actions against the native Californians, see Royce, pp. 32-34, 49, 112.

[7]At the time of the Bear Flag Revolt (mid-June, 1846), Frémont knew of the rejection of Slidell but was unaware of the beginning of hostilities along the Rio Grande. News of the official declaration of war did not reach California until months later. Werner H. Marti, Messenger of Destiny: The California Adventures, 1846-1847, of Archibald Gillespie, United States Marine Corps (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1960), pp. 31-39, 46-49. See also: Bernard DeVoto, The Year of Decision, 1846 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), p. 194; Allen Nevins, Frémont: Pathmarker of the West, Vol. I: Frémont, The Explorer (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1939), pp. 240-244.

administration of James K. Polk. In the discord wrought by the Mexican War, the President suffered the public odium of having provoked an aggressive, and as many believed, an unnecessary war. The popular heroes, Captain Frémont, General Zachary Taylor and to a lesser extent, General Winfield Scott, were crowned with the laurels of military victory. Although a significant minority of Americans deprecated the war of conquest, the preponderant majority wholeheartedly embraced the instruments and symbols of the war for Mexican territory.

To most Americans, the sole consideration was that Frémont's swift, decisive action had not only protected American settlers, but had secured a valuable addition to the Union. The resulting bloodshed of the struggle and enmity of the native Californians was perhaps regrettable, but surely unavoidable. Besides, had it not been preordained—"manifested"—that the destiny of the United States and her republican institutions was to spread across the Rockies and perhaps still further? In an era bred of vaunting confidence and expansion, with total victory achieved, few Americans bothered to consider the necessity or wisdom of Frémont's revolutionary activities in California.[8]

Those few Americans who deplored Frémont's use of force against the native Californians, and might have challenged his part in the conquest of the province, were silenced by the apparent lack of any

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[8]Frémont and his political supporters were careful to cultivate his powerful image as the "conqueror of California." Realizing perhaps the threat from public recognition of Larkin's role, Frémont continued to deny the Consul's importance until his death. Royce, pp. 117-118, 147-148; John C. Frémont, "The Conquest of California," ed. Jessie Benton Frémont, Century: A Popular Magazine, XLI (April, 1891), 922-923.

viable alternatives. Although alienating the native Californians, Captain Frémont had helped to secure California with only a modicum of bloodshed.[9] Surely no other approach could have more effectively accomplished the acquisition of California—a legitimate result few Americans questioned. Forty years later, however, Josiah Royce and Hubert Howe Bancroft uncovered evidence that indicated there had indeed been another more defensible and perhaps less costly method. Aroused by this information, historians began to question the popular role of Frémont in the conquest of California. Working together, Royce and Bancroft pieced together evidence of a secret mission that demonstrated the Polk administration had conceived a plan to acquire California through peaceful means. Embracing intrigue and aggressive by intent, the scheme nonetheless recognized the desires of the native Californians, and thus need not have provoked conflict. The historians found to their dismay that Frémont's actions were not only unauthorized, but also unnecessary. Indeed, the Captain's blundering course had frustrated the success of the scheme to secure California by peaceful means. The mission the historians had uncovered was that of Thomas O. Larkin.[10]

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[9]As Allen Nevins argued, the Bear Flag Revolt "did not cost a dozen lives all told," p. 284. Soon after the American occupation, however, the native Californians rose in bloody revolt. The immediate cause of the revolt was Archibald Gillespie's inept, harsh administration of southern California. The ultimate responsibility nevertheless laid in Frémont's aggressive policy against the native Californians.

[10]Royce, pp. 133-141. Prior to 1886, historians had only a general notion of Larkin's mission. Royce and Bancroft established unquestionably that Larkin's mission was authorized by the administration. In 1878, J. S. Hittell first cast doubt over Frémont's role by charging that: "Everything was going smoothly with Larkin's plans when they were disturbed by the folly and insolence of Frémont." Quoted in John A. Hawgood, "John C. Frémont and the Bear Flag Revolution, A Reappraisal," University of Birmingham Historical Journal, VII (1959), 94-95.

A prominent American merchant of Monterey, Thomas O. Larkin was appointed, in 1843, United States Consul for California. Throughout his government career, Larkin labored for the peaceful acquisition of California by the United States. The Consul kept the administration well-informed of political and military affairs in California. He was an effective representative of the United States government, a respected leader of the American community in California and a man of considerable influence among the native Californians. By 1845 the Polk administration deemed his services sufficiently valuable to appoint him as a confidential agent of the President.[11] Consul Larkin was directed to encourage quietly but deliberately a movement of voluntary separation of California from Mexico and the eventual annexation of the province to the United States. To accomplish this task, Larkin was instructed to stimulate the separatist inclinations of the native Californians and to assure them of the support of the United States. The Consul eagerly undertook the sensitive assignment with his usual skill, discretion and determination. For a fleeting moment his mission showed hopeful prospects of securing California without bloodshed. Unfortunately, Captain Frémont appeared on the California landscape, wrecking the promise of the Larkin mission.

At the same time Frémont was being hailed as the "conqueror of California," Larkin's contributions remained unrecognized. Immediately after the conquest he was even forced to endure a personal attack in a St. Louis newspaper. But to later historians concerned with the

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[11]James Buchanan to Larkin, October 17, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 44-47.

morality of American expansion, including Royce and Bancroft, Larkin's course was easily more justifiable than the aggression of Frémont. Historians not only began to doubt Frémont's authorization and motives in the Bear Flag Revolt, but also to deny his importance in the conquest of California. Believing that Frémont had acted without proper authority, Royce and Bancroft bitterly castigated the motives and role of the famous explorer. Consul Larkin was now acclaimed as the man most responsible for the acquisition of California. Larkin's course, offered Bancroft, "was worthy of all praise, his statesmanship being incomparably superior to that of the opera-bouffe 'conquerors' of California."[12] With Hammond, Hawgood and other historians, the reaction against Frémont and lauding of Larkin carried into the twentieth century.[13]

The praise for Larkin's role by Royce, Bancroft and their followers was thus founded on reaction against the unauthorized, apparently unnecessary, aggressive course of Frémont. These historians, however, have been negligent in providing verification for their extravagant claims for Larkin. From their impassioned denunciation of Frémont, the suspicion arises that their high praise for Larkin emanated solely from a severe distaste for the course of the "gallant Captain." Neither Royce nor Bancroft attempted a systematic account of Larkin's

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[12]Bancroft, Vol. IV, p. 707.

[13]Some historians of course still defend Frémont. While admitting Frémont lacked authorization for his actions, Allen Nevins was generally sympathetic to the explorer. Ernest A. Wiltsee charged that Bancroft blurred the "facts" of the case; going so far as to imply that Bancroft carried a personal vendetta against Frémont. The Truth About Frémont: An Inquiry (San Francisco: John Henry Nash, 1936), pp. v-vi, 1-2. See also Richard R. Stenberg, "Polk and Frémont, 1845-1846," Pacific Historical Review, VII (September, 1938), 211-227.

career or role. The only biography of Larkin details his personal life but passes unknowingly over his role in the acquisition of California.[14] Larkin did not play as visible or dramatic a role as the mercurial Frémont. The Consul's role was more subtle, prosaic and of much longer duration; thus it is more difficult to describe, analyze and appreciate. To disclose the substance behind the unqualified claims for Larkin requires an examination of his pluralistic career as a successful businessman, consul and confidential agent of the United States in California. Larkin did not blunder blindly into the California situation, but had long been a part of the movement to acquire the Mexican province. He took an early interest in advancing the increasing American desire for California. Consul Larkin was directly involved in the Polk administration's plans to acquire California and played an active, significant role in bringing United States rule to the Pacific province.

Thomas O. Larkin served during a critical period of American expansion. By the decade of the 1840's, American interest and settlement in California generated an uncontrollable desire to possess the province. Advocates of American expansion had no trouble justifying their unabashed longing for Mexican territory. The indomitable spirit of manifest destiny enveloped the land and few could resist its unlimited promise. After all, had not the Mexican government demonstrated an utter inability to administer California properly? More ominously, the "despotic" governments of France and Great Britain were

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[14]Reuben L. Underhill, From Cowhides to Golden Fleece (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1939).

reported to be plotting the seizure of this "derelict on the Pacific." American expansionists deemed it necessary to "rescue" the territory from the benighted administration of Mexico and the clutching grasp of the European powers. The "free-born sons of the West" held an indisputable claim to the fertile valleys of California. Expansionist politicians—the "tub-thumpers for manifest destiny"—were determined that they should have it. Thomas O. Larkin was the conduit of American interest on the Pacific. From his own motives, he also wished California to join the American Union. Beginning with his appointment as consul, Larkin began to work discreetly but positively for the acquisition of California. The Consul's frequent, revealing reports to Washington and surreptitious activities in California were to influence heavily developments in the struggle with Mexico over possession of her northern provinces.

Born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on September 16, 1802, Thomas Oliver Larkin was bred of an old Bay State family. His English forebears had settled in New England in the seventeenth century. Regrettably few details are known of Larkin's early life. After the death of his father in 1808, the Larkin family remained in Charlestown for five years. Then, in 1813, the Larkin widow and her children moved to Lynn, Massachusetts.[15] In Lynn, Mrs. Larkin married Amariah Childs, a prosperous banker. From his foster father, Thomas O. Larkin received

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[15]Robert J. Parker, "A Chapter in the Early Life of Thomas Oliver Larkin," California Historical Society Quarterly, XVI (March, 1937), 3-4.

good treatment and his first instructions in business and commerce, the life blood of New England.[16]

Trained for the life of a businessman, young Larkin received only a moderate education. His letters of a more mature age reflect this deficiency in grammar and spelling, but demonstrate practical knowledge and sound business sense. At the age of fifteen, Larkin traveled to Boston to learn "the art of making books." The restless young man grew dissatisfied with book binding and found it to be a "poor business."[17] Thrown upon his own resources at sixteen (his mother died in 1818), the ambitious, youthful Yankee was determined to forge a place for himself in the expanding new nation.

With the sensible calculation he would display in his later career, Larkin realized that post-war, depression-ridden Boston offered a young man with no trade and limited means scant opportunity for success. Larkin decided the logical course was to pursue his future and seek his fortune in the developing areas of the country. Unlike many of his generation in similar circumstances, Larkin did not set out to the westward, but purposely headed south, to Wilmington, North Carolina. Dependent on agriculture, the South imported nearly all of its manufactured goods. In addition, many proud Southerners avoided the unattractive career of commerce. Many commercially-minded Yankees, including Larkin, were eager to serve as middlemen between

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[16]Robert J. Parker, "Larkin, Anglo-American Businessman in Mexican California." Greater America: Essays in Honor of Herbert Eugene Bolton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), p. 416.

[17]Thomas O. Larkin, "My Itinerary: U. S. America." In Robert J. Parker, "A Chapter in the Early Life of Thomas Oliver Larkin," California Historical Society Quarterly, XVI (June, 1937), 169.

the South and the outside world. In his travels through America in 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the South was full of northern businessmen:

> ...northerners are daily spreading over that part of the country [the South], where they have less competition to fear, there they discover which the inhabitants have not noticed...[18]

Expecting to discover ample business opportunities in the developing southern portion of the country, Larkin journeyed to Wilmington in October of 1821. Only nineteen years of age, Larkin established himself in the commerce of the area and for nearly ten years represented one of the Yankee merchants Tocqueville would later observe.

The ambitious young man's aspirations were only surpassed by his lack of experience. His initial business ventures were consequently not crowned with success. Quickly enough, Larkin secured a position as supercargo on a brig bound for Bermuda. An unscrupulous, drunken Captain, however, swindled Larkin out of his salary, commission and small cargo. Bouncing back from this temporary setback, Larkin opened a store with borrowed capital in Moore's Creek, North Carolina. Although this enterprise was not overly successful, he did manage to open a store in Wilmington and purchase a plantation of 280 acres. Larkin was more successful in social and political matters. Demonstrating that he had become a respected member of the North Carolina community, Larkin was appointed, at age twenty-three, Justice of the Peace and Justice of the Duplin County Court. As far as he knew,

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[18]Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 348.

Larkin was the only Yankee in the state to hold the position.[19] Later he was also appointed postmaster. Although not especially rewarding positions (he accepted the job of postmaster because he saved on postage), the official commissions satisfied Larkin's thirst for authority and position in society. In addition, they provided him valuable experience in the benefits and rigors of government service.

Thomas O. Larkin entered the alien (if not hostile) society of North Carolina with no advantages, little money and less experience. Although he had sharpened his business skills, his commercial ventures in North Carolina had survived but not prospered. Through tact and diplomacy, he had become a respected person of responsibility in the Southern society. A shrewd, aggressive Yankee merchant, Larkin nonetheless possessed the peculiar ability to ingratiate himself into an unfamiliar society. The most significant development of his North Carolina experience, however, was a marked change in his attitude. While on a visit to Boston in 1824, Larkin traveled through the state of New York. Compared to the hurried activity and spirit of enterprise he saw in New York, his native Massachusetts now appeared altogether too conservative. While the Massachusetts legislators debated if "fish have a right to the frog pond," Larkin spoofed, one day they would "find a branch of the Erie Canal running between them and their common."[20] His vision and ambition enhanced, Larkin had contracted the boosterism that was infecting young America.

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[19]Parker, "Early Life," (March, 1937), 6-10.

[20]Larkin, (June, 1937), 153.

Dissatisfied with his limited progress and suffering from ill-health, Larkin realized he would not grow rich in North Carolina.[21] To obtain the success he desired it was necessary to search elsewhere. For a time, he hoped to land a position in the Post Office Department and had a relative pressing his cause there. From distant Monterey, California, Larkin's half-brother, John B. R. Cooper wrote of his success as an owner of a Pacific coast trading vessel. Encouraged by the prospects of business opportunity in Mexican California, Larkin determined to head west if he should not obtain the Post Office position.[22] Realizing that California offered another ideal opportunity to an eager young merchant, Larkin was nevertheless not overly anxious to relocate in California. Unsure and hesitant, Larkin confessed he would "rather be under Uncle Sam than in Mexico."[23] When the Post Office position was not forthcoming, however, Larkin had little choice. On September 5, 1831, he began the long, arduous trip to California via Cape Horn.[24] The difficult journey was lightened by the expectations of beginning anew in the strange land of California. As if to fulfill the hopes of a new start, Larkin met his future wife, Rachel, on board the ship. In April 1832, he landed at Yerba Buena and moved on to

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[21]Parker, "Early Life," (March, 1937), 4.

[22]Larkin to Ebenezer Larkin Childs, May, 1831. Robert J. Parker, "Thomas Oliver Larkin in 1831: A Letter from North Carolina," California Historical Society Quarterly, XVI (September, 1937), 269.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Parker, "Early Life," (March, 1937), 4.

Monterey. At twenty-nine years of age, Larkin hoped to gain his fortune and return to the East in a few short years to enjoy his well-earned wealth and achievement.[25]

Monterey Bay provided sailors and merchants a welcome haven. For nearly the entire length of its twenty miles of open, sandy roadstead, the depth of the bay provided anchorage near the shore. Point Pinos warded off storms from the south and southwest, insuring a safe anchorage. Monterey offered further advantages for Pacific coast trade. The Mexican government kept its customhouse here and Monterey was the seat of the provincial government.[26] From the late eighteenth-century, American trading vessels had hailed the California ports. New England ships anchored here to collect sea otter skins to carry to China and hide and tallow to bring to the factories of Massachusetts. Whalers and other vessels landed here to obtain supplies for their endless voyages.[27] Now in 1832, one more New Englander arrived in Monterey. This one did not come to fill his water casks or to exchange manufactured goods for fresh provisions. Thomas O. Larkin disembarked to establish himself in the commercial center of the Pacific trade.

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[25]Ruth Childs to Larkin, September 14, 1843. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 45; Ebenezer Larkin Childs to Larkin, October 21, 1843. Ibid., p. 49.

[26]Norman A. Graebner, Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), pp. 56-57.

[27]Robert Glass Cleland, The Early Sentiment for the Annexation of California: An Account of the Growth of American Interest in California, 1835-1846 (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1915), pp. 3-5.

Larkin quickly realized that Monterey afforded an uncommon opportunity for achieving his life-long goals of independent wealth and a respected position in society. Apart from the sporadic trading visits of various sailing vessels, the economy of Mexican California was largely undeveloped. Her merchants had not taken full advantage of the commercial possibilities.[28] Larkin employed his hard-earned business skills and made rapid progress. He opened a store in Monterey with five hundred dollars in borrowed funds. At first Larkin sold general merchandise, specializing in the much-prized commodity of liquor. His stocks increased as fast as his business connections multiplied. Soon he had built an extensive trading relationship throughout the Pacific, dealing with the merchants in all the major ports, expecially Oahu and Mazatlán. Larkin's chief articles of trade included sea otter skins and the cowhides that bolstered the California economy and powered the leather factories of old Massachusetts. He made considerable profits by supplying the whaling ships of New England and the occasional naval vessels of the United States and other nations.[29] Later he built California's first double-geared flour mill

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[28]Parker, "Anglo-American Businessman," pp. 416-417.

[29]As consul, Larkin repeatedly requested that United States naval vessels visit the California coast. Larkin to Calhoun, June 24, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 145; Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Ibid., p. 206. By furnishing supplies and naval stores, Larkin stood to profit by these visits. Other American citizens on the Pacific coast, however, also regarded a United States naval presence important. Atherton to Larkin, August 10, 1843. Ibid., pp. 31-33; John Coffin Jones to Larkin, September 4, 1844. Ibid., p. 215.

and expanded into the lumber business.[30] By 1843 Larkin had built a substantial business and personal fortune. He was perhaps the best known and most influential merchant on the California coast. In his business career at least, Thomas O. Larkin had achieved full success.

Along with success in business, Larkin became a respected member of Californian society. Through his business dealings he came to have close personal contact with many native Californians and foreigners. John A. Sutter, John Marsh, Juan Alvarado and Mariano G. Vallejo knew and respected the Yankee merchant. Larkin displayed the same tact and conviviality that had proved successful in North Carolina. By no means did he demonstrate the arrogant contempt that many Americans felt toward those of Spanish ancestry and the Catholic religion. Certainly he held intolerant (if not racist) views, but he kept these to himself. The proud Yankee respected the rights and sensibilities of the native Californians.[31] Easily he became the most highly-regarded American living in California.

Still, partly through his own wishes, Larkin remained set apart from the native Californians. Foreigners, especially Americans, were not fully accepted into the California mainstream. From the first, native Californians detected the Americans' disdainful air of superiority. The Californians were wary of the ever-present threat American

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[30]Parker, "Anglo-American Businessman," pp. 417-424. For additional information on Larkin's business career, see the following articles by Robert J. Parker: "Larkin's Monterey Customers," Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly, XXIV (June, 1942), 41-53; "Larkin's Monterey Business: Articles of Trade, 1833-1839," Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly, XXIV (June, 1942), 54-62.

[31]Bancroft, Vol. IV, p. 706.

expansion posed to their government and society. Many of California's citizens, including the richest and most powerful, came to be indebted to Larkin at one time or another. The shrewd merchant's closeness in business affairs was not likely to endear him to many of the native Californians.[32]

Some Americans had married into Californian families and adopted Spanish names and Mexican citizenship. Larkin remained an American citizen. His refusal to adopt Mexican citizenship was prompted by Yankee pride as well as his intention to return eventually to the United States.[33] By failing to adopt Mexican citizenship, however, Larkin could not obtain readily available land grants. Cleverly, Larkin obtained large land grants through his children's names (considered Mexican citizens due to their birth in California). In addition, he secured large blocks of land by purchasing them from the original grantees for a fraction of their potential value.[34] Among Larkin's business pursuits must be numbered extensive land speculation.

For the first ten years of his residence in California, Larkin concentrated on building his financial fortune. By 1843 his personal wealth was worth nearly fifty thousand dollars, considered a huge sum in underdeveloped California. During these years Larkin had played no

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[32]Ibid.

[33]To obtain Mexican citizenship one needed only to request it. Larkin received a carta de seguridad which allowed him to remain in the country. This was renewed each year.

[34]The "Children's Rancho" totalled 44,470 acres on the Sacramento River. Another Larkin land holding near Sonoma included 1500 acres. Parker, "Anglo-American Businessman," pp. 423-424.

open, active role in the politics of California.[35] Once he had achieved a level of financial prominence, Larkin desired a greater part in the political future of California. At the same time, California was becoming an ever-growing point of contention between Mexico and the United States. Inevitably, Thomas O. Larkin was drawn into the unfolding contest.

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[35]Bancroft, Vol. IV, p. 706.

CHAPTER II

AN AMERICAN CONSUL IN CALIFORNIA

American interest in the Mexican province of Alta California began long before the onset of the war with Mexico. For nearly five decades New England trading vessels plied the long coast of California. As direct trade between the two coasts on opposite sides of the continent increased in value and importance, a close commercial relationship developed between New England and California. Merchants and commercially-influenced politicians of New England were concerned about the future of California and her excellent ports. Monterey, San Diego and San Francisco were considered valuable waystations on the trade route to China, while the harbor of San Francisco was acclaimed "capacious enough to receive the navies of all the world."[36] If only the United States controlled the California ports she could dominate the rich Pacific trade. To acquire the ports on the Pacific became a cherished project of the United States government.[37]

Andrew Jackson attempted prematurely to purchase California from Mexico—but the old hero's heart was in Texas, not San Francisco. Jackson hoped to alleviate northeastern opposition to annexation by

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[36]Waddy Thompson to Daniel Webster, April 29, 1842. Robert Glass Cleland, "Asiatic Trade and American Occupation of the Pacific Coast," Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1914, Vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), p. 287.

[37]On the relationship between New England and California, see Cleland, Early Sentiment, 3-5. Norman Graebner believes merchantile interests "determined the course of empire." Empire on the Pacific, p. vi. For a critique of the Graebner thesis, see Zwelling, Expansion and Imperialism.

presenting them the "capacious port."[38] Not surprisingly, Jackson's efforts were in vain. Mexico had recently endured the Texas Revolution. The troubled, infant republic never was reconciled to the loss of Texas and was certainly in no mood to discuss the alienation of any additional territory to the growing "Colossus of the North."[39] Without the inducement of California, northern opposition blockaded the annexation of Texas for another decade.

In the early 1840's, the Tyler administration revived Jackson's unsuccessful efforts. Daniel Webster, the champion of northeastern commercial interests, was in the vanguard of the movement to acquire California. As Tyler's Secretary of State until 1843, Webster worked for the acquisition of California. He considered the port of San Francisco to be twenty times more valuable than Texas.[40] Webster's desire for California was stimulated by a report from Waddy Thompson in Mexico City. The United States Minister to Mexico regarded California "the richest, the most beautiful, the healthiest country in the world."[41] In April, 1842, Thompson believed Mexico might cede "Texas and the Californias" to the United States.[42] Webster's interest

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[38]Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 16.

[39]On Mexican attitudes towards the United States, see Gene M. Brack, Mexico Views Manifest Destiny, 1821-1846: An Essay on the Origins of the Mexican War (Alburquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975).

[40]Webster to Fletcher Webster, March 11, 1845. Fletcher Webster, ed., The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster, Vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1857), p. 204.

[41]Thompson to Webster, April 29, 1842. Cleland, "Asiatic Trade," p. 287.

[42]Ibid. Thompson's inclusion of Texas was notable. The United States, of course, had recognized Texas as an independent republic.

was aroused, but he cautioned Thompson not to appear too anxious. He directed Thompson to sound out the Mexican government on the possibility of a transfer of California in return for the cancellation of Mexican debts to the United States. The Secretary observed that the acquisition of San Francisco was the primary objective, but "the Province would naturally accompany the Port." "The cession must be spoken of," Webster advised, "rather as a convenience to Mexico, as a mode of discharging her debts."[43] Mexico ungratefully declined Webster's offer.

American interest in California was not limited to sailors, merchants and politicians of commercial areas. Agrarian expansionists naturally were attracted to the fertile valleys of California. The agrarian interests of the western United States were drawn initially to Oregon. The United States held at least some claims to the Oregon country south of the Columbia. American expansionists claimed the rest by right of manifest destiny. Settlement in California was more uncertain and consequently lagged behind emigration to Oregon. After all, California was still in Mexican hands. Most Americans believed that this was only a temporary arrangement and that Mexico held California at the pleasure of the United States. For now, the province was in safekeeping—out of the reach of the greedy European powers. Eventually, American expansionists would claim their natural right to California. In 1840-1841, American emigration to California, heretofore barely a trickle, began to increase steadily.[44] The agrarian

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[43]Webster to Thompson, June 27, 1842. The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster, Vol. XIV: Speeches in Congress and Diplomatic Papers (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1903), pp. 611-612.

[44]Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 24.

nationalists had set their sights on California. In time, their spokesmen would come to power and direct the acquisition of California in their name.

Escalating American interest in California prompted recommendations for the appointment of a United States Consul for the province. The volume of American commerce in California long justified the establishment of a consulate. Appointments to the post had been named in 1833 and again in 1837.[45] But the position was not an attractive one. Office-seekers hardly considered it a "patronage plum." The office carried no salary—the only renumeration was in the form of fees. California was an unknown, alien land, laying at the end of a long, difficult voyage. It was no surprise that none of the appointees ever reached their distant posts. American trade, settlement and interest in California continued to mount. Increasing tensions between American citizens and the Mexican government prompted new calls for a consul to be named. Finally, an embarrassing, but revealing incident in 1842 demonstrated that the appointment of a consul for California could no longer be postponed.

In April, 1840, a motley group—the majority of whom were American citizens—were ordered arrested by the governor of California, Juan Alvarado. The band's leader, Issac Graham—a disreputable former fur trapper—was suspected of plotting rebellion against the government

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[45]Hammond, Vol. I, p. xiv.

of California.[46] Graham and forty of his followers were sent to Mexico in shackles. This "outrage" on American citizens angered their fellow countrymen and further soured relations with Mexico. Powhatan Ellis, the United States Minister to Mexico, advised the President to appoint a consul at Monterey—"so that our countrymen in case of future difficulty may have some one present to protect them."[47] Ellis suggested Thomas O. Larkin for the office. Larkin, Ellis recommended, was a suitable person of "good sense and great respectability."

The Minister's suggestion for the appointment of a consul was well-received, but Larkin was not selected to fill the position. Over the next three years, three men were appointed to posts in either Monterey or San Francisco. None accepted the office.[48] In April, 1842, Waddy Thompson, the successor to Ellis as United States Minister to Mexico, again impressed on the administration the need for a consul in Monterey.[49] Still the post was left vacant. Before

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[46]Alvarado had good reason to suspect Graham. In 1836, Graham had aided Alvarado in deposing the governor sent from the central government. John Walton Caughey, California (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940) pp. 196, 245-246. See also Royce, p. 28; Cleland, Early Sentiment, pp. 22-23. From all indications the charge was well-founded but the arrest illegal. With British help, the prisoners eventually were released. Graham and a dozen or so others returned to California.

[47]Powhatan Ellis to John Forsyth, Secretary of State, February 25, 1841. William R. Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860, Vol. VIII: Mexico, 1831-1848 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1937), p. 475.

[48]Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 11, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 92.

[49]James Morton Callahan, American Foreign Policy in Mexican Relations (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1932), p. 147. Callahan was mistaken in assuming Larkin was appointed as a result of the suggestion of Ellis.

another appointment could be made, an international incident occurred in California that left the United States in an awkward position. The result was strained relations with both Mexico and Great Britain. The incident abruptly terminated Waddy Thompson's hopes of acquiring California through negotiation.[50] It also hastened the appointment of a consul at Monterey, California.

The actions of Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones dramatically spelled out American intentions for California. Jones was the commander of the United States Pacific Squadron. His orders were to protect the growing American commercial interests in the Pacific. In the event these interests were threatened, Jones was directed to "act with the decision and firmness becoming the situation."[51] In September, 1842, the Pacific squadron was anchored at Callao, Peru. Jones had not received word from the Department of the Navy for nine months. At Lima, the Commodore reviewed dispatches sent by John Parrott, United States Consul at Mazatlan.[52] Parrott reported that relations with Mexico had deteriorated and that he thought war was "highly probable."[53]

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[50]Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk (New York: Johns Hopkins Press, 1907; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), p. 103.

[51]George M. Brooke, Jr., "The Vest Pocket War of Commodore Jones," Pacific Historical Review, XXXI (August, 1962), 218-219.

[52]Jones discussed the dispatches with J. C. Pickett, American chargé d' affaires at Lima. Ibid., p. 221.

[53]In May, 1842, the Mexican Foreign Minister denounced American influence in Texas in a circular letter to his diplomatic corps. In response, Waddy Thompson defended the American role in Texas. The publication of these angry exchanges in Mexican newspapers created the impression that war was imminent. Callahan, pp. 138-139; David M. Pletcher, The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), p. 87.

Alarmed by the report of war and other rumors that Britain had purchased California, Jones hurried to Callao to ready his ships for sailing. On his arrival, Jones learned the British squadron had suspiciously slipped out to sea. Certain that war had been declared, the Commodore was now convinced the British Navy was sailing to California to take possession of the province. Jones believed his course was clearly marked. He steered his squadron straight for California. Landing parties were readied. Commodore Jones intended to occupy California before the British.[54]

As he entered the harbor on October 19, Jones was relieved to discover there were no British sails in Monterey Bay. The most prominent American in the town, Thomas O. Larkin, boarded the flagship and asked the Commodore who had declared war. Jones replied that the declaration was "conditional" on the part of Mexico. Larkin doubted this and told the Commodore so. He had seen recent Mexican newspapers "which made no mention of any difficulties whatever between the two countries."[55] Larkin, however, could not produce the newspapers. Jones directed him to locate them. Meanwhile, the Commodore went ahead with his plans to seize the port.

Early the next morning, Larkin returned to serve as interpreter for the Mexican representatives negotiating the surrender of Monterey. The merchant repeated his doubts that war had been declared, but confessed he had been unable to obtain the necessary proof. To the

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[54]Brooke, pp. 221-225. War of course had not been declared and there was no "race" to California.

[55]Ibid., p. 228.

impatient Commodore, Larkin's actions may have seemed suspicious; rumors said that Mexican troops were approaching the town. Jones was undeterred—the American flag was raised over Monterey.[56]

During the occupation of the town, several bundles of Mexican newspapers and private letters were found in the office of one of the Mexican representatives.[57] These documents confirmed Larkin's doubts. War did not exist. Faced with this disconcerting news, Jones acted promptly. He hauled down the United States flag and returned the town to the Californians. No one had been injured in "Commodore Jones' War." Larkin and Jones hosted banquets to cover the Americans' embarrassment. The remarkable affair nonetheless had strained American relations with the native Californians.

Jones had not acted with specific instructions from the United States government. The eager Commodore simply overreacted to incomplete information. More than anything else, the affair merely reflected the inadequate, troublesome state of communications in the far-flung Pacific region. The affair nevertheless revealed American intentions for California. As Josiah Royce concluded, the seizure of Monterey was "a betrayal of our national feeling...if not our national plans..."[58] With hardly a hint of war, Americans jumped to seize the defenseless province. No one ignored the valuable lesson. Mexico—if she needed anymore evidence—grew more wary of American expansionist aims. Great Britain was also forewarned. Soon after the end of the "Jones affair,"

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[56]Bancroft, Vol. IV, pp. 307, 310; Brooke, p. 228.

[57]Brooke, p. 231.

[58]Royce, p. 50.

the commander of the British Pacific Squadron visited the Mexican coast. To better watch developments, Britain also established a vice-consulate at Monterey.[59]

The Jones affair brought Thomas O. Larkin fully into the center of the controversy over California. His determination to acquire a larger role in the political future of California was fixed. Larkin was persuaded that California could not long continue in its present state and that the brief American occupation had brought badly-needed order to an unstable region. Commodore Jones' seizure of Monterey convinced Larkin that it was only a matter of time before the United States acquired California.[60] The Jones affair also prompted Larkin to begin his correspondence with the Eastern press, a correspondence that would have important results. In Washington, the episode illustrated the risks in not having an American representative in California. An American official could have advised Jones of the actual state of affairs. The stakes in California were increasing every day. More than ever, the United States needed a trusted representative in the Mexican province.

The Department of State had attempted unsuccessfully to fill the unoccupied post at Monterey. Despite his qualifications (and the

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[59]Pletcher, p. 101. Despite Mexico's demands, Jones was recalled but not officially censured. He was quickly given another command. Brooke, p. 233.

[60]Larkin to James Gordon Bennett, February 10, 1843. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 8-9; Larkin to Faxon Dean Atherton, (undated but endorsed: "Affair in Monterey...October 20-21, 1842"), Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 119-122.

generous recommendation of Powhatan Ellis, the United States Minister to Mexico), Thomas O. Larkin was not among the administration's top choices. The Jones debacle, however, demonstrated that the appointment could no longer be delayed by nominees who did not show up at their post. Larkin's chief asset was that he was already present at Monterey and more than willing to accept the job. Unlike the previous appointees, Larkin was eagerly seeking the position. His cousin and stepbrother, Ebenezer Larkin Childs, held a position in the Post Office Department. Ten years earlier, Childs had tried to wrangle a Post Office appointment for Larkin. Now he was pressing for Larkin's nomination as consul.[61] Larkin had a further advantage—he was still a United States citizen. American public opinion (and office-seekers) demanded that only United States citizens be selected to fill American posts in foreign countries.[62]

Larkin's political loyalties had little to do with his nomination. Although he considered himself a Whig, American political divisions were meaningless in Mexican California.[63] The Tyler administration

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[61]Childs received his appointment under Andrew Jackson but survived the transition to Whig rule. Parker, "Larkin in 1831," p. 270. Childs made sure Larkin recognized his contribution. He solicited a sizeable personal loan of one thousand dollars from the newly-appointed consul. Larkin complied with the request. Childs to Larkin, August 12; October 21; December 26, 1843; March 29, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 33; 49; 61; 86.

[62]"There are insuperable objections to the appointment of any but American Citizens to Foreign Consulates..." James Buchanan to George C. Leiper, October 24, 1845. John Bassett Moore, ed., The Works of James Buchanan, Vol. VI: 1844-1846 (New York: Antiquarian Press Ltd., 1960), p. 283.

[63]Alfred Robinson to Larkin, June 30, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 159. Larkin retained his office even when the Jacksonian, James K. Polk, came to the Presidency.

was not primarily concerned with Larkin's politics. What political services could he perform in faraway California? Perhaps more helpful was that Larkin's uncle was an old friend of Daniel Webster.[64] The Secretary of State resigned his wearisome office on May 9, 1843, without achieving one of his favorite projects—the acquisition of California. Before leaving, however, Webster was able to secure the nomination of a fellow Bay Stater to the vital post at Monterey. On May 1, 1843, Thomas O. Larkin was appointed by President Tyler United States Consul at Monterey, California.[65]

Despite the circumstances of his appointment, Larkin was easily the most qualified person for the sensitive position. The prosperous merchant was a highly-regarded member of the California community. The Californians respected his ability, tact and hospitality. To them he was not just another aggressive American but a fellow resident and neighbor. In addition, Larkin felt a sincere interest in the well-being of the troubled province. The new Consul's extensive business connections were equally beneficial. Merchants were at the center of affairs on the Pacific coast. To keep abreast of the latest political and economic developments was essential to their business. Through their correspondence they were constantly on top of events.

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[64]Childs to Larkin, December 26, 1843. Ibid., p. 61.

[65]This was an ad interim appointment. Larkin's regular appointment was made on January 29, 1844 and his nomination was confirmed by the Senate and forwarded to Monterey on February 3, 1844. For the official documents, see ibid., pp. 358-362, 75. Hammond attributes Larkin's appointment to the "reports of travelers and traders and the help of friends in Washington," and especially Child's "persistent efforts," Vol. II, p. vii; Vol. I, p xiv. All this was undoubtedly true. But the deciding factor was that Larkin was already located at Monterey and prepared to undertake the job.

From the first, Larkin had a ready source of usually reliable information. His business connections also gave him first-hand knowledge of the Californians' business affairs and the government's financial difficulties. The new American Consul was sensitive to the Californians' problems and rights. But he was also anxiously awaiting the coming of United States rule.

The first, last and only American consulate in California opened at Monterey on April 2, 1844. The consulate was barren of necessary supplies. It lacked books, official stationary and seal, and an American "flag or Coat of Arms"—difficult items to obtain in California.[66] The newly appointed Consul was thus at first primarily occupied with arranging these details as well as his personal and business affairs. He solicited advice and the latest news from friends and business associates.[67] The Consul requested the Department of State to forward the required supplies and also to provide instructions to guide his conduct in the new position. With an efficient, businesslike attitude, Larkin undertook his assignment with skill, purpose and determination.

The Department of State deemed American interests in California sufficiently vital to appoint Albert M. Gilliam consul at San Francisco.[68] The Consul at Monterey hurriedly informed the Department

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[66]Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 10; April 11, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 91; 92.

[67]Larkin to Waddy Thompson, April 16, 1844. Ibid., p. 95.

[68]Gilliam was appointed on January 9, 1844. Bancroft, Vol. IV, p. 450.

of its error—Monterey was the only authorized port of entry in California. Foreign vessels were obligated to anchor at Monterey first to pay the necessary import duties. By special permission of the California government, vessels could later trade at San Francisco. Like many California practices, this was not sanctioned by Mexico City. Larkin advised that no consul was required at San Francisco and requested his appointment be adjusted.[69] Gilliam saved the Department of State the trouble—he resigned his commission. Larkin's consular jurisdiction now extended halfway to the nearest United States Consulate, at Mazatlán, hundreds of miles down the west coast of Mexico. The new Consul was responsible to serve American citizens and protect American interests for over a thousand miles of territory. Perhaps Larkin did not foresee the potential responsibility of his post. Barely over a year later he found it "of sufficient importance to the American commercial interest" to appoint William A. Leidesdorff his vice-consul at San Francisco.[71]

The new Consul's most vital duty was to inform the Department of State of the important political, economic and military developments

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[69]Larkin to John C. Calhoun, June 24, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 145.

[70]Due to Larkin's information, the Department decided not to make another appointment. Richard K. Cralle to Larkin, October 25, 1844. Ibid., p. 262.

[71]Larkin to Leidesdorff, October 29, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 73. Larkin was uncertain that he held this authority, but he went ahead anyway. He requested José Castro, the military governor of California, to approve his action until instructions could be received from Washington and Mexico City. Larkin to José Castro, October 30, 1845. Ibid., p. 76. The war rendered the question meaningless. Ibid., p. vii.

within his area of influence. From the first, Larkin recognized the overriding importance of his role as observer. During his first year in office he forwarded nearly twenty reports to the Department of State.[72] As American interest in California deepened, and relations between Mexico and the United States worsened, Larkin's role as observer took on critical importance.

Most of the Consul's official time was nevertheless devoted to more mundane matters. Larkin had certain official dealings with the Mexican authorities, such as obtaining passports for the growing number of American immigrants. The Consul was also responsible for the care of sick or destitute American sailors and for lodging and entertaining visiting dignitaries and naval officers. Although not official duties of a United States consul, Larkin invariably became embroiled in marriage, divorce and other family quarrels.[73]

Many of these additional duties involved added, aggravating expenses. The situation was made more difficult by the fact that the position carried no salary. The only compensation Larkin received was in the form of small fees earned for particular services, such as granting passports or validating sailing papers. In some cases, Larkin allowed even these meager fees to pass.[74] As a result, the total fees

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[72]Larkin to John Marsh, August 19, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 32. Indicative of the lack of appreciation for Larkin's role is Robert J. Parker's claim that "Larkin's most important consular duty was to protect the men engaged in United States commerce," (referring to sick and destitute sailors), "Anglo-American Businessman," p. 425.

[73]On Larkin's more routine duties, see Underhill, pp. 87-91.

[74]Larkin claimed to not insist on his fee in the case of poorer individuals or to maintain friendly relations with others. Larkin to Leidesdorff, December 6, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 41.

Larkin collected were indeed scanty. For example, one six month period yielded a total of only sixty-four dollars. At the most, Larkin could expect to collect about three hundred dollars for a full year.[75]

Unsettling for a businessman like Larkin, the fees did not cover the attendant expenses of the office. The Consul was obliged to send frequent, detailed reports to Washington, but postage ran to fifty cents per sheet. In addition, many times it was necessary to have his correspondence copied or translated into Spanish. Abandoned sailors left in his care required food, lodging and clothes. The balls Larkin hosted on the Fourth of July and for visiting United States naval officers consumed any residue of the fees.[76] In Washington, traditional American beliefs of frugality in government imposed a penny-pinching policy and many of Larkin's receipts and vouchers were disallowed. The Consul at Monterey was in a financial position to assume the added costs of the office, but he was angered at the rejection of what he considered legitimate expenses. Finally, Larkin's patriotism was severely tested when the Department of State forced him to pay for his own flag.[77]

Still the consular post held valued attractions for the prosperous merchant. The office provided definite advantages for Larkin's Monterey-based business. Through his diplomatic correspondence Larkin

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[75]Larkin to the Secretary of State, June 30, 1845. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 254-255. Larkin to F. M. Dimond, March 1, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 216.

[76]Larkin to Dimond, March 1, 1846. Ibid. Larkin cut some corners by supplying the sailors from his own stores.

[77]Ibid.

received the latest, most accurate political, diplomatic and military information. The office of United States Consul brought added attention and respect to the leading merchant of California. This increased his customers and business contacts, benefiting his already lucrative enterprises. Certainly Larkin's interest in the consular position included motives of personal financial gain.

Just as certainly, however, economic considerations did not stand alone. With success in business assured, Larkin sought challenge and further success in other areas. Shortly after receiving the appointment, Larkin turned over daily operation of his business to his able assistant and partner, Talbot H. Green.[78] The Consul sought and held his position because it fulfilled his ever-present desire for a respected station in society. Larkin admitted he held the office not for the sake of fees, but "for security of property and because its an honourable one."[79] Since the Jones affair in October, 1842, Larkin desired a larger role in California's political future. The position of United States Consul gave him the gratifying feeling of being involved in momentous events. It also gave him the unique opportunity of serving both his native country and adopted home. Consul Larkin expected to help bring United States rule to California—a goal he considered in the best interest of the restless province.

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[78]Larkin, of course, retained full personal control and his share in the profits of the business. Larkin and Green Agreement, May 16, 1843. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 15.

[79]Larkin to Leidesdorff, December 6, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 41-42. Larkin's reference to "security of property" may indicate he hoped his position would secure his business and land-holdings when the transition to United States rule occurred.

Larkin undoubtedly gained the greatest satisfaction from his role as the administration's observer in California. The Monterey Consul occupied an especially critical post; his periodic reports were the administration's only reliable source of first-hand information on California. Recognizing this, Larkin put great effort and care into preparing his reports and took pride in presenting the most accurate information available. Usually he verified reports before relaying them to Washington. But he was not always this cautious or entirely correct.

With no prior direction, Larkin understood which subjects most concerned Washington. Reports on American emigration to California were naturally expected. Information on American trade in California was considered routine. From the first, however, Larkin offered additional, unsolicited information. In the light of troubled Mexican-American relations, this information was highly provocative. For instance, Larkin emphasized the dissatisfaction of native Californians for chaotic Mexican rule. The Consul assured Washington that the native Californians were friendly toward Americans. Larkin also reported the dismal state of defense preparations in California. Further, Larkin concentrated on Washington's favorite topic—European schemes in California.[80] By telling the administration what it wanted to hear, Larkin exerted an important influence on deteriorating relations with Mexico.

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[80]Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 16, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 96; Larkin to Calhoun, August 18; September 16, 1844. Ibid., pp. 204-205; 228-230. Larkin to Calhoun, January 1; June 6, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 1-2; 227. For a general discussion see Cleland, Early Sentiment, pp. 39-40, 72-73.

Larkin's reports were received with great interest in Washington. Anxious for information of California, the Department of State and ultimately the President carefully considered Larkin's reports. The Consul was not rebuked for touching sensitive issues. Rather, the Department assured him his reports were "of an important and interesting character." "It is earnestly hoped," wrote the Acting Secretary, "that you will continue to report to the Department... especially if your communications can be made subservient to, or may effect the interest and well being of our Government."[81] The administration did not specify what was meant by "the interest and well being of our Government." It did not have to. Larkin's reports envisioned only one inescapable prospect—the eventual acquisition of California.

Tyler's last Secretary of State, John C. Calhoun, took office on April 1, 1844.[82] Like his perpetual rival Daniel Webster, Calhoun recognized the commercial potential of California. He directed Duff Green (officially the United States Consul at Galveston, but who was also Calhoun's secret representative in Mexico), once again to propose to Mexico the cession of California. "If you succeed in this negotiation," Calhoun instructed, "our commerce in the Pacific will, in a few years, be greatly more valuable than that in the Atlantic."[83] Calhoun was primarily concerned with Texas—a potential slave state. But he

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[81]Richard K. Crallé to Larkin, October 25, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 262.

[82]Abel Parker Upshur served from May, 1843 to March, 1844. He was killed on the explosion aboard the Princeton.

[83]Graebner, p. 71.

clearly grasped the importance of the Pacific coast for American commerce. Secretary Calhoun was anxious to secure the acquisition of California as well as Texas.[84]

Calhoun soon had good reason to appreciate Larkin's information from California. In March, 1844, John C. Frémont's second expedition (and first illegal intrusion into Mexican territory), arrived at Sutter's Fort on the Sacramento River. Sutter reported to Consul Larkin that Frémont and his party "arrived here in distress, having been forced to deviate from his course on account of deep snows, loss of Animals and want of Provisions."[85] Captain Sutter assumed Frémont's arrival was "accidental," but reported Frémont was returning direct for the United States. Larkin forwarded Sutter's letter and additional information to Washington and thus provided direct news of Frémont long before the expedition returned.[86] Secretary Calhoun appreciated the "interesting information" of the expedition's arrival in California, submitted it to the Secretary of War for his perusal and ordered the letter published.[87]

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[84] Pletcher, p. 212; Samuel Flagg Bemis, ed., The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy, Vol. V (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1928; reprint ed., New York: Pageant Book Company, 1958), pp. 201-202.

[85] Sutter to Larkin, March 28, 1844, Hammond, Vol. II, p. 85.

[86] Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 12, 1844. Ibid., p. 94; Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, eds., The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont, Vol. I: Travels from 1838 to 1844 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 653n.

[87] Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Hammond Vol. II, p. 207. Larkin's letter was published in several papers. Atherton to Larkin, February 11, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 34.

An event in 1844 aptly demonstrates the Tyler administration's reliance on Larkin's information from California. The episode reflected the ironic, erratic course of Mexican American relations and foreshadowed subsequent, more important developments. On August 18, 1844, Larkin sent a report to the Secretary of State and the American Legation in Mexico City. The Consul reported that the Mexican Collector of the Port of Monterey had issued a new directive concerning whaling ships—most of which were American vessels. For decades, whalers had landed at California ports after long, difficult voyages. There they obtained fresh provisions in exchange for a small amount of cargo and the Californians received much-needed manufactured goods for their products. The new directive would end this beneficial arrangement. Whalers would be forced to enter their entire cargo and pay the full tonnage duties. Needless to say, this would impose added hardships on the whaling vessels. Worst of all, the six months advance notice would not be enough time to warn many of the ships already at sea, for months on end. As Larkin warned, ships would anchor with needy men on board only to be confronted with the new decree. The Consul hoped the American Legation could persuade the Mexican Government to rescind the order.[88]

The Tyler administration gleefully seized this news and used it in its raging skirmish with Mexico over Texas annexation. Locked in a bitter partisan battle, the administration employed Larkin's

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[88]Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 207. Larkin to the Minister of the Legation of the United States, December 10, 1843. Ibid., p. 313.

information to illustrate Mexico's belligerent stance. In a special message to Congress on December 18, 1844, Tyler remonstrated on the unwarranted animosity of Mexico. Among Tyler's self-righteous denunciations was Larkin's report of the whaling order:

> Still further to manifest her unfriendly feelings toward the United States, she [Mexico]...now denies to those of our citizens prosecuting the whale fishery on the northwest coast of the Pacific, the privilege, which has through all time been accorded to them, of exchanging goods of a small amount in value at her ports in California for supplies indispensable to their health and comfort.[89]

Communications between California and Washington moved slower than an old coasting brig. Larkin's report could not have reached Washington before late October.[90] On the nineteenth of the same month, however, the Mexican Governor of California, Michaltorena, retracted the order respecting whalers. The Governor probably realized the order harmed Californians as much as the American vessels. Larkin, who traded with the whalers, may have used his influence with the Governor to persuade him to rescind the decree. In any case, Larkin delayed reporting the retraction until mid-December.[91] The Consul never dreamed the administration would use the information in such a weighty matter as the contest with Mexico. Larkin had just taken up his duties

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[89]James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, Vol. V (New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897), p. 2208.

[90]Mail between California and the East usually traveled across Mexico from Mazatlán to Vera Cruz. The quickest delivery that could be expected was sixty days, but most times it was longer. Mail from Washington to California took even longer, sometimes over six months. Indeed, in some cases mail never did reach its destination.

[91]Larkin to Calhoun, December 12, 1844, Hammond, Vol. II, p. 322. This report was not received until March 17, 1845.

as consul and probably only reported the incident to demonstrate his efficiency. Had he reported the change immediately, the message nevertheless could not have reached Washington in time. At nearly the same instant Larkin was writing of the change (by now almost two months old), the President's indignant message was on its way to Congress.

This forgotten incident was only a minor episode in the expansionist campaign against Mexico. But it anticipated later, more serious events. The Consul at Monterey witnessed a development potentially harmful to American interests in California. Larkin believed the information sufficiently important to at least relay it to Washington. Traveling a long, uncertain route, the news did not reach Washington until the situation in California had already changed. The administration, however, regarded Larkin's information as current, reliable, and what was more—useful. Washington was more than anxious to use the Consul's information to suit its own purposes. Although the information was long since obsolete, the result was further deterioration of relations between the two combatants in the struggle over Texas. Larkin's influence was not limited to California affairs. His reports became inextricably bound up in the entire expansionist campaign. Larkin's reports from California further stiffened the expansionists' determination to gratify their demands against Mexico.

CHAPTER III

PLAYING THE TEXAS GAME

American interest in California was stimulated by encouraging reports of the economic potential of the province. Maritime expansionists were attracted to California's excellent ports, agrarian expansionists to her fertile valleys. To American entrepreneurs (which included virtually the entire population), California possessed obvious commercial, agricultural and mineral potential. Under Mexican rule, however, the province was economically stagnant. Much of California's economic life depended on foreign shipping and trade--increasingly dominated by Americans. Expansionists blamed Mexico's inability to develop the rich province on "an incompetent bureaucracy and a slothful population."[92] If only American rule would come to California, then American merchants would fill California's harbors and American farmers make her valleys bloom.

Motives of practical self-interest and economic gain, however, were augmented by more idealistic claims. Manifest destiny was an aggressive, imperialistic doctrine, but it drew its lifeblood from American public opinion and democratic ideals. Perhaps sincerely, many expansionists hoped to bring enlightened, democratic rule to a backward, divided province. To determined expansionists it was not essential that the Californians desire the coming of American rule.

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[92]Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963; Vintage Books, 1966), p. 31.

But if the Californians "should desire to unite their destiny with ours," so much the better for the promise of manifest destiny.

California's internal problems and differences with the central government received wide publicity in the expansionist press. To suit their purposes, American expansionists focused on California's difficulties and were willing to enlarge them if necessary. (British expansionists did the same, for precisely the same reason)[93] California's problems provided useful grist for the expansionist mill. The restlessness of the Californians fulfilled the precepts of manifest destiny. Further, the province's difficulties furnished needed support for the expansionists' partisan campaign. It was important that California, struggling under harsh Mexican rule, should be anxious to accept American help. But it was absolutely vital that it should so appear to the American electorate.

Behind the expansionists' smoke, definite problems blazed in California. Mexican rule in the province was hopelessly ineffective and held in contempt by the proud natives. Plagued by recurring partisan battles and acute financial troubles, the central government never properly administered her most distant northern province. Mexican rule in California was handicapped by a persistent lack of adequate funds. This prevented any wide basis of support from developing among the natives. For troops, the central government was forced to rely on "half-breed convicts," the so-called cholos. The

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[93]Sheldon G. Jackson, "The British and the California Dream: Rumors, Myths and Legends," Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly, LVII (Fall, 1975), 254.

native Californians considered the use of these troops an unforgiveable insult. Mexico, however, could not even afford to support these troops—forcing the cholos to "live off the land." The depredations of these dregs further embittered the native Californians toward Mexican rule.[94]

Far from central Mexico, the Californians developed a strong taste for independent rule. Much like Americans of the period, the Californians were loyal first to their province, second to the central government. In Mexico's countless revolutions, California opposed centralist rule. In 1836, the Californians, aided by some foreigners, ousted the Mexican governor of the province. A native son, Juan Alvarado, was placed in the governor's seat. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, a prominent northern California rancher, was made military commander of the province. For the following several years, California enjoyed a large measure of home rule.

In 1842, a Mexican-appointed governor, Manuel Micheltorena, arrived in California with three hundred cholos to implement Mexican rule. Micheltorena followed a liberal trade policy, winning the support of many influential foreigners, including John A. Sutter. The Californians, however, were determined to end the abuses of his cholos. In November, 1844, Alvarado and José Castro led a native revolt against the Mexican governor. In early 1845, Micheltorena and his despised troops were forced to leave the province. Two native Californians assumed control over the government. At Los Angeles Pío Pico was

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[94]Caughey, pp. 196-197.

installed as the governor of the province. José Castro became military commander at Monterey. Although the Californians had ridden themselves of Micheltorena, this division of authority further exacerbated the long-standing antagonism between the northern and the southern regions of the province.[95]

The Mexican government was forced to recognize the native regime in California. Although California remained nominally loyal to the central government, the Mexican hold over the province was never weaker. Californians were clearly dissatisfied with their position in the Mexican republic. To American expansionists it appeared little pressure was needed to sunder the remaining bonds.

Concentrating on his business interests, Thomas O. Larkin took no active part in Californian politics prior to 1842. With Governor Micheltorena, however, Larkin established a close business relationship. In addition to his own business connections with the Governor, Larkin considered Micheltorena favorable to American commercial interests. The Mexican Governor pursued a conciliatory policy toward foreigners; evidenced by his cancellation of the order respecting whaling vessels.[96] Larkin went so far as to provide Micheltorena

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[95]Ibid.; Andrew F. Rolle, California: A History (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969): pp. 161-168.

[96]Larkin to Calhoun, September 16, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 229-230; Larkin to Copmann & Lomer, January 25, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 26.

several thousand dollars in loans to support his regime.[97] During the Californian revolt against the Governor, Larkin realized his consular position demanded he remain neutral. Perhaps due to his large investment, Larkin nevertheless hoped Micheltorena could survive—even providing the beleaguered governor advice in his difficulties.[98]

The American Consul did not wish it generally known that he had provided financial support for Micheltorena's deposed government. Larkin's repeated efforts to recoup his large loans further dampened his relations with the new California government of Pío Pico.[99] On his part, Governor Pico did his best not to repay Larkin. Although the Pico government eventually decided to meet at least some of the debt, payment was interrupted and Larkin probably never received the full amount.[100] This financial squabble soured relations between Larkin and

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[97]Larkin's loans to Micheltorena were another example of speculation by the Monterey merchant. As some of his grants to the Governor were in the form of supplies from the merchant's own stores, the exact amount of the loans is indeterminable. The repayment value of the loans, however, was twenty thousand dollars. Although Larkin was by now a prosperous businessman, these loans represented a large percentage of his personal fortune. Larkin to John Parrott, January 25, 1845. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 28.

[98]Larkin to Micheltorena, January 20, 1845. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[99]Despite Pletcher's statement that Larkin "took his losses philosophically," p. 213-214, the merchant had no intention of assuming such a large financial loss. Almost frantically, he tried to force the government to repay the loans. Larkin to Pico, March 5, 1845. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 55-56; Larkin to Stearns, July 20, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 28.

[100]Larkin's loans were contestable because he had lent the money directly to Micheltorena and had not received the approval of the central government. Abel Stearns to Larkin, March 11; May 13, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 62; 184. Larkin to Stearns, December 30, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 48. See also Bancroft, Vol. IV, pp. 558-559.

the Californian government. In time, Larkin was on good terms with both Pico and Castro, but never to the extent as he was with Micheltorena.

The native Californian revolt against Micheltorena epitomized what Larkin believed to be California's greatest problem—lack of order and stability. The absence of a sound government further inhibited California's slow economic development. In addition, the government was unable to provide adequate security. As a result, "Wild Indians are carrying off thousands of horses, and have shot with arrows, several people."[101] The Consul was deeply disappointed in California's "very unsettled state."[102] To a close friend, Larkin expressed his dissatisfaction with the condition of California:

> Certainly for a country not containing fifteen thousand people; it's the most excitable & combustible one in the world. I wish there was more love of country and less pretention to it.[103]

California's leading merchant, Larkin naturally held a valuable stake in the stability of the province. Basically conservative in outlook, Larkin considered himself a "Government Upholder"—but only as long as the government deserved his confidence.[104] To the efficient businessman and Consul, the function of government was to promote trade and commerce while providing order and exercising effective authority. That was the reason Larkin supported Micheltorena.

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[101]Larkin to Dimond, March 1, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 216.

[102]Larkin to Stearns, March 4, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 20.

[103]Larkin to Stearns, April 12, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 127.

[104]Larkin to Stearns, March 4, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 20.

The Governor was the instrument of Mexican rule (which presumably Larkin should have opposed), but he also represented stable authority. Larkin was disappointed at Micheltorena's overthrow, but hoped the new government would bring "peace, and what is more, good order."[105] If the Californian government could bring stability to California, then Larkin was willing to support it. Until the government proved itself however, he remained skeptical and aloof.

Perhaps a self-fulfilling prophecy, it was not long before Larkin was disenchanted with the Californian government. He believed the province's troubles continued while "Government appears to be doing nothing."[106] To his dismay, the "Wild Indians" were killing nearly one white person a month. The Consul believed the "Sons of the Country" were unable to provide the much-needed order and central direction for California. The animosity and division of authority between Pico and Castro only complicated the problem because "the affairs must be conducted by one." Concerned with the distressing situation, Larkin confessed, "I'm not a grumbler, yet do not like the state of the country."[107]

By early 1845, the American Consul in Monterey was convinced the only solution to California's difficulties lay in United States rule. Since the Jones affair, Larkin had considered the acquisition of California by the United States inevitable—but it still lay in the

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[105]Larkin to Stearns, April 12, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 127.

[106]Larkin to Dimond, March 1, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 216.

[107]Larkin to Stearns, December 30, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 46.

uncertain future. Now he was certain that only United States rule could eradicate California's troubles. In 1842 Larkin had hoped the American occupation would continue long enough "so that the rogues could have been hung, the vagabonds banished, the wild Indian horse stealers killed or stopt in their robberies."[108] Nearly two years later he still believed the "great order and quietness" that prevailed during the occupation dramatically illustrated the real benefits of United States rule.[109]

Larkin undoubtedly felt a deep interest in the future of California and sincerely hoped that the change to United States rule would better California's "very unsettled state." But he also had personal motives in desiring an American acquisition of California. Businessmen often complain of suffering from unstable conditions, but Larkin's complaints were real. As a result of the Californian revolt against Micheltorena, Larkin was in danger of losing thousands of dollars in loans. Obviously, California's instability had a direct impact on Larkin's financial status. More than this, however, Larkin believed that United States rule would bring an increase in trade, an influx of capital and a market for California's agricultural products.[110] Surely the "merchant prince of Monterey" had much to gain from such an increase in California's commerce. Furthermore, thousands

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[108]Larkin to Atherton, undated. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 123.

[109]Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 205.

[110]Larkin to Atherton, undated. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 123.

of American immigrants would accompany the American takeover. This, Larkin believed, would multiply the value of livestock and property. The Consul was already a major landowner in California. Expecting the coming of United States rule (and in the months ahead working towards that end), Larkin acquired even more landholdings and advised his friends to follow his speculative lead.[111]

Larkin hoped for ultimate United States rule, but he recognized that Mexico was determined to hold on to her territory.[112] An American takeover of California could not be accomplished without bloody conflict—disrupting Larkin's penchant for stability. A man of business sense and diplomatic taste all his life, Larkin searched for a better alternative—one that promised eventual United States rule but at a minimum of bloodshed. The Consul realized from the first that he held a firm, potential ally in the disaffection of the native Californians. He believed the natives had "but little sympathy for a Mexican."[113] Some Californians were amenable to a change—Larkin expected to persuade the rest. Perhaps more than anyone else, Larkin realized that any plan for an American takeover must take into account the native Californians. Americans in California constituted only a small minority, probably only five hundred in a total population of about ten thousand. British emigrants represented even a lesser amount,

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[111]Ibid.; Larkin to Stearns, June 14, 1846. Ibid., p. 69; Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 23, 1846. Ibid., p. 56.

[112]Larkin to Robert J. Walker, August 4, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 182.

[113]Ibid.

probably not much more than one hundred.[114] The overwhelming majority of the population were native Californians. Any plan that did not recognize their legitimate rights and real power would be unnecessarily dangerous.

The American Consul's disenchantment with California's situation led him to support a movement for the establishment of an independent republic on the Pacific. This republic would include California and as much of the Oregon country as possible. Such an independent republic had long been envisioned—sometimes as part of an expansionist program.[115] Eventually, an independent Pacific republic would naturally wish to join the American Union. From the middle of 1845, Larkin began to curry support for such a project. He began to impress the idea on friends and influential citizens.[116] To accomplish the transition to independent rule, Larkin probably foresaw another bloodless California revolt—similar to the one that recently deposed Micheltorena.[117] To enlist their support, the native Californians were offered an equal place in Larkin's republic. The prime source of

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[114]In 1843, Sir George Simpson estimated that of six hundred foreigners, about four hundred were Americans and one hundred British. "Letters of Sir George Simpson, 1841-1843," The American Historical Review, XIV (October, 1908), 89.

[115]Merk, Manifest Destiny, pp. 13-19.

[116]Larkin to John Marsh, July 8, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 25; Marsh to Larkin, August 12, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 308; Larkin to Stearns, October 1, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 35-36. See also Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 115; Pletcher, pp. 585-586.

[117]The only casualties in this revolt were one dead horse and one wounded mule.

unrest in California, dislike for Mexican rule and a taste for independence, would work to the benefit of the plan. Best of all, the establishment of an independent republic would clear the way for the coming of United States rule. And it would do it the way Larkin had always hoped—peacefully.[118]

California often was (and still is) compared to the example of the Texas Revolution. The engine of manifest destiny could not be stalled simply because the coveted region belonged to a foreign nation. It was only necessary to adopt a more appropriate tack—or what Frederick Merk called "state making at the expense of a foreign government."[119] Texas offered a sublime example. The Texas method was indeed almost too good to believe. Texas residents—the great majority of them American emigrants—determined to replace "despotic" Mexican rule with an independent republic. Expansionists considered this a prime example of "democracy in action" (or better yet—popular sovereignty at its best). Moreover, the Texans were able to win their independence without direct, official United States involvement. The Texans fulfilled their appointed role by quickly requesting annexation to the United States. By freely rejecting Mexican rule, Texas satisfied the basic tenets of expansionist doctrine.

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[118]For a general discussion of Larkin's motivation in this respect, see John A. Hawgood, "The Pattern of Yankee Infiltration in Mexican Alta California, 1821-1846." Pacific Historical Review, XXVII (February, 1958), 27-37.

[119]Merk, Manifest Destiny, pp. 7-8.

This ideal, time-tested method encountered severe problems in California. Unlike Texas, the Pacific province possessed a large native population. These native Californians need not embrace American expansionist goals. American emigration could be expected to increase, but for now the Americans were only a small minority. Fortunately for the future of manifest destiny, the Americans in California formed a tightly-knit, active group and had taken the Texas lesson to heart. Some observers predicted these "foreigners" were destined to play a deciding role in the future disposition of California.[120]

Ever-increasing American emigration to California was not inevitable. Mexico too had learned the painful lessons of Texas. In late 1842, Juan N. Almonte, the Mexican Minister to the United States, attempted to stem the tide of American emigration. In a letter to American newspapers, he tried to discourage potential emigrants to California by exposing as false the reports of generous land grants from Mexico. The Minister warned that Mexico desired no foreign colonists and had enacted a law to prevent their entry without express permission.[121] Unfortunately for Mexico, the central government was forced to rely on the provincial government to enforce her decrees. The Californians were not always receptive to directions from Mexico City. Further, the Californians expected to profit from increased emigration. Even the Mexican-supported governor, Micheltorena, was not compelled to oppose the emigration and may have encouraged it with

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[120]Larkin to Calhoun, January 25, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 24; William Hooper to Larkin, April 29, 1845. Ibid., p. 158.

[121]Almonte's letter to the Baltimore American is printed in Niles' National Register, LXIII (December 31, 1842), 277.

grants of land. Perhaps due to the conflicting reports, American emigration to California in 1843 lagged behind most expectations.[122]

Even the opponents of expansion recognized the powerful promise of the Texas example. The New Orleans Tropic clearly foresaw the implications of American emigration: "Once let the tide of emigration flow towards California, and the American population will soon be sufficiently numerous to play the Texas game!" If American emigration went unchecked, the by now familiar formula would be repeated in California:

> The standard of revolt will be raised—the Government will be overthrown—the cry of "Liberty!" will be raised in this country, and thousands of the young and the adventurous will fly to the relief of their oppressed countrymen in California!...
>
> A little while longer, the "Republic of California" will be knocking at our doors; and then we shall...have the absurd and ridiculous cry of Reannexation of California! It will all be right, of course; it will only be "extending the area of freedom," and there can be no possible objection to that.[123]

Expansionists, however, were not about to leave such an important task to chance. Mexico might effectively block American emigration, or potential American settlers might be discouraged by the controversy. Worst of all, Great Britain or France might obtain a mortgage or protectorate over the exposed province. American expansionists were determined to insure that things went according to the well-laid plan.

More than anyone else, Thomas O. Larkin was personally aware that the acquisition of California was too important and too uncertain to leave to the vagaries of time or chance. The American Consul at Monterey became an early, active member of the expansionist campaign.

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[122] Bancroft, Vol. IV, pp. 379, 383-384, 389.

[123] Niles' National Register, LXVIII (May 17, 1845), 162.

As American Consul, his duty was to inform the United States government of important developments in California. As a devoted expansionist, his self-appointed task was to promote the policy of the acquisition of California. As part of his duties, Larkin wrote to at least one prominent expansionist, Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, offering advice and his personal services.[124] In addition, the Consul sent numerous, engaging articles to expansionist newspapers, including the New York Sun and the New York Herald. In his articles, Larkin portrayed California as a ready target of American expansion, but warned of European schemes in the province. From 1843, Larkin took an active interest in promoting American emigration to California and a direct part in advancing plans for the acquisition of the Mexican province.

Like most expansionists, Larkin was not willing to wait for American emigration to "be sufficiently numerous to play the Texas game." He took a direct part in advancing an early plan to "arrange" the acquisition of California. During the Webster-Ashburton talks in 1842, a scheme had been proposed by Webster to settle the Oregon dispute and secure the acquisition of California. By this arrangement, the United States would agree to the Columbia River boundary in exchange for British aid in obtaining California south to the thirty-fourth parallel—which would include the primary objectives of Monterey and San Francisco bays. Nothing came of the scheme, partly because it

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[124]Larkin to Walker, August 4, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 181-183.

offered Mexico only the "opportunity" of repaying her debts.[125] In August, 1844, Larkin lent his support to a revival of the same plan.[126] The Consul urged adoption of the plan on the Secretary of State and Senator Walker. Not satisfied with the original limits of the plan, Larkin advised that two more degrees south would secure the fine harbor at San Diego. This arrangement, Larkin assured, "would be a Yankee bargain, outstripping all the Yankee's had ever done before in the way of trade."[127] Despite Larkin's strong support, the plan suffered the same fate as its predecessor.

Larkin's interest in American emigration corresponded nicely with his consular duty to inform the Department of State of the arrival of American settlers in California. On becoming consul, Larkin regularly collected all available information concerning emigration and forwarded it directly to the Secretary of State.[128] He carefully collected news of the origins, numbers and locations of all incoming

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[125]Ashburton did not oppose the idea, primarily because he did not believe the region would be of any use to the United States. The project never got off the ground due to Mexican animosity over the Texas issue and the Jones affair. Pletcher, pp. 100-101.

[126]Larkin did not "propose" or "suggest" this plan as Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 111, and Pletcher, p. 212, indicate. He had seen a report in a New York paper of some twenty senators supporting the plan. Due to the "age" of newspapers on the Pacific Coast, Larkin may have been referring to the older plan. Larkin to Walker, August 4, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 182.

[127]Ibid; Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Ibid., p. 205. Larkin was still interested in the plan in July, 1845. Larkin to Marsh, July 8, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 25.

[128]Larkin to Sutter, Spril 29, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 111; Sutter to Larkin, July 17, 1844. Ibid., p. 169; Larkin to Calhoun, June 20, 1844. Ibid., p. 141.

parties from such knowledgeable sources as John A. Sutter, John Marsh and Samuel J. Hastings. The United States Government was naturally interested in information concerning the emigrants. The Department of State appreciated Larkin's "important & interesting" information and directed him to continue to report on American emigration to California.[129]

The American Consul saw to the needs of the emigrants on their arrival in the Mexican province. He took measures to insure that they received the necessary official papers; establishing the vice-consulate at San Francisco to make it more convenient for the emigrants who concentrated to the north.[130] Larkin also attempted to organize the American settlers. In November, 1845, the Consul advised the new emigrants to elect responsible representatives to meet with him in Monterey. Larkin would make the proper arrangements with the California authorities for the Americans to settle in the province.[131] But Larkin also urgently requested John Marsh, a leading American resident, to accompany the emigrants to Monterey.[132] Apparently the Consul hoped to keep the Americans closely organized and expected to work with them in the months ahead.

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[129]Cralle to Larkin, October 25, 1844. Ibid., p. 262. See above, p. 36.

[130]Sutter to Larkin, March 28, 1844. Ibid., p. 85; Larkin to George C. Yount, November 12, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 38.

[131]Larkin to the Emigrants Recently Arrived at the Sacramento River, November 12, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 97.

[132]Larkin to Sutter, November 12, 1845. Ibid., p. 98.

The American Consul's interest in American emigration to California received its fullest exposition in his correspondence to several eastern United States newspapers. By promoting California in the press, Larkin hoped to encourage emigration to the province. American settlers were an essential ingredient of the Texas formula for expansion. Beyond this, the Consul hoped to stimulate American interest in the acquisition of California. Eastern newspapers received his articles with great interest and published them in full. Larkin's articles were also picked up and reprinted by newspapers throughout the country.[133] Describing everyday life and the political situation in California, Larkin's engaging articles contributed indirectly to the escalating American desire for California.

During the early 1840's, American interest in California developed steadily. The publication of John C. Frémont's report of his second expedition and works on California by Richard Henry Dana, Lansford W. Hastings and others added to the increasing public attention.[134] By 1845 American newspapers were anxious for any news on California. Beneath a headline reading "CALIFORNIA," The Niles' National Register reprinted an article by the New Orleans Courier

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[133]Included in the many papers that printed Larkin's articles were the: New York Sun, New York Herald, New York Journal of Commerce, Boston Daily Advertiser, Washington Union, Charleston Mercury and Niles' National Register.

[134]Frémont's report was ordered published by Congress. The report went through four editions in two years, and was widely reprinted by the nation's press. Only a portion of the report dealt with California, but "no other part was equal to this in graphic description." Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 56. Hastings' The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California was published in 1845. Dana's classic Two Years Before the Mast was published in 1840.

that announced:

> Information in regard to this favored portion of the globe is eagerly sought after by our citizens, as it is destined ere long to be annexed to the United States. The large number of Americans already settled and immigrating there, give assurance of the result.[135]

California appealed both to maritime and agrarian interests. Newspaper attention to California was therefore not limited to one particular region, party or ideology. Western newspapers described the province as a settler's paradise. In turn, California's commercial potential was emphasized in eastern journals.[136] Even the American Review, a staid, conservative Whig organ, was attracted to the economic promise of California. The leading Whig journal joined numerous others in supporting the acquisition of the province.[137]

The strongest support for California came from the nation's expansionist press. James Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald, Moses Y. Beach of the New York Sun and Thomas Ritchie of the semi-official Washington Union led the expansionist campaign. Both Bennett and Beach claimed to have the largest daily circulation in the United States. Bennett, the most vehement expansionist editor, vowed he would "take care of California."[138] Beach boasted his paper would secure

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[135]Niles' National Register, LXVIII (May 17, 1845), 162.

[136]Ray A. Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860 (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 106; Frederick Merk, The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansion, 1843-1849 (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 107.

[137]Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 59.

[138]Frederic Hudson to Childs, December 5, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 294.

California as it had Texas.[139] On June 2, 1845, the Union left little doubt of its stand: "Westward, ho!": "The Road to California will be open to us. Who will stay the march of our western people?"[140]

Soon after the Jones affair, Thomas O. Larkin began to send information on California to the New York Herald. In 1845, he also began to send articles to the New York Sun and the New York Journal of Commerce, a moderately expansionist press.[141] Realizing the sensitivity of his position, Larkin did not allow his name to appear with the articles. Later he adopted the pseudonym "Paisano." Larkin did not wish it generally known that the American Consul was advocating the acquisition of California by the United States. In a serious, significant letter, however, he could not resist the opportunity to vent his favorite personal complaint:

> The Am Consul has a jurisdictin of 1000 miles of Sea Coast, while the nature of the trade is such that he has barely any fees. Governmt allows no salary. The fees of this Consular is under 200$ a year, the Stationry bill about the same which is not allowed by the Dept of State.[142]

Through his letters to the expansionist press, the Monterey correspondent deliberately attempted to encourage American emigration

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[139]Moses Yale Beach & Sons to Larkin, December 24, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 129.

[140]Pletcher, p. 263.

[141]Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 36.

[142]Larkin must have realized that only a person very close to the Consul, or the Consul himself would have such information. Larkin to Journal of Commerce, July, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 293. Larkin was deeply sensitive of his deficiencies in spelling and grammar and instructed that his articles should be corrected before publication. Larkin to James Gordon Bennett, May 20, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 382-383.

to California, Larkin sketched the attractiveness of life in the province. He reported the officers of the United States Navy found California appealing, spending "their leasure time ashore hunting wild Deer or dancing with tame Dear, both being plenty in and about Monterey."[143] To agrarian expansionists Larkin's description of the plenty and fertility of California was surely most interesting:

> Here are many fine Ports, the land produces wheat over 100 fold. Cotten & hemp will grow here and every kind of fruit there is in New Eng—granes in abundance of the furst qualuty....The Bays are full of fish, the Woods of game.[144]

The correspondent also announced that emigrants were well-received in California. Only a simple procedure was required to adopt citizenship and qualify for large grants of land.[145]

Larkin further stimulated maritime interest by describing the commercial potential of California. He reported American trade and property in the province was increasing daily. Easily the greatest attraction was San Francisco—"prehaps the most magnuficnt Harbour in the World." So valuable was the port that "Letters nor words can not express the advantag and importance of San F. to a Naval power." The great bay was of immense commercial value, easily defended and would "hold prehaps all the vessels in the World." Under Mexican rule, however, the port was "of as much use to the civilized world as if it did not exist."[146]

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[143]Larkin to Bennett, February 10, 1843. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 6.

[144]Larkin to Journal of Commerce, July, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 294.

[145]Larkin to Beach, May 28, 1845. Ibid., p. 202.

[146]Ibid.; Larkin to Journal of Commerce, July, 1845. Ibid., p. 294.

To the nation's expansionist press Larkin foretold the American acquisition of California as "any other natural course of events." Manifest destiny dogma declared the province too valuable to be entrusted to the Californians—who "will not work if he can avoid it." "The time will come, must come," Larkin proclaimed, "when this Country is peopled by another race." Americans of course were the chosen race. Once the United States acquired the province then California "will team with a busy race."[147] Larkin warned, however, the transition to American rule could not be long delayed. Foreign powers were scheming to snatch the province from American hands. The dire threat of European interference further animated Larkin's demand for California—"We must have it, others must not."[148]

Not satisfied with his own considerable efforts in behalf of California, Larkin urged another prominent American in California, John Marsh, also to promote the province to the eastern press. The Consul assured Marsh his knowledge of California's advantages would deeply interest potential emigrants. Larkin specifically advised Marsh to draw attention to foreign influence by writing all he knew

> ...respecting English agents or Consul or her subjects, all you know respecting they or the H. B. Co [Hudson's Bay Company] agents, trading, smuggling in C[alifornia], aiding revolution, acting for or counteracting the supreme or local Gov't in any way.[149]

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[147]Ibid., p. 295.

[148]Larkin to Bennett, May 20, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 383.

[149]Larkin to Marsh, July 8, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 25.

Larkin promised Marsh he would make sure the letter was printed in the New York papers and would probably be copied by others.

Marsh hesitated, but after a second prodding by Larkin, wrote to Senator Lewis Cass, an ardent expansionist.[150] In an open letter to Cass, dated January 20, 1846, Marsh overreached even Larkin by pronouncing "California, though nominally belonging to Mexico, is about as independent of it as Texas and must ere long share the same fate." Like Larkin's letters, Marsh's testimony for California was widely reprinted throughout the country.[151]

The expansionist editors assured their Monterey correspondent his articles were read with "great interest" in the United States. "News from your quarter is looked for with deep interest here," explained the editor of the New York Sun. Beach claimed Larkin's efforts (and his own) produced much effect:

> A letter which you wrote us some time since describing Monterey & harbor we think seemed to have acted strongly on the public mind, and owing to what we have since said, they now look with a longing eye towards California....
>
> You may judge what influence we have, from the fact that since we have spoken of Monterey as the terminus [of the Pacific Railroad], several persons are on the eve of starting for that place to purchase lands.[152]

Like the Sun, the New York Herald informed Larkin it was anxious "to

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[150]Larkin to Marsh, August 19, 1845. Ibid., p. 32.

[151]Marsh's letter was "said to have influenced President Polk himself." Hawgood, "Yankee Infiltration," pp. 32-33.

[152]Beach to Larkin, December 24, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 129.

obtain the latest accounts by every conveyance." The expansionist editors urged Larkin to continue his "valuable correspondence."[153]

Always sensitive about his lack of education, Larkin was deeply gratified by the reception his articles gained. By currying his favor, the editors contributed to his elevated sense of importance. With a false sense of humility, Larkin replied to Beach, "I never dreamt they would all be printed or any of them copied from one newspaper to another, and hardly know why I sent them."[154] On the contrary, Larkin knew exactly what he was doing.[155] As the Marsh correspondence demonstrates, the Consul deliberately undertook to promote California to the United States. He knew his letters excited interest in California and that his letters were reprinted in many newspapers. Moreover, he also perfectly understood that a hardly subtle warning of European influence in California touched a responsive cord in the American nervous system.

In attempting to determine Larkin's influence, historians have conferred much credit on Larkin's "one-man Chamber of Commerce for California."[156] Robert Glass Cleland, a pioneering historian of

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[153]Frederic Hudson to Larkin, October 14, 1845. Ibid., p. 24; Beach to Larkin, January 12, 1846. Ibid., pp. 159-160.

[154]Larkin to Beach, May 19, 1846. Ibid., p. 379.

[155]Larkin was at least partly motivated by a felt need for self-defense. He believed that other writers were promoting Oregon while disparaging California. Larkin to Marsh, July 8, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 25.

[156]Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, pp. 51-52.

American interest in California, declared:

> Indeed, it may be said without fear of exaggeration, that most of the communications published in these three papers [the Sun, Herald and Journal of Commerce] on the subject of California originated with Larkin.[157]

John A. Hawgood asserts Larkin played "a major part in publicizing California and making it as much coveted as Oregon and Texas."[158] Perhaps it is enough to admit that Larkin's letters urging the acquisition of California were reprinted in many newspapers and read by thousands of Americans. For many readers, Larkin's articles were probably their only source of information on the appealing province. More than anything, Larkin succeeded in keeping California before the public eye. It would be less appropriate to propose that Larkin generated American interest in California. Larkin merely told his audience what he knew they wanted to hear. He disclosed that California was a rich province, inadequately governed and defended by Mexico, and threatened with interference by the European powers. The Monterey correspondent entrusted American expansionism to accomplish the rest.

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[157]Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 59.

[158]Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 17. See also Royce, pp. 38-39.

CHAPTER IV

THE AMERICAN CONTINENT

American expansionists considered the eventual acquisition of California "one of the surest affairs yet in the womb of time." Continued American emigration to California insured that the province would one day soon follow the Texas lead. Only one possibility disturbed the confidence of American expansion--the threat of European interference. Expansionists traditionally feared, or at least claimed to fear European designs on California. For more than a decade, countless rumors abounded of European schemes aimed at expropriating the vulnerable Mexican province (before the United States could). A few of the rumors had some basis, but most were greatly exaggerated and widely believed. By 1845 the intention of European powers to grab California and halt the extension of the "area of freedom" into Texas, Oregon, and California were accepted as expansionist doctrine. Great Britain, the world's foremost colonial power, was naturally most suspected by American expansionists, but France, Russia and even Prussia were not beyond the pale of suspicion.

One historian of American expansion has proposed that: "Fear of England more than any other factor carried manifest destiny to the Pacific in 1845."[159] American expansionists were adamant that Great Britain would not "pre-empt" their right to California. Abundant evidence exists to document the frenzied attitudes of many Americans to

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[159]Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 87.

the foreign peril—newspapers and private letters overflow with these rumors and fears. But it is virtually impossible to decide if the apprehensions were genuine or merely conveniently manufactured (consciously or not) to justify the acquisitive goals of American expansion. No matter the sincerity of the expressed fears of American expansionists, there is no doubt that rumors and fears of European schemes were an urgent, compelling force in bringing United States hegemony to California.

Rumors of European intrigue in California were not without some basis. In addition, these rumors received the color of authenticity when printed in newspapers and reported by official United States representatives. Great Britain after all had demonstrated a measure of interest in California.[160] The appointment of a British vice-consul at Monterey in 1842 preceeded the appointment of Consul Larkin. Without official authorization, British agents in California and Mexico were working for the acquisition of California by their government. Alexander Forbes, a leading British merchant in Tepic, Mexico and Eustace Barron, the British consul at Tepic, recognized the potential of California and attempted to impress their views on the British government. In 1835 Forbes had written the first history of California

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[160]The standard study is Ephraim D. Adams, "English Interest in the Annexation of California," American Historical Review, XIV (July, 1909), 744-763. Adams' view that England had no interest in California is partially corrected by Jackson, "The British and the California Dream: Rumors, Myths and Legends." See also, Lester G. Engelson, "Proposals for the Colonization of California by England," California Historical Society Quarterly, XVIII (June, 1939), 136-148.

in the English language. Published in 1839, the work drew much European attention with its most telling chapter titled: "Upper California Considered as a Field for European Colonization." Like Larkin, Forbes emphasized the vital factor that the native Californians appeared receptive to a change of flags. The work of these British agents aroused American suspicions, while most of the rumors concerning British designs on California speculated that Mexico would cede California in payment of its large debt to British bondholders.[161]

British interest in California perhaps reached its climax during the native revolt against Governor Micheltorena. The Californian leaders secretly met with the British vice-consul at Monterey, James A. Forbes. The Californians asked the British agent if his government would support their plans to overthrow Micheltorena and declare their independence from Mexico. Forbes expectantly relayed the attractive request to London for instructions. If ever Great Britain desired to obtain California, here was the consummate opportunity. Contrary to the worst fears of American expansionists, the British government replied to its consular agent that it was

> ...entirely out of the question that Her Majesty's Government should give any countenance to the notion which seems to have been agitated of Great Britain being invited to take California under her protection.[162]

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[161]Jackson, pp. 253-254. Oddly enough, the hugh Mexican debt may have acted as a restraining influence on British ambitions. In order not to jeopardize repayment, the British government had no desire to alienate Mexico.

[162]Aberdeen to Barron, December 31, 1844. Adams, p. 752. Jackson, p. 262.

In this significant reply, the London government announced that it had no interest in a separatist movement in California and directed that her agents should not encourage such a movement, but "should remain entirely passive."

Great Britain's policy toward California not only differed from the charges of the American expansionists, but was also completely out of step with the policy of the United States government. While the United States was depending on the separation of California from Mexico, hopefully by the Texas example, Great Britain had no wish to see the province alienated from Mexico. The world's greatest colonial power had no intention of acquiring a colony or protectorate in California, but this did not mean that Great Britain took no interest in the future of the province. The British government had indeed recognized the potential value of California and was most concerned that it should not fall into the hands of a power that "might prove inimical to British interests."[163] Great Britain's overriding concern for California was not to obtain it for herself, but to halt the headlong expansion of her brash commercial rival—the United States.[164] To accomplish this, Great Britain hoped Mexico could retain control over California by settling the Texas dispute before it gave the United States a pretext for war. In this respect at least American expansionists were correct; Great Britain represented the greatest obstacle in the way of American hopes to acquire California. Mexico was powerless to stem American ambitions; only Great Britain threatened the future of American expansion.

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[163]Aberdeen to Barron, December 31, 1844. Adams, p. 752.

[164]Jackson, pp. 264-265.

A new president assumed office in 1845 who was especially susceptible to threats of European interference on the "American Continent." James K. Polk had been nurtured under the tutelage of the grand Anglophobe—Andrew Jackson. "Young Hickory" had been warned by his hero-mentor against the pervasiveness of the foreign peril.[165] General Jackson had been bent on removing European influence from the North American continent; now another Tennessean inherited the old hero's fallen gauntlet. From the first the new President was a devoted expansionist. Polk's expansionism resulted from his intense nationalism; he had little interest in abstract (what he thought meaningless) principles such as the debate over the extension of slavery. One factor he was constantly wary of was the threat British power posed to the expansion of the United States. Like his fellow expansionists, Polk construed British territorial ambitions as cold fact and was determined that the colonial despot would not stand in the way of the further extension of the "area of freedom."[166]

James K. Polk entered the nation's highest office on a platform spouting a call for the "re-annexation of Texas and the re-occupation of Oregon." At this point nothing was said of California and it had not been an issue in the presidential campaign.[167] Public interest in California had not yet crystallized but had been diffused by the

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[165]Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 97.

[166]For Jackson's anti-European sentiment and role see, Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977). On Polk's views see, Charles G. Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[167]Norman A. Graebner, "American Interest in California, 1845," Pacific Historical Review, XXII (February, 1953), 13.

dominant concern over Texas and Oregon. Although he ran on an expansionist platform, Polk found it unnecessary to command public sentiment for California. A public demand for California, still recognized as part and parcel of Mexico, would have been needlessly hazardous. Unlike the calls for the settlement of the Oregon dispute, where the United States held some claims, and the annexation of Texas, which had won its independence, a call for California involved an overtly aggressive stance. Few presidents gain election by advocating a war policy. Polk never used the fighting words "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight," but was willing to garner votes in the Northwest by not directly repudiating the bellicose campaign slogan.

President Polk thus entered office not publicly committed to the acquisition of California. Privately, however, Polk had decided that one of his major policy thrusts was to be to gain the Mexican province. Soon after his inauguration, the new president confessed to his Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, that to obtain California was one of his four great goals as president.[168] Although cognizant of the

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[168]Evidence for the view that Polk entered the presidency with a fixed desire for California rests on a reminiscence by Bancroft in 1887. Most historians, including Robert G. Cleland, Jessie S. Reeves and Frederick Merk, accept Bancroft's claim, with Merk proposing that: "Polk brought to the White House an actual fervor for California," Monroe Doctrine, p. 111. Shomer S. Zwelling argues, however, that Polk's interest was a much later reaction to the threats of foreign influence, pp. 85-91. Zwelling casts doubt on Bancroft's validity by quoting George Lockhart Rives' view that: "How far the memory of a man nearly ninety could be trusted to relate correctly a conversation which, in the light of subsequent events, looked astoundingly like prophecy, is no doubt a question." Rives, The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 719. See also Pletcher, p. 262. For the purposes of this discussion the dominant view has been accepted. Actually the point is not absolutely essential as Polk's actions soon demonstrated the intensity of his intention to acquire California, no matter the foreign threat question or the dangers of war.

threat from foreign powers, Polk's desire for California was not a knee-jerk reaction but an outgrowth of his nationalistic and expansionist proclivities. The danger of European interference made the acquisition of California an ever-urgent necessity, but Polk had designed a definite, sound program to acquire the rich Pacific province. His entire Texas policy of bluff, bluster and thinly-concealed coercion was calculated towards the winning of California. Polk did not consider the Rio Grande border as valuable as the immense, bountiful province of Alta California. The expansionist President used the boundary dispute as an entering wedge to pry further concessions from his feeble opponent.[169] California was the golden reward that lay at the end of Polk's Texas policy.

With the ascension of the Jacksonian Democrat to the presidency, Thomas O. Larkin not only retained his consular position, but also remained a trusted administration observer and advisor on Californian affairs. Like its predecessor, the incoming administration regarded the Consul at Monterey as a reliable source of useful information on California—a topic on which the Polk administration grew daily more concerned. Larkin's constant stream of information proved helpful in advancing expansionist plans for California. Until now, Larkin had testified to the potential value of California and the increasing American commercial interests and settlement in the attractive province. Just as importantly, Larkin revealed that the bonds that held California

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[169]The Texas joint resolution left the adjustment of the Texas border to be determined later. This gave Polk his opportunity to insist on the questionable Rio Grande border in order to bring pressure on Mexico. Reeves, p. 268.

to Mexico were strained and the native Californians might join in severing them completely. To eager American expansionists (who included President Polk and virtually his entire cabinet), Larkin's reports indicated that California was a rich prize; one that might be easily won.

Larkin's encouraging reports from Monterey had an early and important effect on the policy of the Polk administration for California. At the end of May, 1845, Larkin's report of the native Californian revolt against the Mexican governor, Micheltorena, reached Washington. The Consul's information not only touched off a vigorous campaign by the expansionist press to acquire California, but prompted the administration to take its first official action toward California.[170] On June 24, 1845, Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft sent a telling dispatch to Commodore Sloat, Commander of the United States Pacific Squadron, outlining the administration's policy for California:

> It is the earnest desire of the President to pursue the policy of peace, and he is anxious that you and every part of your squadron should be assiduously careful to avoid any act which could be construed as an act of aggression....
>
> The Mexican ports are said to be open and defenseless. If you ascertain with certainty that Mexico has declared war against the United States, you will at once possess yourself of the harbor of San Francisco and blockade or occupy such other ports as your force may permit... You will be careful to preserve, if possible, the most friendly relations with the inhabitants, and where you can do so, you will encourage them to adopt a course of neutrality.[171]

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[170]See the discussion below, p. 84. Zwelling, p. 91; Pletcher, p. 263.

[171]Emphasis added. Bancroft to Sloat, June 24, 1845. Sherman, pp. 51-52. See also, Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 73.

With anticipation, the administration responded to Larkin's report of instability in California by directing its naval commander to be prepared to seize the vulnerable province. In addition, the intelligence that the Mexican (or Californian) ports were "open and defenseless" emanated from the Consul's many reports detailing the sorry state of defense preparations in California and Mexico.[172]

More than this, however, the Secretary's dispatch reflected the Polk administration's decided policy toward California; a policy founded largely on Larkin's influence. The Consul had testified that the native Californians were resentful of Mexican authority and might welcome American rule, if offered respectfully and peacefully. His reports indicated to the administration that it might find an indispensable ally for its expansionist plans in the restless native Californians. At the very least, Larkin had advised, it was not necessary and certainly not wise to alienate the overwhelming majority of California residents. Enamored with the prospect of acquiring California through a policy of least resistance, the Polk administration adopted Larkin's program of conciliation of the native Californians. Although California inevitably became enmeshed in the Texas conflict (where the administration resorted to an aggressive policy), the Polk administration never abandoned its hopes to secure California with the aid, or at least the acquiescence of the native Californians.

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[172]See for example, Larkin to Calhoun, August 18, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 204-205; Larkin to Calhoun, September 16, 1844. Ibid., pp. 228-229.

By the summer of 1845 the American Consul at Monterey had exercised considerable influence on administration policy for California. Larkin's reports had, until now, envisioned only the eventual acquisition of the Pacific province. In the climatic months ahead, however, Larkin would wield a more immediate and forceful influence. In July of 1845, the Consul emphasized an added element in his reports to Washington—the threat of European intrigue and interference in California. Larkin had long been wary of European interests in California, but his July reports carried a more urgent and impassioned warning of European interference. Moreover, the administration that received his latest reports, suspicious of European ambitions from the start, was engaged in a desperate struggle with powerful colonial powers. At stake in this contest of nerves, resolve and strength was the future of American empire. Larkin's warning of European intrigue brought a further disturbing element to an already volatile, dangerous situation. As a result the Polk administration felt constrained to take definite action to hasten the acquisition of California; action that carried over into the interconnected disputes over Texas and Oregon.

No different from many of his fellow Americans, Larkin had long been suspicious of European intentions for California. He recognized that only Great Britain blocked American expansion across the Rockies. To forestall the threat of European interference, Larkin believed it was necessary for the United States to act first. The Consul was largely unaware of the British government's lack of pretension for

California.[173] He only knew of the unauthorized schemes and boasts of British agents in Mexico and the wild rumors that frequently ricocheted across the Pacific community. Larkin not only accepted the rumors as valid, but passed them on to Washington. Consequently, his fears and suspicions of British activities colored the administration's view of the troubled situation in California.

For years Larkin had been aware of the rumors of British ambitions for California and the concern of the United States in those rumors. In 1840 one of his correspondents assured him that "England is treating for California in payment of her Mexican claims and our Govt. seems to be a little jealous of this movement."[174] Americans in California, particularly the merchants, were most suspicious of the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company. Besides their ingrained distrust of their British rivals, American merchants naturally felt menaced by the huge corporation. To the small, independent American merchant, the Hudson's Bay Company seemed an evil, monopolistic monster; its cutthroat business practices marking it as an enemy of

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[173]By May, 1846, Larkin learned that the British vice-consul, James A. Forbes, had been instructed to "remain passive" during the revolt against Micheltorena in 1844-1845. Larkin was thus aware that the British government "will not interfere in any Californian affairs, but will view with much dissatisfaction any other nation that does." Larkin to Stearns, May 26, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 396; Larkin to Stearns, May 1, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 61. Forbes had apparently informed Larkin of the instructions he received following his request for directions from London; using virtually Aberdeen's exact words. See above, pp. 67-68. Larkin did not know of this in July, 1845, although it is uncertain when Forbes did tell him. In any case, Larkin did not inform Washington of this very valuable information. See also below, pp. 123-124.

[174]Francis Johnson to Larkin, June 9, 1840. Hammond, Vol. I, p. 43.

American free trade interests. Actually the company's fur trade in California never prospered and local merchants were better able to compete in the export of cowhides. In 1842, Sir George Simpson, a governor of the Hudson's Bay Company's territories, found the prospects for profit in California so dismal that he decided to end the company's operations there. During 1842-1843 the company undertook its final trapping expedition into the interior. Only a small store remained at Yerba Buena (until 1846) to continue to excite American suspicions.[175]

Larkin believed the Hudson's Bay Company posed a threat to American commercial interests in California. Although he probably was not harmed by its competition, he and his fellow merchants were alarmed by the dreaded company's activities on the Pacific.[176] To Larkin the favored British corporation became the embodiment of British interference in California. To counter the threat, Larkin determined to warn the United States government of the giant fur company's activities in Oregon and California. In response to the Senate debates over Oregon in 1844, Larkin advised the Secretary of State that the Hudson's Bay Company was not withdrawing from the Columbia, but in addition to trapping was more ominously "cultivating the soil and building mills."[177] To better illustrate the threat the company represented to American

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[175]John S. Galbraith, "A Note on the British Fur Trade in California, 1821-1846," Pacific Historical Review, XXIV (August, 1955), 259-260.

[176]Francis Johnson to Larkin, August 31, 1840. Hammond, Vol. I, p. 52; Ethan Estabrook to Larkin, January 29, 1841. Ibid., pp. 77-78.

[177]Larkin to Calhoun, June 20, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, p. 140.

commercial interests, Larkin went on to detail its varied interests in the Pacific region:

> They are shipping flour and lumber to the Sandwich Islands and this country, and I believe to the Russians. They are purchasing cattle from California and stocking their farms largely. They have an Agent doing business in Oahu for them, and one stationed in San Francisco...where they have purchased land and the best house in the place, selling goods and purchasing hides to ship in their vessels...[178]

Certainly more alarming to those interested in obtaining California, Larkin also reported that an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company had attempted to secure a large grant of land on the Sacramento River in order to bring in settlers. Not satisfied with these efforts, the Consul wrote directly to Robert J. Walker, then a leading expansionist Senator from Mississippi. Larkin warned the influential Senator that the British were not leaving Oregon, but that their "people, their business and their flocks are increasing."[179]

The American Consul's suspicion of the Hudson's Bay Company was founded largely on a natural fear of added competition as well as traditional distrust and dislike of the British. To inflame the situation further, Larkin had bitter personal disagreements with two British agents in California. During late 1844, Larkin quarrelled with William Glen Rae, the Hudson's Bay Company's representative in Yerba Buena, apparently over a disputed business deal. Rae insultingly chided Larkin to settle his account in "an honest & honorable manner."[180] The unstable

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[178]Ibid., pp. 140-141. In this dispatch, Larkin also described the growth of French trading interests in California.

[179]Larkin to Walker, August 4, 1844. Ibid., p. 182.

[180]Rae to Larkin, September 2, 1844. Ibid., p. 214.

Rae later committed suicide in January, 1845 by putting a pistol to his head and when it failed to discharge four times, madly reached for another and finished the deed.[181] Even after Rae's death Larkin encountered difficulty in collecting unpaid debts.[182] This fracas with Rae further antagonized the proud merchant toward the Hudson's Bay Company and the British.

Larkin's distrust of the British evidently carried into his personal affairs for he also quarrelled with James A. Forbes, the British vice-consul in California. Larkin angrily accused Forbes of having insulted his efficiency, hospitality and integrity.[183] (Larkin had a well-earned reputation for parsimony). Later Forbes delayed repaying a large debt to Larkin.[184] Eventually Larkin and Forbes were on good terms and later worked closely to settle the future of California. During 1844-1845, however, Larkin had endured two acrimonious and agonizing personal disputes with the two leading British agents in the province.

The spring and summer of 1845 was a difficult time for Thomas O. Larkin. Besides the controversy with Forbes, the Consul encountered

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[181]Henry Mellus to Larkin, January 27, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 29.

[182]Larkin to William Sturgis Hinckley, October, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 15.

[183]Forbes to Larkin, April 1, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 113. Larkin and his wife apparently had a child out of wedlock. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 140-142. As a result the Larkins may have suffered cruel talk behind their backs. Like Andrew Jackson, Larkin was deeply sensitive about reflections on his or his wife's character.

[184]Larkin to Charles H. Forbes, October 8, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 12-13.

further trouble with the California government of Pío Pico. In order better to inform Washington, Larkin addressed a letter to Pico's government requesting information on Californian affairs. His request was promptly refused as inappropriate.[185] The rebuff came as a bitter disappointment for Larkin, attempting to recoup some of his lost influence with the Californian government. Perhaps even more painful, Larkin learned the Pico government scoffed at his request for repayment of his large loan to Governor Micheltorena.[186] By now Larkin was totally disgusted with the unsettled state of California and believed this intolerable situation could no longer continue.

To further fuel his discontent during the trying summer of 1845, Larkin became convinced the European powers were at work to frustrate his hopes for California. By July the Consul was nearly fanatically consumed with the peril of European interference in the province. Perhaps due partly to his argument with Forbes, Larkin's simmering distrust of the British finally boiled over. In July he implored John Marsh to call attention to the growth of British influence and the Hudson's Bay Company's interests in the province.[187] The Consul was now certain that Great Britain meant to block the acquisition of Texas and California. He objected to their interference in

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[185]Larkin to Stearns, April 12, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 126-127.

[186]John Coffin Jones to Larkin, May 1, 1845. Ibid., p. 160. On Larkin's loans to Micheltorena, see above, pp. 44-46.

[187]See the discussion above, pp. 61-62. Larkin to Marsh, July 8, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 25.

the Texas negotiations and protested to the British vice-consul:

> Why England or France should take a part in the Texas negociation I can not imagine. I know however that no European Nation should be allowed to interfere with the affairs of any Nation on the American Continnt.[188]

Like President Polk, Larkin believed that only the European powers stood in the path of the rightful destiny of the United States. His resistance to European interference anticipated Polk's similiar declaration in his first annual message to Congress on December 2, 1845:

> The United States...can not in silence permit any European interference on the North American continent, and should any such interference be attempted will be ready to resist it at any and all hazards.[189]

As if to confirm Larkin's worst fears, news arrived in late June that indicated Great Britain had definite plans of interfering in California. From at least three different sources Larkin received "confirmed" reports that some two thousand Mexican troops were being sent to California. The sending of these troops to subdue the rebellious province, reminiscent of the hated cholos, was enough to excite passions in California, but there was more to the rumors. Two British financial houses in Mexico and Eustace Barron, the British Consul at Tepic, were reported to have provided the funds for the troops. California was pledged to Great Britain, so the rumors went, and the troops were meant to secure the province.[190]

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[188]Larkin to Forbes, June 9, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 231.

[189]Richardson, Vol. V., p. 2248.

[190]Jones to Larkin, June 10; June 20; July 20; 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 231-232; 246; 276. Uhde & Pini to Larkin, July 3, 1845. Ibid., p. 258. Marsh to Larkin, July 7, 1845. Ibid., pp. 259-260. See also, David Spence to Leidesdorff, June 14, 1845. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 23.

Dismayed and taken aback, Larkin may have initially credited the alarming reports. After all they confirmed the long-standing rumors that Great Britain meant to obtain California from Mexico in settlement of her huge claims. Upon reflection, however, Larkin decided that the Mexican troops were not intended to secure the province for Great Britain.[191] Rather the troops were being sent to arrest the growth of American influence in the province and the developing spirit of Californian independence. He believed the Mexican troops were meant to restore the loosening bonds that held California to Mexico and to prevent the chances of a San Jacinto from occurring in California. This was no less menacing than the original rumors. Perhaps Great Britain was not planning to obtain California, Larkin believed, but the colonial power was certainly scheming to thwart the further expansion of the United States. The machinations of Great Britain endangered Larkin's entire plan for the peaceful accession to American rule. The American Consul was not going to brook any further European interference in his plans for California.

Discouraged by the unsettled state of affairs in California and believing that war may have already been declared with Mexico,[192] Larkin determined to warn the government and people of the United States against the European threat in California. His warnings did not envision an imminent seizure of the province, but decried the dangers of European

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[191]Larkin to Marsh, July 8, 1845. Ibid., p. 24.

[192]Months distant from the East, Pacific coast merchants continually tried to anticipate the expected declaration of war. At various times therefore, war was falsely assumed to have broken out. At this time Larkin once again believed war had been declared. Larkin to F. M. Dimond, June 25, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, p. 247.

interference in the pre-destined march of California to American rule. To the Department of State the American Consul described the growth of European interest in California and related the current reports of European schemes. Not satisfied with this, Larkin forwarded a similar but much stronger account to the New York Journal of Commerce. Sent in early July, 1845, Larkin's reports did not reach the East until October, where they exploded upon the raging controversy over Texas and Oregon.

To the Secretary of State, James Buchanan, Larkin announced that there was "no doubt in this Country" that the Mexican troops were being sent to California

> ...by the instigation of the English Government under the plea that the American settlers in California want to revolutionize the Country. It is rumoured that two English houses in Mexico have become bound to the new General to accept his drafts for funds to pay his Troops for eighteen months.[193]

Larkin continued his philippic against European intrigue by reporting that the British had appointed a vice-consul for California. (Forbes was appointed in 1842 and took up his duties in 1843). The vice-consul, Larkin revealed, was permitted to reside nearly fifty miles into the interior. Even if there were a large amount of British commerce in California (there was not), the vice-consul would be of no service far in the interior. This British agent, Larkin suggested, "is no doubt kept under pay for other purposes." The American Consul disclosed further that a French consul had recently arrived in Monterey. Not only did this Frenchman receive an enormous (and galling) salary of over four thousand dollars a year, but he had "no apparent business to do."

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[193]Larkin to Buchanan, July 10, 1845. Ibid., p. 266.

To lend a hint of urgency to his warning, Larkin added that the French Sloop of War Heroine and the British ship America were daily expected to land in Monterey.[194]

The anonymous Monterey correspondent had long tried to arouse American interest in California. Larkin knew that threats of European intrigue haunted Americans and probably decided that this was the best way to capture his countrymen's attention. In his Journal of Commerce article (written at the same time of his official dispatch to Buchanan), Larkin praised the bounty of California but pointed to the danger of European interference in the province. To his American readers, Larkin proclaimed that there was "no doubt" that the Mexican troops were being sent to California by the "instigatin of the English under the pretext that the Am[ericans] are settlng in the C[alifornia] too fast and will one day obtain possessin." Following the substance of his official dispatch, Larkin reported the British vice-consul's ability to reside in the interior—far from his supposed duties—and his close ties with the Hudson's Bay Company. Larkin also announced the arrival of the French Consul in Monterey with his exorbitant salary. Except for the Hudson's Bay Company, Larkin declared, the British and French had virtually no commerce on the California coast—"Ther Consul therefore have nothig to do apparenty." To Larkin and many of his readers this

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[194]Ibid., pp. 266-267. At the urging of French residents, travelers and officials in Mexico and California, the French government finally appointed a consul at Monterey in 1843. Abraham P. Nasatir, ed., "The French Consulate in California, 1843-1856," California Historical Society Quarterly, XI (September, 1932), 199-203. Perhaps Larkin only forgot that he had earlier urged the appointment of a French consul at Monterey. Larkin to Gauden, April 21, 1844. Hammond, Vol. II, pp. 103-104.

meant only one thing—the European powers were plotting to check the progress of manifest destiny in California. To the Monterey correspondent at least, the threat was clear and imminent: "Why they are in Service there Govt best know and Uncle Sam will know to his cost."[195] To concerned expansionists, Larkin's warnings proved that the slow but ultimate course of the Texas method of expansion was menaced in California by the unwarranted interference of the European powers.

While sounding the tocsin against European intrigues, Larkin also maintained that the appealing province could still be saved for the United States. To the Secretary of State he reported that although the Californians wished to govern themselves, they preferred American troops to the Mexican cholos. Despite the disruptions of the past months, Larkin related, "Our countrymen continue to receive, every assurance of safety and protection from the present Government."[196] To the eastern journal the Monterey correspondent described the great commercial and agricultural benefits of California and revealed that the ties that held the province to Mexico were ready to snap. California was of no use to Mexico—"It must change owners." Inevitably and perhaps soon, Larkin insisted, California would be "peopled by another race."[197] Although the Europeans were meddling in the province,

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[195]Larkin to the Journal of Commerce, July, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 292-296.

[196]Larkin to Buchanan, July 10, 1845. Ibid., p. 267.

[197]Larkin to the Journal of Commerce, July, 1845. Ibid., pp. 294-295. See the discussion above on Larkin's promotion of California to the Eastern press, pp. 59-64.

the Consul and correspondent advised that the United States could still respond to the challenge before California was lost forever.

Larkin's vehement warnings of European interference in California were to exert a potent impact on public, press and president. As events and evidence soon showed however, never had Larkin's reports been more unreliable. Great Britain of course had no territorial ambitions to gratify in California. Although the great power had no desire to see California fall under American sway, she took no definite action to prevent it. The Hudson's Bay Company had previously decided to abandon its California operations and finally withdrew completely in 1846. The British vice-consul was not the harbinger of British interference in California; his dispatches were barely noticed in London. Indeed, Vice-Consul Forbes later cooperated with Larkin's efforts to bring United States authority to California. The dreaded Mexican expedition to subdue California had never been supported by Great Britain and it soon disintegrated before it began.[198]

The Consul's actions and motives in this incident are subject to question. Larkin had always taken great care to present the most accurate information available, yet his July reports were totally wrong on nearly every count. Did he knowingly exaggerate the danger of European interference and thus deliberately deceive the American public and government? Although he had reason to doubt the rumors, Larkin allowed himself to believe them. Rumors of European interference had been widely circulated and believed; Larkin was not the only one to credit them. The report of the British support for the Mexican

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[198]Pletcher, p. 281.

expedition of reconquest had been confirmed by many different sources, but Larkin knew all the earlier rumors proved to be spurious. Furthermore, Larkin should have been aware that Forbes' residence in the interior was but his condition of filling the post, not a signal of foul British ambitions. Later Larkin became familiar with the full tenor of Forbes' instructions, directing the vice-consul not to interfere in affairs in California. In July however, Forbes and Larkin were feuding and probably not communicating, causing Larkin to be ever more suspicious of the Englishman's intentions. Confronted with a threat to his hopes for California, Larkin's suspicions and disapproval of European influence impinged his usual good sense. The Consul and leading merchant had great personal and financial interests in seeing American rule come to California. Partly from self-interested motives, Larkin overreacted to the false spector of European interference. To Consul Larkin the inevitable "march of our western people" to California was simply too important to be imperiled or delayed.

On reaching the East Coast, the American Consul's July reports stirred a wave of apprehension and excitement over the future of California. At the end of May, 1845, Larkin's report of the native Californian revolt against Governor Micheltorena had been received in the East. In response the expansionist press had sounded loud warnings against European interference and called for the acquisition of the province. More than ever, the public and the press were concerned with

California and wary of European intentions.[199] When Larkin's later and more urgent July reports were received in October of 1845, the public, the expansionist press and the administration were prepared to credit his warnings and heed his call for the acquisition of California to overcome European interference.

The nation's expansionist press, led by the New York Herald and the New York Sun, had been waging a ceaseless campaign for the Pacific province. Expansionist editors repeated the well-worn rumors of European intrigue in California and grieved at the prospects. Increasing pressure was brought to bear on the President to respond to the foreign threat.[200] When Larkin's July warnings were received in October the expansionist press burst out with strident demands for the United States to react positively. By October 4, the nation knew of the reports that Mexico was planning to send troops to California "to preserve that part of the republic from being dismembered."[201] Just two weeks later came Larkin's authoritative report that the troops were being supplied at the "instigation of the English."

The New York Journal of Commerce printed its Monterey correspondent's article on October 16, 1845 and the nation's alarmed expansionist press broadcast the disturbing news across the country. On

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[199]Larkin to Calhoun, January 25, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 22-24; Larkin to the Secretary of State, March 24, 1845. Ibid., pp. 95-96. Pletcher, p. 263.

[200]Pletcher, pp. 279-280; R. W. Van Alstyne, The Rising American Empire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 140.

[201]From the Boston Daily Advertiser, reprinted in Niles' National Register, LXIX (October 4, 1845), 65.

October 20, the Washington Semi-Weekly Union reprinted Larkin's "very important and interesting letter." The unnamed correspondent's warnings, declared the paper, demonstrated that "Affairs in that part of the world are evidently reaching a critical point. Our surmises with regard to English and French designs on the coast of the Pacific are greatly strengthened by this letter."[202] The Daily Union reprinted Larkin's letter the next day, the Charleston Mercury on October 22 and the Niles' National Register on November 29, as Larkin's warning of European interference in California found its way into newspapers around the nation.[203]

The expansionist press reaction to Larkin's warnings was both immediate and strong. The Washington Semi-Weekly Union demanded that Congress should provide for a commercial agent in California "with ample means and power to look after and protect American interests and property in that quarter." Not knowing the Monterey correspondent's identity, the Union called for the appointment of "efficient resident consuls" at Mazatlan, Monterey and Acapulco, "to watch foreign and domestic movements against the commercial interests of the United States." Larkin's upsetting news confirmed the Union's opinion that "our interest in the Pacific is too large to permit of the European possession of the bay of San Francisco, and colonization and government of California."[204]

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[202]Washington Semi-Weekly Union, October 20, 1845.

[203]Washington Daily Union, October 21, 1845. Niles' National Register, LXIX (November 29, 1845), 203-204. See also, Cleland, Early Sentiment, p. 17.

[204]Washington Semi-Weekly Union, October 20, 1845. See also, Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 115.

Invigorated by Larkin's report from Monterey the expansionist press renewed its powerful campaign for California. Although President Polk claimed he had "but little opportunity to read newspapers,"[205] the verbal warfare in the nation's press brought additional pressure on the administration. Strangely enough, if Polk did ignore Larkin's newspaper reports (not knowing they were his), the President nevertheless depended heavily on the Consul's official reports. On October 11, Larkin's July dispatch to Secretary Buchanan finally arrived in Washington. The Polk administration had no way of knowing that nearly all of Larkin's information was inaccurate; his earlier reports had always been highly reliable. Although he probably never met the Consul, the President considered Larkin "a very efficient and patriotic man."[206]

The Polk administration regarded the Consul at Monterey as a trusted observer and relied greatly on his detailed reports. Perhaps more important, however, administration agents in Mexico substantiated Larkin's forebodings of European interference in California. These agents provided further testimony for the most distressing of Larkin's reports. Like the Monterey Consul, United States agents in Mexico had warned the administration of European intrigue in California. Closer to the center of events, the Mexico City agents provided information even more misleading than Larkin's. These agents were months

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[205]Milo Milton Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, Vol. I (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1910), December 19, 1845, pp. 126-127.

[206]Samuel J. Hastings to Larkin, January 22, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 177-178; Atherton to Larkin, December 3, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 290.

nearer Washington. Their reports were thus more recent than Larkin's first-hand but dated news of California. Anxious for the most up-to-date intelligence, the administration was forced to depend on its Mexico City agents in order to surmise what already may have occurred in distant California.

United States representatives in Mexico had long been interested in California, especially British intentions for the province. In 1843 Waddy Thompson, the United States Minister to Mexico, sounded out the Mexican chieftain, Santa Anna. Thompson suggested that in some future war England might seize some portion of Mexican territory, California perhaps, and retain possession of it. Santa Anna responded cleverly, "Oh, your Government will not permit that; will it?"[207] In early 1845 Thompson's successor, Wilson Shannon, reported definitely that a secret "negociation was going on between Santa Anna and the English Minister for the sale of the two Californias." There was "no doubt," Shannon affirmed, that the English Minister had acted under instructions from his government—"it may therefore be assumed that it is the settled policy of the English Government to acquire the possession of the two Californias."[208]

Before the latter half of 1845, the Polk administration thus had good reason to suspect British intentions for California.[209] Then, in addition to Larkin's warnings, came further reports from administration agents in Mexico. In July, 1845, the Polk administration received

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[207]Thompson to Upshur, October 3, 1843. Manning, pp. 563-564.

[208]Shannon to Calhoun, January 9, 1845. Manning, pp. 695-696.

[209]For a discussion of Polk's reaction to the news of foreign intrigue see, Cleland, Early Sentiment, pp. 82-97.

word from William S. Parrott, a confidential agent in Mexico, that British interference was hampering his efforts to approach the Mexican government. Parrott also relayed the disturbing news that

> Great Britain has greatly increased her Naval Forces in the Pacific, the object of which, as stated, is, to take possession of, and hold upper California, in case of a war between the U. S. & Mexico—to secure the interests of some of her subjects in a mortgage on a nominal part of that Territory.[210]

In August Parrott reported the proposed Mexican expedition to subdue California. Even more than Larkin, Parrott credited the wild accounts of European influence in the project. He reported the condemning news that the commander of the force was educated in France. The expedition was therefore expected to be "turned to french account, under the direction of the french Legation here." This was apparent, Parrott suggested, because the commander "certainly takes with him a large number of frenchmen, for some purpose or other."[211]

On the same day Larkin's July dispatch reached Washington (October 11), the administration received another alarming dispatch from Parrott, written in September. The confidential agent relayed the suspicious news that "Every thing coming from California, excites great interest here in English circles. The British Legation is all alive on such occasions."[212] Six days later more disturbing news arrived from John Black, United States Consul at Mexico City. Black reported it was now uncertain if the Mexican expedition would go to California. But a

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[210]Parrott to Buchanan, May 13, 1845. Manning, pp. 715-716. See also Reeves, p. 270.

[211]Parrott to Buchanan, August 5, 1845. Manning, p. 745.

[212]Parrott to Buchanan, September 2, 1845. Manning, p. 748.

secret express had arrived from California and the Consul was not sure that something grave had not happened in the province.[213] From three different sources, Larkin, Parrott and Black, it appeared that something strange and suspicious was afoot in California.

Supported by Parrott's and Black's reports, Larkin's grim intelligence of European interference in California tormented an already suspicious and troubled administration. Locked in a critical struggle with powerful foreign governments over Texas, Oregon and now California, James K. Polk deeply mistrusted European intentions. Now a trusted agent provided convincing evidence to confirm his worst fears—Great Britain was plotting to frustrate his favored plan to win California. Alerted by Larkin's warnings, expansionist editors and politicians exerted increasing pressure on the administration.[214] The shocked administration responded by taking vigorous steps to counter the impending threat. For the next six weeks, Larkin's disturbing information influenced administration action in the Oregon and Texas disputes, as well as for California. New orders were issued to General

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[213]Black to Buchanan, September 2, 1845. Manning, p. 749. See also Black to Buchanan, August 23, 1845. Manning, pp. 745-746.

[214]Several days after Larkin's report arrived, Secretary of War William Marcy received a letter from Aaron Leggett, a New York friend with connections in California (and claims against Mexico). Leggett informed Marcy that there was an agreement pending whereby California would be guaranteed independence by Britain and France, provided the province would promise never to join the United States. Leggett also repeated the news that England and France had consuls in California, which he had read in Larkin's Journal of Commerce article. "An Important Letter: Aaron Leggett to William L. Marcy, October 16, 1845," California Historical Society Quarterly, XI (March, 1932), 33-34. See also Pletcher, p. 282.

Taylor and Commodore Sloat. Most of all, President Polk moved to meet the British challenge by seeking to secure California first.[215]

Easily the clearest indication that Larkin's July dispatch had shaken the administration is a letter James Buchanan, the Secretary of State, wrote to Louis McLane only three days after receiving Larkin's dispiriting dispatch. McLane, the United States Minister to Great Britain, was engaged in lengthy, sensitive negotiations over the settlement of the Oregon border issue. In a private letter to the Minister, Buchanan explained the administration's latest information on European intentions. The Secretary avowed that Great Britain and France were disposed to "meddle in the concern of this continent" and there were "strong suspicions" the European powers were intriguing in Mexico and California. Buchanan announced that these suspicions had inflamed American passions against Great Britain. The Secretary then revealed the source of the information that had raised such a stir:

> By advices from Monterey of the 10th of July last, we are informed of the arrival of a British and French consul in upper California without any ostensible business.[216]

Buchanan continued to cite much of Larkin's report, directly quoting passages of the July dispatch. Prompted by Larkin's warnings, Buchanan advised McLane that the administration suspected that Great

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[215]Only indirect evidence exists to demonstrate Larkin's impact on the administration. Most historians are convinced, however, that Larkin's information stirred the administration into action. See for example, Sellers, pp. 333-334; Pletcher, pp. 281-282; Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, pp. 109-110.

[216]Buchanan to McLane, October 14, 1845. Quoted in Cleland, Early Sentiment, pp. 93-94.

Britain was planning to interfere in California and warned the Minister to be on guard against such happenings:

> I need not say to you what a flame would be kindled throughout the Union should Great Britain obtain a cession of California from Mexico or attempt to take possession of that province.[217]

Soon after receiving Larkin's unsettling news from California, President Polk became convinced that "Great Brittain had her eye on that country and intended to possess it if she could."[218] Polk was certainly not going to "permit California to pass into possession of any new colony planted by Great Britain or any foreign Monarchy."[219] While suspecting British ambitions, however, Polk was "exceedingly desirous" to obtain California himself.[220] Due to the danger of European interference, the timetable for the acquisition of California had to be stepped up. The proven Texas method of expansion might not be given a fair chance to operate in California; it might even be necessary to speed the process along a bit. James K. Polk decided more forceful action was required if California was to be saved.

Reacting to the threat of European interference, the Polk administration took decisive military steps on October 16 and 17 in connection with California and Texas. General Zachary Taylor, in command of United States troops in Texas, was ordered to approach the

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[217]Ibid.

[218]Quaife, Vol. I, October 24, 1845, p. 71.

[219]Ibid.

[220]Polk to Slidell, November 10, 1845. Richard R. Stenberg, ed., "President Polk and California: Additional Documents," Pacific Historical Review, X (June, 1941), 217.

Rio Grande "as near...as circumstances will permit, having reference to reasonable security."[221] Taylor was also directed to observe local conditions in preparation for possible future orders to march to the Rio Grande or for the opening of hostilities with Mexico. The Polk administration deemed these measures necessary in order to check "any attempted incursions by the Mexican forces or the Indian tribes."[222] At the same time, further orders were sent to Commodore Sloat, the United States naval commander in the Pacific. On October 17, George Bancroft, the Secretary of the Navy, amended Sloat's orders of June 24, 1845. The Commodore was no longer directed to occupy the California ports only on a certain declaration of war by Mexico, but also "in the event of actual hostilities."[223] The Polk administration was purposively putting its military forces on a more advanced footing. To insure that Great Britain would not obtain the province, Polk prepared United States military forces for swift, preventative action. At the earliest sign of hostilities, United States troops would seize California and march into the disputed Rio Grande region. The European powers would not be permitted the chance to interfere.

To acquire California President Polk was fully prepared to go to war, as he later demonstrated. In October and November, however, he hoped to secure the province by means short of war. Polk devised a multifaceted but basically simple program to win California. The plan

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[221]Pletcher, p. 282.

[222]Stenberg, "Polk and Fremont," p. 214.

[223]Rives, Vol. II, p. 168. For Sloat's June orders, see above pp. 70-71.

gathered strength from its inherent flexibility but was weakened by dependence on uncontrollable agents and unpredictable events. An important part of the Polk plan was to attempt to purchase California from Mexico—the famous Slidell mission.[224] Another equally promising part of the plan was not as well known as it involved secrecy and intrigue. This scheme envisioned the peaceful acquisition of California by the voluntary consent of its inhabitants and it involved the Consul at Monterey.

Thomas O. Larkin had warned the administration of European intrigue in California; it would of course be necessary to guard against that. But the Consul had also reported that the bonds that tied California to Mexico were near the breaking point. Further, Larkin held out the appealing possibility that the native Californians might be persuaded to enter voluntarily the American Union. The Californians would in effect become willing participants in their own Texas-style revolution. Like the "Lone Star Republic," the new pacific republic would soon wish to be annexed to the United States. This possibility had always intrigued President Polk. He never lost hope in securing California with the aid or acquiescence of the native Californians. If California was moving toward independence from Mexico, why not encourage such a favorable development? Polk—dubbed "the Mendacious" by his detractors—was naturally attracted to schemes

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[224]Richard R. Stenberg claims that Polk intended the ill-fated Slidell mission to fail from the first. "Polk and California," p. 61. Most historians would agree with Charles Sellers that Polk accepted the possibility of war but genuinely hoped Mexico could be coerced into ceding California, p. 338.

of intrigue.[225] Why not authorize a confidential agent in California? While combating European interference in the province the agent could smooth the way for the coming of United States rule. Polk probably believed the scheme might just work; California might be won without war and without handing millions of American dollars over to Mexico. If nothing came of the scheme, what would be lost? California could still be purchased or if necessary wrenched from Mexico.

Thomas O. Larkin was the obvious choice for such a sensitive and vital mission. The Consul shared Polk's deep suspicion of European interference and had proven to be a discreet and reliable agent. More importantly, Larkin enjoyed valuable influence with the native Californians. Consequently, Polk decided to entrust the secret mission to his Monterey consul. On October 17, Secretary of State Buchanan, at Polk's direction, drafted the administration's reply to Consul Larkin.[226]

James Buchanan's return dispatch to Larkin was an important indication of the administration's concern for California. To the Consul, Buchanan affirmed that "the future destiny of that Country is a subject of anxious solicitude for the government and people of the United States." The Secretary announced that although "in the contest

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[225]Polk of course had a well-deserved reputation for "disingenuousness" and was well-disposed to schemes involving confidential agents. Additionally, a New York correspondent had advised the President that it might be wise to have "an active, discreet and intelligent agent" in California in order "to protect American citizens and give to our government the earliest information." Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 115.

[226]Buchanan to Larkin, October 17, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 44-47. This significant dispatch will be quoted extensively in the succeeding paragraphs.

between Mexico and California we can take no part," the Polk administration would "not view with indifference the transfer of California to Great Britain or any other European Power." If California was threatened with European seizure, Buchanan warned, then the United States would be forced to "vigorously interpose" to prevent it.[227]

To meet the threat of European interference in California, the Polk administration appointed Larkin as its confidential agent in the Mexican province. Agent Larkin was cautioned "not to awaken the jealousy of the French and English agents in California by assuming any other than your Consular character." The new agent's immediate mission was to "exert the greatest vigilance in discovering and defeating any attempts which may be made by Foreign Governments to acquire a control over that Country." Larkin was not only to "discover and defeat" European attempts at interference, but also he was

> ...prudently to warn the Government and people of California of the danger of such an interference to their peace and prosperity.

Most significantly, agent Larkin was to carry this one step further and

> ...inspire them with a jealousy of European dominion and to arouse in their bosoms that love of liberty and independence so natural to the American Continent.

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[227]Buchanan repeated much of Larkin's information on European interference in California from his July dispatch. As Frederick Merk suggests, this was probably done as built-in insurance against future censure for the Larkin mission. Manifest Destiny, p. 74. The inclusion of Larkin's overdrawn warnings, however, would have serious repercussions. Without realizing the circumstances, others, such as John C. Fremont, would read and act on the information contained in the administration's dispatch.

The Consul and confidential agent was therefore not only to warn the Californians against European intrigue, but to encourage the growth of a spirit of Californian independence. The Polk administration proposed that it could not interfere in the internal affairs of Mexico, but it offered a movement for Californian independence the strong support of the United States:

> ...should California assert and maintain her independence, we shall render her all the kind offices in our power as a Sister Republic. This Government has no ambitious aspirations to gratify and no desire to extend our Federal system over more Territory than we already possess, unless by the free and spontaneous wish of the Independent people of adjoining Territories.

At the same time it was denouncing European ambitions for California, the Polk administration was inducing a province of a neighboring nation to declare its independence. Even more remarkably, through its agent the administration offered an independent California an equal place in the American Union:

> Whilst the President will make no effort and use no influence to induce California to become one of the free and independent States of this Union, yet if the people should desire to unite their destiny with ours, they would be received as brethen, whenever this can be done, without affording Mexico just cause of complaint.[228]

The Polk administration was indeed making an effort and using influence to induce California to separate from Mexico and join the United States. That was the admitted purpose of this dispatch and the Larkin

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[228]The Larkin dispatch was long kept a secret; primarily due to this sensitive passage. In 1886, Josiah Royce obtained access to the original dispatch in the State Department. He was shown the dispatch but the section offering the Californians equal status as "brethren" was kept concealed by a cloth. Only when Royce informed the Secretary of State that he already had a full copy (which he had obtained from Hubert H. Bancroft) was the cloth removed. Royce, pp. 142-143.

mission. With the hoped for consent of its inhabitants, the area of freedom would be extended across California—"and there can be no possible objection to that." With a minimum of pain and political trouble, Polk would attain the acquisition of California.

President Polk hoped the Larkin mission would bring ultimate success, but he was unable to depend on it. An uncertain proposition at best, the mission would require an unknown amount of time to develop. It would take months for the dispatch just to reach Larkin! The administration did its best to hurry the dispatch to its agent; meanwhile alternate plans for California would have to be pursued. Perhaps Larkin's mission was the ideal prospect, but less savory methods would have to be relied on. An attractive alternative was to put pressure on Mexico to cede California. Polk was willing to pay forty million dollars for California, but Taylor's troops were the clearest inducement he offered Mexico to "sell."[229]

Administration interest in the attempt to purchase California had been raised by William Parrott, a confidential agent in Mexico, Parrott advised the administration that "an Envoy possessing suitable qualifications" might be able to settle the Texas boundary issue "over a breakfast."[230] In the process, Parrott suggested, California might also be obtained. John Slidell of Louisiana was recruited to make the attempt. The "envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary" was authorized to "adjust a permanent boundary between Mexico and the

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[229]Quaife, Vol. I, September 15, 1845, pp. 34-35; Polk to Slidell, November 10, 1845. Stenberg, "Polk and California," p. 217.

[230]Parrott to Buchanan, August 26, 1845. Quoted in Reeves, p. 271.

United States." Polk hoped the boundary would be drawn to include California and New Mexico.[231]

Slidell's instructions were initially prepared on September 16, 1845. At that time it appeared the only sure way to secure California was through forced negotiations or even war. Then, nearly a month later, Larkin's July dispatch indicated that California might be won by means other than war. The British, however, appeared to be scheming in the province. More than ever the administration hoped the Slidell mission would settle the dispute with Mexico. California might be obtained by negotiation or voluntary separation; in the meantime it was absolutely essential that California not be ceded to England.[232] Adjusting Slidell's instructions, Buchanan warned the Ambassador of European interference in California:

> There is another subject of vast importance to the United States, which will demand your particular attention. From information possessed by the Department it is to be seriously apprehended that both Great Britain and France have designs upon California. The views of the Government of the United States on this subject you will find presented in my dispatch to Thomas O. Larkin, Esqr., our consul at Monterey, dated October 17, 1845, a copy of which is herewith transmitted.[233]

Ambassador Slidell was alerted to the dangers of European interference in California and cautioned to "ascertain whether Mexico has any

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[231]Polk wrote to Slidell that it was Parrott's "opinion...that both New Mexico and California could be had, for $15,000,000." Stenberg charged that Polk deliberately misrepresented Parrott's opinion, in order to prove his sincerity for the Slidell mission. "Polk and California," pp. 217-218.

[232]Sellers, p. 335.

[233]Buchanan to Slidell, November 10, 1845. Moore, Vol. VI, p. 304.

intention of ceding it to the one or the other power" and to exert all his energy "to prevent an act which...would be so fraught with danger to the best interests of the United States." By the dispatch to Larkin, Slidell was aware that a surreptitious administration project would soon be under way in California. To guide him further, Slidell was instructed to communicate directly with the administration's agent in Monterey.[234]

Larkin's connection to the Slidell mission was demonstrated further after Slidell had journeyed to Mexico. In September Larkin addressed another dispatch to the administration. The Consul reported that the Mexican troops were still expected in California, but that it was no longer certain that the funds were provided by the British. No matter, Larkin advised, these troops would not be able to subdue the restless Californians. Even more interesting, Larkin announced that the situation was so disjointed in California that "the people hardly care what Flag is exchanged for their own."[235]

The Consul's latest dispatch reached Washington in early December. From this dispatch it appeared that a British seizure of the province was no longer as imminent. Best of all, the administration's hopes to acquire California by a movement of independence seemed even brighter. No longer was it absolutely vital that Slidell obtain California. The province might yet be secured by the favored Texas method. Buchanan thus instructed Slidell that if the attempt to

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[234]Ibid.

[235]Larkin to Buchanan, September 29, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 367-369.

purchase California would hinder his chances of obtaining the Rio Grande border or New Mexico, he was "not to sacrifice these in the pursuit of what is unattainable."[236] In early December at least, the Polk administration was pinning its hopes on the approaching Larkin mission.

Together the Slidell and Larkin missions complimented each other perfectly. By keeping in direct communication, the two agents could tailor their strategies accordingly. At the same time, the two missions were totally independent.[237] Each offered some hope of success, but the failure of one need not jeopardize the success of the other. Should Larkin experience some measure of success, Mexico might be more readily persuaded to part with her rebellious northern province. Should Slidell obtain a cession of California, the transition to American rule would have been eased by Larkin's efforts.

Buttressing the entire plan was Commodore Sloat and his squadron hovering watchfully in the Pacific. Sloat had been instructed to seize California "in the event of actual hostilities." But he was also included in the administration's secret plans for California. A duplicate of the Larkin instructions were sent to the Commodore at Mazatlán, Mexico. Sloat was directed to cooperate with Larkin and to "do everything that is proper to conciliate towards our Country the most friendly regard of the people of California."[238] In addition, Sloat was to

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[236]Sellers, pp. 336-337; Pletcher, p. 291.

[237]Unless of course Larkin's mission came to light. This would have produced quite a stir and probably would have wrecked any hopes of negotiation.

[238]Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 75.

distribute copies of the Texas Constitution, conveniently translated into Spanish. On December 5 he was ordered to move his squadron closer to Oregon and California. The Commodore was told to watch British activities on the coast and to keep in constant communication with the Consul at Monterey.[239]

By December of 1845, President Polk's well-conceived plan for the acquisition of California was maturing steadily. While Slidell was attempting to purchase California, Larkin would soon be encouraging the dissatisfied province to separate from Mexico. Either mission might bring success, but if they did not, General Taylor and Commodore Sloat were standing by to impose American power. Confident that his plans would succeed, Polk felt strong enough to warn the European powers to stay clear of California. In his first annual message to Congress on December 2, Polk reinvoked the nearly-forgotten doctrine of President Monroe. "The United States," Polk cautioned, "can not in silence permit any European interference on the North American continent, and should any such interference be attempted will be ready to resist it at any and all hazards."[240] Looking towards California and hinting at the prospects of the Larkin mission, the President announced:

> We must ever maintain the principle that the people of this continent alone have the right to decide their own destiny. Should any portion of them, constituting an independent state, propose to unite themselves with our Confederacy, this will be a question for them and us to determine without any foreign interposition.

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[239]Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[240]Richardson, Vol. V, pp. 2248.

While admonishing the European powers for interference, Polk overlooked his instructions to Larkin and affirmed:

> It is well known to the American people and to all nations that this Government has never interfered with the relations subsisting between other governments. We have never made ourselves parties to their wars or their alliances; we have not sought their territories by conquest; we have not mingled with parties in their domestic struggles; and believing our own form of government to be the best, we have never attempted to propagate it by intrigues, by diplomacy, or by force.

Meanwhile Polk's dispatch to Larkin was slowly meandering its way on its long journey to the agent at Monterey.

CHAPTER V

RIPE FOR FALLING

A major element of President Polk's plan to win California was embodied in the October instructions to agent Larkin. Commodore R. F. Stockton in command of the frigate Congress was selected to carry the dispatch to the Consul at Monterey. On the same day Larkin's instructions were readied (October 17, 1845), Stockton was issued orders that he was not to open until he cleared the capes of Virginia. These secret orders directed the Commodore to sail for California and deliver "in person, or by a trustworthy hand" the administration's dispatch to Larkin. Stockton was also ordered to become an active member in the President's plan to secure California:

> You will confer with the Consul, gain all the information you can on Mexican affairs and do all in your power to conciliate the good feeling of that place towards the United States.[241]

After delivering the dispatch, Stockton and the Congress were to join Sloat's Pacific squadron.

The Congress would need several months to round Cape Horn and reach the California coast. Far too much precious time had already slipped by since Larkin penned his July account. A few weeks or even days might make all the difference in the struggle for a Pacific empire.

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[241]Bancroft to Stockton, October 17, 1845. Printed in Irving Berdine Richman, California Under Spain and Mexico, 1535-1847 (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1965), pp. 528-529. Stockton was also directed to deliver the United States Commissioner and Consul to the Sandwich Islands, and thus did not reach Monterey until June 23, 1846, after the outbreak of the Bear Flag Revolt.

Polk was determined the Larkin mission would begin as quickly as possible. Reflecting this sense of urgency, the administration decided to send a duplicate of the dispatch to Larkin overland by special courier. Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie of the Marine Corps was recruited to undertake the perilous crossing of central Mexico. Gillespie was chosen for this delicate mission not only because he was a capable young officer, but he also spoke Spanish fluently.[242]

The dispatch to agent Larkin was a remarkably sensitive document. Should it become public knowledge (as Slidell's secret mission did), it would produce a political and diplomatic tumult. The Polk administration thus took great care to provide appropriate "cover" for its secret courier. Gillespie was to be disguised as a businessman traveling across Mexico on his way to Monterey. The Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, provided Gillespie papers identifying him as a business agent of Bryant, Sturgis & Company, a well-known Boston firm with large business interests in California.[243] Further, since Larkin had no cipher code, Gillespie was to commit the dispatch to memory and destroy it before landing in Mexico. These elaborate precautions proved wise—Gillespie's luggage was searched closely on his arrival in Vera Cruz.[244]

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[242]Marti, p. 7.

[243]Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 74.

[244]Rives, Vol. II, p. 169; Marti, p. 9.

Lieutenant Gillespie was not only to deliver the instructions to Larkin, but also to

> ...watch over the interests of the United States and to counteract the influence of any foreign agents who might be in the country with objects prejudicial to the United.States.[245]

Gillespie was thus to join agent Larkin in rooting out the European schemes in California the Consul had warned against in his July dispatch. More significantly, the Lieutenant was also to cooperate fully with Larkin's mission to encourage the Californians to separate from Mexico.[246]

Before leaving for California, Gillespie was summoned to the White House (on October 30) for a confidential meeting with President Polk. Larkin's instructions were necessarily couched in vague, ambiguous terms—the administration could hardly have been perfectly straightforward in authorizing such a sensitive mission. If the President's plan was to succeed, however, Larkin must fully understand what was expected of him. Polk wanted to make sure Gillespie understood his intentions and could explain them to the Consul if needed. In this last meeting with the secret courier, Polk explained these things and gave Gillespie his last minute instructions. The President

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[245]Gillespie's testimony to the Senate Committee (investigating claims arising out of the conquest of California) is quoted in Marti, p. 38.

[246]Buchanan to Larkin, October 17, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 46.

may also have warned the Lieutenant that should the Larkin and Slidell missions fail, war might be the unfortunate result.[247]

Lieutenant Gillespie was also entrusted with a packet of family letters from Senator Thomas Hart Benton and his daughter, Jessie Benton Frémont, addressed to her husband, John C. Frémont. The famous explorer was then on his third expedition to the West, surveying the best routes to the Pacific. At this time, Polk was attempting to gain Benton's support for his troubled Oregon policy and soon to be announced restatement of the Monroe Doctrine.[248] As a favor to the powerful Senator, Polk offered to have the Benton family letters delivered by the administration's courier, already scheduled to leave for California. The Lieutenant was told he would probably find Captain Frémont near the Sacramento River. Since Gillespie was now to meet the explorer, Polk decided to have him repeat the Larkin instructions to Frémont. Captain Frémont, commanding a body of

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[247]Quaife, Vol. I, October 30, 1845, pp. 83-84. In this entry, Polk recorded that Gillespie's "secret instructions & the letter to Mr. Larkin" would explain the object of Gillespie's mission. Other historians have inferred from this that Polk possibly gave Gillespie additional "secret instructions" authorizing an American revolt in California. See for example Stenberg, "Polk and Frémont," pp. 218-219. Such a construction is unnecessary and probably unwarranted. Gillespie had been given plenty of "secret instructions"—his entire mission was secret! Polk did not refer to any additional instructions but linked Gillespie's mission directly to the Larkin instructions.

[248]Quaife, Vol. I, October 12, 1845, pp. 55-56; October 24, 1845, pp. 68-72.

United States troops in a foreign land, could then guide his conduct accordingly and perhaps assist Larkin and Gillespie in some manner.[249]

In many ways, Lieutenant Gillespie was the key man in Polk's attempt to secure California by voluntary separation from Mexico. He was to deliver the dispatch to Larkin and aid the Consul in any way he could. Indeed, the extent of Larkin's success would hinge on how well Gillespie fulfilled his appointed role. Gillespie was also to bring Frémont into the scheme, acquaint the explorer with the President's plans and serve as intermediary between Larkin and Frémont. Gillespie's mission did not proceed as smoothly as Polk would have liked. By December the courier was still in Mexico City, delayed by the Paredes revolt. Early in the next year, Gillespie managed to reach Mazatlán and make contact with Commodore Sloat. The Lieutenant delivered Sloat's orders (from the Secretary of the Navy) and apprised the Commodore of the Larkin mission. Sloat arranged for the sloop-of-war Cyane to transport Gillespie to Monterey by way of the Sandwich Islands, the usual route. Back on October 17, 1845, Polk had hoped the Larkin mission could get underway as quickly as possible. Due to

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[249]Marti, p. 38; John Adam Hussey, "The Origin of the Gillespie Mission," California Historical Society Quarterly, XIV (March, 1940), p. 51. Frémont later insisted these family letters conveyed (through a secret family code) authorization for his revolutionary activities in California. See Frémont's testimony to the court-martial board in Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, pp. 373-374 and "The Conquest of California," pp. 919, 923. Nearly all historians deny Frémont's claim. See for example: Nevins, p. 238, DeVoto, p. 194; George Tays, "Frémont Had No Secret Instructions," Pacific Historical Review, IX (June, 1940), pp. 157-163. Royce, pp. 143-146, demonstrates the Benton family letters were originally intended to travel by the regular consular mails. For a slightly different view, see Marti, pp. 45-46.

insufferable delays, Lieutenant Gillespie did not reach agent Larkin until April 17, 1846, fully six months later.[250]

Since his urgent warnings of July, 1845, Consul Larkin's apprehensions of European interference had gradually subsided. As months passed European influence in the province no longer seemed so suspicious or threatening. Mexican troops were still reported bound for California, but no longer was it absolutely clear that the British were instigating the expedition. In late September, Larkin assured Captain Montgomery of the Portsmouth that despite British schemes, American interests in the province were secure.[251] Most encouraging, the Consul believed the months of uncertainty had dispirited the Californians to the point that they no longer cared "what Flag is exchanged for their own."[252] Larkin's hopes for a peaceful transition to United States rule seemed brighter than ever.

Unknown to the anxious Consul, his hopes received a shattering blow the moment Captain John C. Frémont stepped foot in California. Just as the Mexican cholos, the arrival of Frémont and his band of sixty heavily armed frontiersmen excited the passions and suspicions of the native Californians. Frémont's armed force symbolized United States power and hinted at American ambitions—precisely what Larkin had tried to avoid. Worst of all, Frémont's haughty attitude and

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[250]Rives, Vol. II, pp. 178-179; Marti, pp. 21-22.

[251]Fred Blackburn Rogers, Montgomery and the Portsmouth (San Francisco, John Howell Books, 1958), p. 14.

[252]Larkin to Buchanan, September 29, 1845. Hammond, Vol. III, pp. 367-369.

unwise actions injured the natives' honored pride and aroused their latent distrust of Americans and American expansionist intentions.

Captain Frémont's "scientific" expedition left the United States in May, 1845 and by December the band of explorers had arrived in Mexican California. Frémont left the bulk of his troops on the frontier and proceeded with a few companions to Sutter's Fort. There the Captain arranged for supplies for his men and set out again for Monterey. At Monterey Frémont hoped to obtain badly needed funds, permission to bring his troops into the settlements and perhaps some encouraging news of developments in the struggle with Mexico.[253]

The Captain sought out the American Consul at Monterey and secured a cash advance to obtain supplies.[254] Larkin advised that the explorer's arrival had generated suspicion and it would be best to visit the Californian authorities and explain his intentions.[255] The eager explorer had neglected to provide his company with passports to enter Mexican territory, as required by Mexican law.[256] In company with Consul Larkin, Frémont called on José Castro, the military governor, ex-governor Juan Alvarado, and the Prefect and Alcalde of Monterey. The Captain explained the scientific nature of the

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[253]Sutter to Larkin, December 22, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 127; Frémont's testimony to the court-martial board, Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, p. 372; Frémont, "The Conquest of California," pp. 920-921; Nevins, pp. 220-223.

[254]Larkin to Joel Giles, March 6, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 235-236.

[255]Manuel De Jesús Castro to Larkin, January 29, 1846. Ibid., p. 185.

[256]Tays, "Frémont Had No Secret Instructions," p. 157.

expedition and his intention to explore the Colorado-Gila River area. The Californian leaders received Frémont cordially but were wary of his motives. They had little choice but to acquiesce in his presence. Captain Frémont, however, mistakenly believed he had been granted express approval to remain in the country.[257]

Reunited with his men, Captain Frémont eventually had his party moving again. Inexplicably, he did not head north toward Oregon or southeast toward the Colorado. Instead he marched his force southwest within eighty miles of Monterey, straight through the most settled portion of California. Already leery of Frémont's intentions, the Californians could not tolerate the Captain's latest actions. With ample cause, on March 5 José Castro ordered the misguided explorer to retrace his steps and leave the province at once.[258] Frémont believed he had been betrayed and insulted. Outraged by this apparent insult to his honor, and urged along by his men, Frémont refused to obey the perfectly justifiable order. He barricaded his men on Hawk's Peak in the Gabilan Range, hoisted the American flag and defied the Californians to oust him. Captain Frémont was in direct defiance of a government with which his nation was at peace.[259]

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[257]Frémont testimony, Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, p. 372; Frémont, "The Conquest of California," pp. 920-921.

[258]José Castro to Frémont, March 5, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 228-229.

[259]Frémont, "The Conquest of California," p. 921. Nearly all historians agree Frémont acted illegally and foolishly. See for example Nevins, p. 227.

As General Castro marshaled his forces to meet Frémont's challenge, Consul Larkin could barely believe what was happening. He had made all the proper arrangements and could not see what the explorer had done to warrant his removal. Still, the Consul realized that Frémont must comply with Castro's order.[260] Learning of the decision to order Frémont to quit the province, Larkin requested that Castro send an experienced officer to deliver the order to the excitable explorer. Larkin hoped to prevent the unfortunate incident from degenerating even further.[261]

Captain Frémont's stern refusal to obey the order placed Larkin in an extremely awkward position. He recognized the folly of Frémont's actions, but was still bound to aid the Captain as much as possible. Larkin could not be entirely certain that the explorer was not acting according to official instructions. The Consul held no authority over Frémont, yet was forced to explain his aggressive behavior to the angry Californians. He hoped to maintain his good relations with the Californians but could not abandon Frémont to his fate. Squarely placed on the twin horns of a dilemma, Larkin resignedly admitted "I do not know what I can do."[262]

Frémont's armed confrontation with the Californians deeply alarmed the American Consul. He feared that reprisals might be taken

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[260]Larkin to the Secretary of State, March 5, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 230.

[261]Larkin to José Castro and Manuel De Jesús Castro, March 6, 1846. Ibid., 231.

[262]Larkin to Manuel Díaz, March 6, 1846. Ernest A. Wiltsee, "The British Vice Consul and the Events of 1846," California Historical Society Quarterly, X (June, 1931), p. 163.

on American residents in California. The incident might even spark a war with Mexico.[263] To protect American citizens and interests in the province, Larkin urgently requested that a United States naval vessel be sent to California as soon as possible.[264] Commodore Sloat, who had received his orders to cooperate with the Consul, promptly dispatched Captain Montgomery and the Portsmouth to California. Unfamiliar with the situation, Sloat may have believed this was all part of the preconceived plan. The Commodore directed Montgomery to cooperate with Larkin, distribute the copies of the Texas Constitution and to do "every thing that is proper to conciliate towards our country the most friendly regard of the people of California."[265]

Faced with this impossible situation, Larkin determined to act as a peacemaker and calm tempers on both sides. He suggested that General Castro meet with Frémont to work out an amicable arrangement.[266] Meanwhile the Consul promised to do all he could to convince the Captain to withdraw. To attempt this, Larkin obtained permission from the Alcalde of Monterey to send a message to the embattled explorer.[267]

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[263]Larkin to Díaz, March 10, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 247.

[264]Larkin to the Commander of any American Ship of War in San Blas or Mazatlan, March 9, 1846. Ibid., pp. 243-244.

[265]Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 75; Rogers, pp. 19-20. Sloat took this action on April 1 and the Portsmouth reached Monterey on April 22, 1846.

[266]Larkin to Díaz, March 10, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 247.

[267]Larkin to the Alcalde of Monterey, March 10, 1846. Ibid., p. 246.

On March 9, Larkin's letter was allowed to pass through the Californian lines and arrived at Frémont's camp late in the afternoon.[268]

Consul Larkin warned Frémont against "acts of treachery at night" and advised him to "by no means depend on the natives."[269] He cautioned the explorer that the Californians were gathering their forces for an attack and he could not predict the outcome. Larkin did not attempt to instruct Frémont, but could not see what could be gained by bloodshed. He respectively suggested that the Captain reconsider his position. The Consul assured the explorer he was in good standing with the Californians and offered to act as mediator. He might be able to arrange an honorable withdrawal to a camp farther away from Monterey. If Captain Frémont needed any further assistance, Larkin was prepared to visit the American camp.[270]

As he watched the Californians gather below, Captain Frémont's confidence began to wane. His frontiersmen could make the hillside a slaughterhouse, but they could not withstand a determined, full-scale assault or a prolonged seige. Larkin's message may have finally persuaded the explorer of the dangers of his position and he decided to withdraw that night. When the hastily raised American flag fell to the ground, Frémont used the timely omen to tell his men to prepare to break camp.[271] In the dead of the night, Frémont and his band of

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[268]Bancroft, Vol. V, p. 20.

[269]Larkin's instructions to the Courier, March 8, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 241

[270]Larkin to Frémont, March 8, 1846. Ibid., pp. 239-241.

[271]Nevins, pp. 234-235.

explorers abandoned their fortified position and retired grudgingly to the north. Satisfied to be rid of the troublesome Americans, the Californians allowed them to retire unmolested.

Captain Frémont had bestirred bitter emotions in California. During the excitement the American settlers had grown restless and had begun to rally to Frémont's side. The native Californians thus grew even more distrustful of the American emigrants.[272] Before even receiving Polk's instructions, Larkin's hopes to achieve a peaceful transition had suffered a staggering setback. The legacy of suspicion left behind by Frémont may already have doomed Larkin's efforts to failure. Still he remained optimistic. Relieved that the "troubles have passed over," Larkin worked to repair the damage that had been done.[273] He was confident he had handled the difficult situation well and believed he was still on "the best terms of friendship" with the Californian leaders. Despite Frémont's disruptive actions, Larkin remained confident that "if a new Flag was respectfully planted it would receive the good will of much of the wealth and respectability of the country."[274] Moreover, the arrival of Frémont's expedition had convinced Larkin that American interest in California had finally taken hold.[275] Soon after the Frémont episode ended, one of Larkin's

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[272]Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 2, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 276-277; Nevins, p. 232.

[273]Larkin to Stearns, March 26, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 53.

[274]Larkin to the Secretary of State, April 2, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 277.

[275]Larkin to Stearns, March 19, 1846. Ibid., p. 260.

close friends suggested that "Lieut. Frémont is a man of whom we shall hear more before many years."[276] In the climatic months ahead, no one would know this more than Thomas O. Larkin.

Partly in response to the encounter with Frémont, at the end of March General Castro called a military junta to meet at Monterey. Castro, the military governor, intended to propose additional defense measures and also hoped to strengthen his position against Pío Pico, the provincial governor at Los Angeles. Reflecting this intraprovince squabble, the junta recognized the new Paredes regime in Mexico City—a rebuke to Pico whose authority came from the deposed Herrara.[277] The meeting also discussed the growing American emigration to the province and military steps were considered to stem the tide.[278]

Larkin had not yet received his special instructions and thus took no unusual interest in the meeting—he may have even been excluded due to the lingering distrust arising out of the Frémont incident.[279] When Gillespie finally did arrive with his instructions, Larkin began

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[276]Atherton to Larkin, March 18, 1846. Ibid., p. 259.

[277]Pletcher, pp. 427-428.

[278]At one of these meetings, the highly-respected Mariano G. Vallejo was said to have urged the Californians to welcome the American emigrants and the protection of the United States. This meeting was supposed to have taken place at Larkin's house and all the foreign consuls were to have attended. None of the foreign consuls, including Larkin, reported the meeting. Royce discarded the story as myth, pp. 173-174. See also Bancroft, Vol. V, pp. 41-44. Myrtle M. McKittrick argues the speech was probably given. Vallejo and California (Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Mort, Publishers, 1944), pp. 248-249. In any case, Vallejo's American sympathies were well-known and he later cooperated with Larkin's efforts.

[279]Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 13, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 284.

to display a greater interest in the junta, even urging Governor Pico to attend.[280]

The Consul's limited attention to the military junta may have been the result of his growing dissatisfaction with his consular position. To add to his discontent over the meager compensation, the Department of State had recently disallowed many of his expenses. As a result, Larkin protested he did not "feel disposed to hazard much expense for the government." In addition, Larkin had received only one dispatch for all of 1845 and could not be certain his suggestive reports were greeted with favor in Washington. Nearly a half year had passed since Larkin sent his important July dispatch, yet he had received no word in return. Feeling ignored and unsure, Larkin sighed "I hardly know how to act."[281] Angered and dismayed, the Consul even considered resigning his post.[282]

On April 17, 1846, Thomas O. Larkin was suddenly aroused from his inactivity by the unexpected arrival of Lieutenant Gillespie at Monterey. Reaching his destination after months of delay and hard travel, the administration courier urged Larkin to come on board the

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[280]Larkin to Stearns, May 1, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 61-62.

[281]Larkin to the Secretary of State, March 9, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 242.

[282]Gillespie to the Secretary of the Navy, April 18, 1846. George W. Ames, Jr., ed., "Gillespie and the Conquest of California from Letters Dated February 11, 1846, to July 8, 1848, to the Secretary of the Navy," California Historical Society Quarterly, XVII (June, 1938), 137.

Cyane immediately because "I have an important dispatch for you."[283] The anxious Consul hurried to the vessel where Gillespie identified himself and repeated the President's instructions word for word. The Lieutenant told the astonished Larkin that the official dispatch was on board the Congress but the President wished their mission to begin at once.[284]

Below decks the two confidential agents plotted their coming strategy and grew more excited over the prospects. Gillespie was greatly impressed with the skill and zeal of the Consul with whom he had been ordered to work.[285] The Lieutenant explained he had additional messages for Captain Frémont and was distressed to learn the explorer had been forced to flee to the north. The Consul had to decide the best way to present Gillespie; his arrival on a United States man-of-war had already produced suspicion. Concluding their discussion, Larkin made arrangements for the courier to quietly slip out of Monterey and hasten to Captain Frémont in northern California.

The arrival of Lieutenant Gillespie signalled the fulfillment of all the Consul's greatest hopes. He had long worried over the impression his reports produced in Washington; now he learned his July

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[283]Gillespie to Larkin, April 17, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 299.

[284]Gillespie's memory proved excellent; his recitation of the instructions differed in only insignificant small details.

[285]Gillespie to the Secretary of the Navy, April 18, 1846. Ames, (June, 1938), 137.

reports had been received "in a remarkable flattering manner."[286] The President of the United States had not only heeded his warnings and adopted his program to secure California, but had also entrusted to him much of the success of the task. Forgetting perhaps the recent transgressions of Frémont, Larkin still considered the prospects for a peaceful transition as good. He believed many Californians were ready for a change—he hoped to persuade the rest. Now he could offer the reluctant the powerful inducement of United States protection and acceptance into the Union. Excited that what he had dreamed was finally taking place, Larkin was still somewhat uncertain of attempting such a sensitive and possibly dangerous assignment. Determined to see his years of hard work bear fruit, the Monterey agent decided to boldly launch himself "into the vortex" and attempt to win California for the United States.[287]

One of Larkin's first steps in his new role as confidential agent was to comply with Secretary Bancroft's order to "collect and communicate to the Department all the information respecting California which may be useful to the United States."[288] Larkin immediately prepared a reply to Washington, holding the Cyane in port for the purpose. In this dispatch Larkin sketched the troubled political situation in California and offered the important news that Castro was considering

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[286]Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 27, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 57.

[287]Ibid.

[288]Buchanan to Larkin, October 17, 1845. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 47.

steps to bar American emigrants. Larkin admitted he had until now "conversed but a little with these Authorities respecting affairs not immediately connected with his Consulate."[289] His more recent orders, however, would allow a more extensive and purposeful inquiry. In addition, Larkin began to prepare a fully detailed description of California. Among the wealth of information in this report dealing with California's government and important citizens, Larkin paid close attention to those who favored (or opposed) the coming of United States rule.[290]

Agent Larkin was also prepared to "discover and defeat" any European schemes in the province. But before he could begin to root out and foil European plots, he was forced to admit his earlier warnings might have been overdrawn. He reported that the English and French "agents" had not had much luck in influencing the native government. Indeed, the French Consul had approached the authorities on a minor matter only to be "denied his interferance." The British vice-consul, who had earlier seemed so suspicious, was "not a man to exert himself in Government affairs."[291] To the American Consul, European interference in the province no longer seemed so threatening, but he was prepared just the same.

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[289]Larkin to Buchanan, April 17, 1846. Ibid., pp. 292-294.

[290]Larkin, "Description of California," April 20, 1846. Ibid., pp. 303-334. This document did not reach Washington until August 17, 1847.

[291]Larkin to Buchanan, April 17, 1846. Ibid., pp. 293-294.

Following the President's lead, the confidential agent began "prudently to warn" the people of California against the dangers of European interference. To influential residents, Larkin asserted that "Those who look to Europe know nothing of an English Colonist life or the heavy tax and impositions he suffer." The Consul also announced that the United States was determined that "no Europian Government should plant colonies in North America." To those who might stand to block American expansion, Larkin warned that the United States planned to acquire California and would tolerate no interference. The American Consul cautioned that anyone who stood in the way was placing himself in the path of United States power:

> ...the day that the Europian colonists by purchase, or the Europian Soldier by war, places his foot on California soil, that day we see the hardy sons of the west come to the rescue![292]

Throughout his efforts to encourage the Californians to separate from Mexico, agent Larkin was always watchful of European schemes. By May 1, he was aware the Hudson's Bay Company was withdrawing from California.[293] Still he remained suspicious. Then, in late May, he received the "startling information" that "Overtures" had been made to the California government by British agents. One of his trusted correspondents advised that the British agents had offered British protection to a movement of California independence. Shocked by what this could mean to his own plans (and anxious to fulfill Polk's instructions), Larkin sprang into action. He urged his correspondent

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[292]Larkin to Stearns, John Warner, Jacob P. Leese, April 17, 1846. Ibid., pp. 296-297.

[293]Larkin to Stearns, May 1, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 61

to gather more detailed intelligence of this British plot. His superiors would soon know of the scheme, Larkin declared, and "Should England continue to carry out any plan of this kind, she must and will be met at the threshold."[294]

Agent Larkin next confronted the British vice-consul with this condemning news. James A. Forbes, who by now wished to cooperate with Larkin, denied the charge. He assured the American Consul that he had been instructed that England "will not interfere in any Californian affairs, but will view with much dissatisfaction any other nation that does it."[295] Forbes went even further and promised Larkin he would advise the Californian leaders not to count on British aid. Relieved, agent Larkin was confident he had nipped another British plot in the bud.

Larkin continued to be suspicious of British intentions for the province. In June, an Irish priest, Eugene McNamara, arrived in California. McNamara was attempting to secure a large grant of land in order to bring in thousands of Irish settlers. Larkin was

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[294]Larkin to Stearns, May 24, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 391. This reported British scheme bears a remarkable resemblance to the earlier "overtures" made to the Californian leaders during the revolt against Micheltorena in 1844-1845. See above, pp. 67-68. Answering Larkin's inquiries of European influence, Stearns probably only repeated the older reports.

[295]Larkin to Stearns, May 26, 1846. Ibid., p. 396. This was probably the first Larkin had heard of the British "overtures" and Forbes' instructions. See above, p. 75, footnote 173.

naturally highly suspicious of the cleric and kept a close eye on his activities.[296]

Despite his deep concern with British influence, Consul Larkin was confident that the destiny of California was decided. The escalating American intentions to acquire California, Larkin affirmed, insured that "events will and must have their natural way, without any referance to England or any other European power."[297] American emigration to the province was increasing daily—"good nor bad reports will not retard it." The continued emigration and his own efforts convinced Larkin that nothing could prevent "the destiny of C. [alifornia] as it now appears to be going."[298]

The new agent's strongest efforts were aimed at encouraging the Californians to separate from Mexico. Whenever the chance arose, Larkin decried the troubled condition of California and hinted at the benefits to be gained from independence. He told his listeners to consider these benefits and suggested that the United States was standing by to grant full protection. Best of all, the American Consul was sure that an independent California would readily be accepted into

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[296]Larkin to Stearns, June 14, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 68-69. McNamara eventually did secure a land grant, albeit a much smaller one. Larkin advised him the grant was illegal, especially since the United States had occupied the province, and the plan was abandoned. Engelson, pp. 144-145.

[297]Larkin to Stearns, May 26, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 396.

[298]Larkin to Stearns, June 14, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 68-69.

the American Union. The promise was unimaginable—all would gain in the transition to United States rule. All would enjoy the blessings of a mild, republican government and all profit by the prosperity that was synonymous with America. In the following months, Larkin impressed these appealing ideas on anyone who would listen. He also took definite steps to stimulate a movement for independence. Soon his determined efforts began to show signs of ultimate success.

To aid his cause, agent Larkin attempted to enlist the support of prominent individuals who he knew favored United States rule. Shortly after receiving his instructions, Larkin wrote to Jacob Leese, John Warner and Abel Stearns, currying their support for his project.[299] All were born in the United States but had married into native Californian families and become leading California citizens. Jacob Leese of Sonoma had married into the powerful Vallejo clan and become an important landowner. John Warner lived in San Diego where he was a prosperous merchant and rancher. At Los Angeles, the commercial enterprises of Abel Stearns rivaled even those of Larkin.

Consul Larkin cautioned these three men of prominence that California's uncertain state was becoming an issue between foreign powers and must "change by some means." He urged Leese, Warner and Stearns to join his effort to bring an independent California into the United States:

> The idea of Independence is from his mother's breast, implanted in every Native of the American Continent. Then where should he under imposition or a state of distrust look to for assistance? only to the United States of America. He will there find a

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[299]Larkin to Stearns, Warner, Leese, April 17, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 295-297.

> fellow feeling, with those who can participate in all his ideas, and hail him as a Republican and citizen of the land of Freedom.[300]

Larkin invited the three leading citizens to present these views to others and to do what they could to encourage pro-American sentiment in their areas. The Consul promised to visit their areas if his presence would help the cause. Finally, he requested they keep him well informed "of any wish on the part of the people in your vicinity to change or better their condition."[301]

Better to present his case, Larkin prepared a document that discussed the unsettled state of affairs and future of California. Larkin patterned this document closely after Buchanan's October instructions, echoing many of the Secretary's exact words. Naturally it warned the Californians against the dangers of European interference. Most of all, the document offered the Californians equal status as "bretheren" should they "desire to unite their destiny with that of the great northern Republic."[302] Although the document expressed most of Polk's wishes, Larkin cleverly represented it only as his "opinion." Some of course might consider the American Consul's "opinion" as reflecting official United States policy. Larkin had

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[300]Ibid., p. 296.

[301]Ibid., p. 297. Larkin received a mixed response to his entreaties. Leese replied he would follow the lead of Vallejo. Leese to Larkin, June 11, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 14. Warner agreed that United States protection was desirable, but warned that many Californians had suffered at the hands of the Americans and would prefer England. Warner to Larkin, June 16, 1846. Ibid., p. 33.

[302]Larkin, "Opinion of State of Affairs in California," April, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 298-299.

the provocative document translated into Spanish and presented it to many influential Californians in positions of authority and leadership.

Agent Larkin decided that if he was to watch and influence developments throughout the province, he would need able and trusted lieutenants. Gillespie was off to locate Captain Fremont in the wilds of northern California and could not be counted on for some time. But at Yerba Buena, Larkin already had a reliable aide—William Leidesdorff, just appointed as his vice-consul. Larkin apprised Leidesdorff of the tenor of his instructions and enlisted the vice-consul's assistance for the mission. The Consul considered Leidesdorff a capable, even bold man, but was not always sure of his judgment. Larkin therefore instructed him to guard his words and actions well and not to allow their correspondence to fall into the wrong hands.[303] The agent cautioned Leidesdorff that the success of their mission turned on the goodwill of the native Californians. Leidesdorff was thus to do his "utmost to pacify and keep in good faith and humor the natives around you." "By all means," Larkin directed, "prevent our countrymen from trying to injure or browbeat the people of the country." Leidesdorff's reward for this service would be to see "California flourishing as so fine a country must flourish."[304]

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[303]Larkin to Leidesdorff, May 29, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 65.

[304]Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 27, 1846. Ibid., p. 57.

Larkin also decided he needed a confidant in the southern portion of the province. At Los Angeles he believed he could depend on Abel Stearns. Larkin trusted the merchant's ability and believed he favored United States rule. The Consul thus requested Stearns to become his "confidential correspondent" at Los Angeles.[305] Larkin expected Stearns to keep him strictly informed of all important developments. It was Stearns who had first informed Larkin of the British offer of protection to the Californians. Although he could not tell Stearns the full extent of his instructions, Larkin hinted at the gravity of the situation. He predicted that the American emigration would continue to increase and might bring serious results. The Consul also announced that Commodore Stockton—a man "much in the confidence of Mr. Polk"—was headed for California. Stearns could guess what Stockton's orders were—"Hardly to take charge of a squadron to see to Whalers and some merchants ship."[306]

Coinciding with Larkin's efforts was a proposed meeting of a California Committee of Safety, summoned by Governor Pío Pico to meet on June 15 at Santa Barbara. Pico called the Committee in response to

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[305]Larkin to Stearns, May 23, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 389-390. It should be noted that Larkin offered Stearns and Leidesdorff no compensation (at least not monetary). He even told Stearns he was receiving no "pecuniary remuneration." Actually, since April 17, Larkin was drawing the handsome sum of six dollars a day for his duties as confidential agent. Later he even requested his salary be made retroactive, as he had already anticipated many of his instructions. In this latter regard, at least, he was correct. Larkin to Buchanan, June 15, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 28.

[306]Larkin to Stearns, May 24, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 392.

the action of José Castro's military junta at Monterey. The Governor intended to use the Committee to charge Castro with misuse of public funds.[307] Primarily then, the proposed meeting was but part of the continuing feud between Castro and Pico. Many others, however, believed the meeting might be used to discuss California's problems and perhaps to consider declaring independence. Although many still clung to Mexico, support for California independence was gradually gaining momentum. Many favored independence but were undecided about how it should be accomplished. Some preferred independence under British protection—Governor Pico was evidently one of these.[308] Due to Larkin's efforts, however, there was also strong support for independence with United States protection. While taking steps to limit the influence of those who sought British protection, Larkin moved to advance the interests of the United States.

Agent Larkin was not sure of the Committee's intentions, but was aware of the sentiment for British aid. He also realized that opinion on the issue was largely split or undecided and that he might be able to influence the action of the Committee.[309] He instructed Abel Stearns, who was close to the Pico government at Los Angeles, to watch closely developments there and keep him informed. Meanwhile

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[307]Stearns to Larkin, June 12, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 19.

[308]Bancroft, Vol. V, pp. 65-69. In late June (after the outbreak of the Bear Flag Revolt), Pico applied to Vice-Consul Forbes for British naval intervention. Pico to Forbes, June 29, 1846. Wiltsee, "British Vice Consul," pp. 114-115.

[309]Larkin to Leidesdorff, May 20, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 62; Larkin to Stearns, May 21, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, pp. 385-386.

Larkin took action to contain the influence of those who favored British protection. He urged Stearns, Jacob Leese, Mariano G. Vallejo and others favorable to United States rule to attend the meeting. Larkin also planned to attend and invited Lieutenant Gillespie to meet him at Santa Barbara to lend assistance.[310] With this solid nucleus of support, Larkin expected to block any proposal for British protection. Moreover, if the Committee did turn to consider independence, Consul Larkin would be there to present the President's offer of United States support and eventual entrance into the Union.

Unfortunately for Larkin's plans, the projected Committee never met. Castro forbade the northern delegates to attend, making a quorum impossible.[311] Agent Larkin was badly disappointed. He had hoped to make inroads at such a large meeting of influential persons.[312] Besides the informal contacts he could have made, he might have been able to sway the Committee to favor United States rule. Larkin's first good chance to accomplish his mission had passed, but he was confident there would be other opportunities. In the meantime he directed Stearns to remain vigilant should the southern delegates decide to meet

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[310]Larkin to Leese, May 21, 1846. Ibid., pp. 386-387; Larkin to Stearns, May 21, 1846. Ibid., p. 386; Larkin to Gillespie, June 1, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 1.

[311]Stearns to Larkin, June 12, 1846. Ibid., pp. 18-20.

[312]Larkin to Forbes, June 12, 1846. Ibid., p. 18.

without the representatives from the north. If any support for independence emerged, Larkin would hurry to the south.[313]

Consul Larkin believed that the most effective way to accomplish his mission was to convince the leading men of California of the real benefits of United States rule. These leaders could then carry along the mass of California residents.[314] Reflecting his own philosophy, Larkin believed his greatest obstacle was the concern of the leading men for their positions in society. If they expected to lose, not profit from a change, then they would not support a movement for United States rule. He tried to assure the prosperous and the respected that their wealth and influence would be secure, and perhaps even grow under the American flag. In addition, Larkin requested permission from Washington to offer the Californian authorities guaranteed salaries.[315] Without waiting for a reply, Larkin hinted to leading officials that their financial future would indeed be bright in American California.[316]

Agent Larkin believed his greatest victory (before his mission was cut-short) was to win the support of José Castro, the military governor of the province. In a number of conversations with Castro and

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[313]Larkin to Stearns, June 14, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 68. To defend his own actions, Gillespie later charged that Larkin ignored the Committee in order to pursue his business interests. It was Gillespie of course, far away in northern California, that had neglected his instructions to assist the Larkin mission. Gillespie to the Secretary of the Navy, July 25, 1846. Ames, p. 280.

[314]Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 23, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 56.

[315]Larkin to Buchanan, April 17, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 294.

[316]Larkin to Gillespie, April 23, 1846. Ibid., p. 341.

other key leaders, Larkin suggested they prepare for the approaching "exchange of flags." At their final meeting, General Castro presented Larkin a written proposal to declare California independent within the next two years. With this written assurance, Larkin was confident that he had secured Castro's allegiance for his mission.[317]

As his solitary campaign to win California progressed, Consul Larkin was certain he would ultimately achieve full success. The President's confidential agent believed he had laid his plans well. He had trusted agents working to achieve his ends throughout the province. Soon Gillespie would return to join the effort and Commodore Stockton was also expected daily. Captain Frémont and his men were still available should a small show of force prove necessary. Several influential residents, such as Abel Stearns and Mariano G. Vallejo were supporting Larkin's object. The British vice-consul was not working to prevent California from falling into American hands, but was cooperating with the American Consul. Further, the military governor of the province had proposed to lead a movement of independence within the next two years. Larkin's well-laid plans appeared to be maturing successfully. By 1847 or 1848, he believed, the American flag would be planted "through the will and voice of the Californians."[318]

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[317]Larkin to Buchanan, July 20, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, pp. 144-145.

[318]Ibid.

Consul Larkin was not deceived by what he had undertaken. He realized that he had become involved in a difficult and dangerous project.[319] He knew full well what was at stake—Gillespie had warned him the President might be forced to resort to war, should all other methods fail.[320] Larkin knew his own efforts might produce a crisis, but he believed his was the best way to attain California for the "area of freedom." Whatever the result of events east of the Rockies, Larkin regarded the destiny of California as inalterable. To the agent at Monterey at least, the pear was "near ripe for falling."[321]

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[319]Larkin to Leidesdorff, May 24, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 63.

[320]Larkin to Stearns, April 27, 1846. Ibid., p. 59.

[321]Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 23, 1846. Ibid., p. 56. On the success of Larkin's intrigue, see Royce, pp. 161-165; Cleland, Early Sentiment, pp. 78-79; Billington, p. 162.

CHAPTER VI

BAD-ACTED AFFAIR AT SONOMA

As Consul Larkin patiently worked to secure California within the next two years, Lieutenant Gillespie dashed off to find Captain Frémont far to the north. Despite the attempt to keep the courier's identity secret, he was easily recognized as a United States military officer. At Yerba Buena the American residents greeted his arrival with open talk of a change in California's status—one was even distributing copies of the Texas Constitution. Gillespie was most surprised to learn that "even some of the natives (Californians) are very much dissatisfied with the state of affairs."[322] Larkin expected the Lieutenant to deliver his messages to Frémont and return to aid their joint mission. Remembering the Captain's encounter with the Californians, Consul Larkin did not expect (or wish) the explorer to return.[323]

Forced to withdraw to the north, Captain Frémont had made little effort to reach Oregon. Instead he lingered in northern California, perhaps hoping for some sort of news that would allow him to regain his damaged pride. Then early in May, word reached camp that a Marine lieutenant with important messages was trying to locate the explorer.

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[322]Gillespie to Larkin, April 25, 1846. Hammond, Vol. IV, p. 347.

[323]Larkin to Frémont, May 31, 1846. Ibid., p. 410; Gillespie to Larkin, June 7, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 7.

A courier riding hard after him into the California backwoods? Perhaps this was the long hoped for news![324]

With a few trusted men, Captain Frémont galloped off to find Gillespie, and on May 9 the two leading figures of the Bear Flag revolt finally met. To his amazed listeners, the courier quickly identified himself and announced he had been sent by the Secretary of State and the President himself. As Gillespie handed the personal letters to Frémont, he explained the purpose of his mission.[325] Over six months ago he had been selected to carry a secret dispatch to Consul Larkin at Monterey. Gillespie then repeated the Consul's instructions and briefly explained that he and Larkin had been ordered to

> ...ascertain the disposition of the California people, to conciliate their feelings in favor of the United States; and to find out, with a view of counteracting, the designs of the British Government upon that country.[326]

More excitedly, Gillespie revealed that he had spoken privately with the President before leaving Washington. The President had spoken of his intention to acquire California peacefully, but admitted war was certainly possible. Frémont was alerted to be prepared to protect his party and American interests in California, should war with Mexico occur. The Lieutenant also repeated the exciting news he had learned since leaving Washington. In Mexico City there had been a noisy revolt accompanied with angry anti-American denunciations. Relations with

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[324]Nevins, pp. 234-237.

[325]On the origin of the Gillespie mission see above, pp. 107-111. As discussed above, p. 110, the Benton family letters carried no official instructions.

[326]Frémont, Memoirs of My Life, p. 489.

Mexico were tense, Gillespie declared, and war may have erupted even now.[327]

To the ambitious Captain, Gillespie's startling news suggested several interesting prospects. After Gillespie had finished his report and the others had settled down for the night, the eager explorer

> ...sat far into the night, alone, reading my home letters by the fire, and thinking. I saw the way opening clear before me, and a grand opportunity was now presented to realize fully the far-sighted views which would make the Pacific Ocean the western boundary of the United States. I resolved to move forward on the opportunity, return forthwith to the Sacramento Valley, and bring all the influence I could command.[328]

If war had indeed broken out, Frémont thought, California would have to be secured for the United States. Who better to accomplish this feat than Captain John C. Frémont?

Spurred by Gillespie's information, Frémont decided to reenter the province that had just forcibly ejected him. Frémont's return in itself represented an aggressive act—quite apart from his later involvement in the Bear Flag Revolt.[329] To justify this action,

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[327]Gillespie had traveled with Slidell and could tell Frémont of his mission, and perhaps of his rejection. Before meeting Frémont, Gillespie may have received Larkin's news of April 23 that "Our Minister has been refused in Mexico." Larkin to Leidesdorff, April 23, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 55; Marti, pp. 31-34. Billington, p. 164, suggests that Gillespie's news of impending war was the deciding factor in Frémont's resolve to return to California.

[328]Frémont, "The Conquest of California," p. 924. The explorer was apparently so excited that he failed to post a guard that night. Around dawn the camp was attacked by Indians, three of the party dying in the attack. Nevins, pp. 250-251, suggests this tragedy sealed Frémont's decision to return.

[329]Washington of course had no way of knowing Frémont had been forced to flee California and was no longer welcomed in the province. Any directives to Frémont such as to patiently observe developments were thus rendered obsolete. Recognition of this vital fact devolved to Frémont's judgment.

Frémont later insisted that he had been granted sufficient injunction to act by the visit of Lieutenant Gillespie. The available evidence indicates, however, that Frémont received no secret instructions but acted entirely on his own responsibility.[330]

In interpreting what Gillespie told him, Captain Frémont made several important mistakes. Although hostilities on the Rio Grande had in fact already broken out, Frémont did not have sufficient cause to assume that they had.[331] Furthermore, he completely misunderstood the instructions to Larkin. Frémont could not believe the conquest of California was to be entrusted to a mere Yankee merchant. Since the explorer was not familiar with the genesis of the Larkin instructions, he could not fathom its strange language. He took the dire warnings of British designs on California at face value. Moreover, the instructions to Larkin to encourage a movement of California independence, Frémont took to mean a revolt in California would not displease Washington.[332] The Larkin instructions of course directly cautioned against such action.

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[330]Josiah Royce presents the strongest argument that Frémont received no secret instructions. But see also, Tays, "Frémont Had No Secret Instructions," pp. 157-171 and Hussey, pp. 43-53. Nevins, pp. 280-281, admits Frémont received no instructions. Stenberg, "Polk and Frémont" and Wiltsee, The Truth About Frémont, present only highly speculative and questionable arguments to suggest that the explorer's actions had been authorized by the Polk administration.

[331]On April 25 near the Rio Grande, "American blood was spilled on American soil." This was not known in California until months later.

[332]Merk, Manifest Destiny, pp. 78-79.

Captain Frémont, however, decided the Larkin mission "was no longer practicable" and immediately "dropped this idea from our minds."[333]

Due largely to Larkin's advice, the Polk administration had no desire to alienate the native Californians. The last thing Polk wanted was to push the Californians back into Mexican arms. The President's entire aim was to enlist the support or acquiescence of the native Californians to win the province for the United States. That was the decided purpose of the Larkin mission. On his own, Captain Frémont determined to grasp the "grand opportunity" that had been presented to him and "make the Pacific Ocean the western boundary of the United States." The Polk administration issued no orders to Frémont to seize California by leading an American revolt. Only in the methods he would employ, however, did Frémont's design differ from that of Polk and Larkin.

Captain Frémont's impetuous return to the Sacramento Valley precipitated the uprising of Americans at Sonoma. The native Californians were fully aware that a United States officer (Gillespie) had ridden off after Frémont and had returned with the American explorer. The Captain's presence further exacerbated tensions between the native Californians and the American settlers. Rumors circulated of threatened action by the Indians and Californians against the Americans. Not one to be idle during such a crisis, Frémont decided not only to

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333Frémont, "The Conquest of California," pp. 922-923. See also Royce, pp. 116-118; Frémont, Memoirs of My Life, pp. 489, 559-560.

protect the American settlers, but to bring about "the total overthrow of Mexican authority in California."[334] To achieve this "grand design," the explorer "indirectly encouraged" Ezekiel Merritt, William B. Ide and their fellow "Bear Flaggers" to take action.[335] Assured of the Captain's support, this motley band of Americans descended upon the small settlement at Sonoma, took a few prisoners and helped themselves to Sonoma's arms and liquor supply. Inspirited by this success, they boldly announced the founding of the "Republic of California" and ran up a crude flag sporting an outline of a bear. Captain Frémont quickly cast off his thinly-veiled neutrality and eagerly assumed command of a revolt against a province of a nation with which (for all he knew) his nation was at peace.

By June 18, scattered details of the revolt had filtered into Monterey. As Californians hustled about, mounted up and scurried off to the north, Consul Larkin did not know what to make of all this strange activity. More and more news arrived that first puzzled, then dismayed, and finally shocked the Monterey agent. He was horrified to learn that Americans had not only attacked Sonoma, but had imprisoned Mariano G. Vallejo and Jacob Leese—two men he knew to favor United States rule. Even more disconcerting, Captain Frémont and Lieutenant Gillespie appeared to be leading the peculiar revolt.[336]

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[334]Frémont testimony, Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, p. 374.

[335]Admitting this, Nevins nonetheless argues the revolt "would doubtless have occurred" without Frémont's presence, pp. 263-265.

[336]Larkin to Leidesdorff, June 18, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 75.

Agent Larkin could not imagine what this meant—it was not part of any plan he had heard of. Although he had not realized it, Larkin's hopes to acquire California by peaceful means had vanished. Frémont's aggression against the native Californians made it impossible to persuade them to accept voluntarily United States rule.

Confused, Larkin initially considered the affair at Sonoma a venture in outlawry (which, as Bernard DeVoto declared, was exactly what it was).[337] To angry Californians, Larkin vigorously denied that Gillespie and Frémont were involved. For he knew (and fervently hoped) that they could not be. As Frémont's role became more apparent, Larkin believed it was only an attempt by the excitable explorer to revenge himself against José Castro.[338] Soon Larkin was forced to admit Captain Frémont was leading an American revolt against the native Californians. Still he could make no sense of the explorer's actions; the President had not authorized this. Agent Larkin simply could not understand what Frémont was trying to accomplish—"The Northern affair is beyond my comprehension."[339]

Once again Captain Frémont had placed Consul Larkin in a compromising, difficult situation. For months the Consul had been gently persuading the Californians to join their American "bretheren" in freely accepting beneficent United States rule. Then Frémont appeared

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[337]Larkin to Mott Talbot & Co., June 18, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 52; DeVoto, p. 273.

[338]Larkin to Mott Talbot & Co., June 18, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 52; Larkin to Leidesdorff, June 18, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 75.

[339]Larkin to Leidesdorff, July 1, 1846. Ibid., p. 81.

on the scene, brandishing the standard of revolt against the native Californians. Larkin's position was not only embarrassing, but dangerous. He had been closely associated in the public mind with Gillespie and Frémont. As a result, some bitter Californians charged that Larkin had plotted the revolt and demanded he be arrested.[340] Consul Larkin was forced to defend himself against these serious charges:

> There are many suppose if I have to do with the late rise. I know nothing of it, or its people, and shall prehaps be the last person they speak to on the Subject.[341]

Holding no influence with Frémont's rebels, Consul Larkin nonetheless attempted to restrain their actions. He hoped to salvage some good out of the whole unfortunate affair. He counseled the Bear Flaggers not to harm innocent people or steal private property. Larkin especially warned them not to harm foreigners, as this might invite British naval intervention. Most of all, he advised it was pointless to antagonize the native Californians. If fairly treated, Larkin pleaded, they were not the enemy but would join the movement for an independent republic.[342]

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[340]Larkin to Anthony Ten Eyck and Joel Turrell, June 21, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 62.

[341]Larkin to Stearns and Temple, June 22, 1846. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 77.

[342]Larkin to Leidesdorff, undated, (probably second half of June, 1846). Ibid., p. 76.

Consul Larkin was unwilling to see his years of hard work go for naught. He had long worked for the acquisition of California, but recoiled at Frémont's methods. In addition to disliking the use of force, Larkin believed the whole business was needless. The confidential agent had always expected to secure the province with the support of the native Californians. In late July, Larkin protested to Washington that his mission had been ruined by the unwarranted actions of Captain Frémont. The Consul remonstrated that he had made certain promises to the native Californians and his mission had made remarkable progress. Larkin declared that he would have placed California in Washington's hands within two years. Regretting that Frémont had attacked the native Californians, Larkin hinted that the explorer had overstepped his bounds. If a revolt was planned, why did Frémont not confer with him and invite the Californians to join? If the original mission had been followed, Larkin argued, the United States would have been welcomed as a friend and protector, not opposed as a foreign conqueror.[343]

With the failure of the Slidell mission, James K. Polk lost all hope of acquiring California by peaceful means. The President was no longer willing to wait for the uncertain Larkin mission to achieve results. Not waiting to hear from the agent he had appointed to obtain California peacefully, Polk drafted (on May 9) a war message founded on the rejection of Slidell. That same day news of the bloody

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[343]Larkin to Buchanan, July 20, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, pp. 144-146. See also above, pp. 132-133.

clash along the Rio Grande gave the President the opportunity to demand satisfaction for the "bellicose" actions of Mexico. California was to be wrenched from Mexican hands.

Although Polk had decided to go to war to acquire California, he still hoped to secure the province without alienating the great majority of its residents. His naval commanders had already been instructed to "conciliate towards our Country the most friendly regard of the people of California."[344] Following the declaration of war, the administration reinforced its orders to occupy the province without strife to the Californians. On May 15, Commodore Sloat was directed to take possession of San Francisco "even while you encourage the people to neutrality, self government and friendship."[345] Secretary Bancroft later instructed that in occupying Los Angeles, Sloat should be careful to "ascertain the views of the inhabitants." Bancroft advised that the administration had received intelligence (from Larkin) that the Californians "may be counted upon as desirous of coming under the jurisdiction of the United States."[346] Polk had been forced to choose war to achieve his object. Due largely to Larkin's influence, however,

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[344]For the earlier orders to Sloat and Stockton, see above, pp. 72, 106.

[345]Bancroft to Sloat, May 15, 1846. Quoted in Tays, "Frémont Had No Secret Instructions," p. 169.

[346]Bancroft to Sloat, July 12, 1846. Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, pp. 59-60.

he never abandoned hope of securing the province through the "wishes of the people of California."[347]

The Consul at Monterey refused to allow the American revolt to frustrate his plans of winning the support of the Californians. No matter Frémont's motives or authority, Consul Larkin had his orders and he intended to follow them. Throughout the American military occupation of the province, Larkin bent every effort to persuade the Californians not to oppose United States rule. Indeed, the Californians had not as yet resisted United States forces, but had only responded to the illegal actions of Frémont's rebels. Larkin still hoped to encourage them to accept peacefully United States occupation and rule.

On May 17, Commodore Sloat had received unofficial word of the fighting along the Rio Grande. Sloat hesitated at Mazatlán for a few weeks, waiting for official confirmation. He had no desire to re-enact Commodore Jones' hasty seizure of California.[348] Finally Sloat set sail and on July 2 he arrived in Monterey. The Commodore had been ordered to confer with the American Consul and expected to gain his help in occupying California with as little resistance as possible. Larkin hurriedly boarded the flagship and informed Sloat of the last few weeks' unexpected events. Although an American revolt was

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[347]Ibid. It should be noted these orders were issued before the administration had heard of the Bear Flag Revolt. Moreover, the orders were issued after Polk had supposedly (according to Stenberg and Wiltsee) authorized Frémont to lead an American revolt in California. Finally, Sloat was not instructed to cooperate with, or even expect, an American lead operation in the interior.

[348]Pletcher, pp. 431-433. It should be remembered Sloat had been ordered to occupy California "in the event of actual hostilities," see above p. 95.

apparently underway in the north, Larkin advised that the hopes to gain Californian support were not lost. The Commodore had been ordered to work with the Consul to conciliate the Californians. In addition, he could not be absolutely certain that war had actually begun. Sloat thus decided to heed Larkin's advice and postpone the occupation for a few days. The proclamations that had been prepared at sea were destroyed as the Commodore waited to see if Larkin's plans would bear any fruit.[349]

Hoping to accomplish the occupation peacefully, Consul Larkin tried to persuade the Californians to request the Commodore for United States protection.[350] He believed that Castro, Pico and other native leaders would meet on July 7 to discuss the possibility of declaring independence under the American flag.[351] Commodore Sloat, however, was troubled by Frémont's operations in the north and believed the occupation could be no longer delayed. At a council of war, Sloat was said to have answered Larkin's pleas for delay with: "We must take the place! I shall be blamed for doing too much or too little— I prefer the latter."[352] No longer able to postpone the American occupation, Larkin aided Sloat in preparing a proclamation declaring California peaceably annexed to the United States as a result of the war with Mexico. On July 7, the American flag was raised over the

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[349]Bancroft, Vol. V, pp. 225-227; Sherman, p. 93.

[350]Larkin to the United States Commissioner and the United States Consul, Sandwich Islands, July 4, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 102.

[351]Justin H. Smith, The War With Mexico, Vol. I (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919), p. 530.

[352]Pletcher, pp. 433-434.

customhouse at Monterey to a twenty-one gun salute from the American warships in the harbor. A few days later Captain Montgomery raised the flag at Yerba Buena.[353] Farther to the north, Captain Frémont (on July 10) learned the "joyful intelligence" that Sloat had taken Monterey and he quickly pulled down the Bear flag and hoisted the American standard.[354]

Consul Larkin did his best to insure that the occupation proceeded smoothly and peacefully. He continued to try and persuade Castro to meet with the Commodore and cooperate with the American takeover.[355] Feeling betrayed by the Sonoma revolt, Castro angrily refused and withdrew with his few troops.[356] Larkin also tried to encourage the Bear Flag rebels to halt their independent actions and depredations against the Californians. He urged William B. Ide "to desist from any contemplated movements you may have against the Natives of California."[357] The Consul also requested Frémont and Gillespie to meet with the Commodore and join in the peaceful occupation of the province.[358] Responding to Larkin's message, the two Bear Flag leaders journeyed to Monterey. Once there, Sloat demanded to know under what authority they had acted. The Commodore was unnerved by Frémont's answer that he had acted "largely on

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[353]Ibid.

[354]Frémont testimony, Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, p. 374.

[355]Larkin to Castro, July 8, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 113; Larkin to Alvarado, July 8, 1846. Ibid., p. 114.

[356]Smith, Vol. I, p. 335.

[357]Larkin to Ide, July 7, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 110.

[358]Larkin to Frémont, July 7; July 12, 1846. Ibid., pp. 112; 129-130.

my own responsibility, and without written authority from the Government to justify hostilities."[359] Shaken by Frémont's reply and the weight of responsibility, Sloat relinquished command to Commodore Stockton and returned to the East.

Sloat's occupation of Monterey and San Francisco, and Frémont's operations in the interior secured northern California for the United States. In August, Stockton moved to bring the southern portion of California under American control. Consul Larkin accompanied the Congress to the south, hoping to see the occupation proceed peacefully. Remembering perhaps the Jones affair, Larkin feared that war had not been declared and all the conflict in California would be to no avail. He still was attempting to persuade the Californian leaders to declare independence and accept United States protection. Landing at San Pedro with the United States troops, Larkin sent messages ahead to Los Angeles. He implored Abel Stearns to try and encourage the Californians to meet with Stockton and discuss the peaceful occupation of Los Angeles.[360] Stearns' reply was discouraging. On August 13, Stockton's troops and Consul Larkin took possession of Los Angeles for the United States. The few remaining Californian forces under Castro fled to Sonora. For now at least, effective resistance to United States occupation of California had ended.[361]

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[359]Frémont, "The Conquest of California," p. 926. See also, Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, p. 375; Frémont, Memoirs of My Life, p. 534, Gillespie to the Secretary of the Navy, July 25, 1846. Ames, (June, 1938), 277-278.

[360]Larkin to Stearns, August 6, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, pp. 184-186.

[361]Larkin to Stearns, August 7, 1846. Ibid., p. 187; Stockton to Bancroft, August 28, 1846. Spence, Vol. II, Supplement, pp. 83-84; Bancroft, Vol. V, pp. 271-272, 280-281; Smith, Vol. I, pp. 337-338.

Once definite news of war was received, Consul Larkin was satisfied with his role in forging a "country whose boundries are now the Atlantic and the Pacific."[362] The goal he had long hoped and worked for had finally taken place. Relieved and confident, he expected California to "come forward and show to the world her resources."[363] Content with the results, Larkin was not pleased with the manner of the American occupation of the province. For a man of his business and diplomatic taste it had been much too messy and disorganized. Moreover, Larkin still harbored fears for the future. He knew and respected the Californians' pride and realized they had reason to feel betrayed. He did not expect them to stand passively by while Americans occupied and ruled their native land.[364] From the first, Larkin had tried to avoid this very thing, hoping to encourage the Californians to join, not oppose the change to United States rule.

Consul Larkin had known the Californians for many years and his apprehensions proved worthy. In September, a violent revolt against American occupation erupted in the south. Gillespie's unwise administration of the south had sparked the revolt, but the Californians' distrust of the Americans had been inflamed since the Bear Flag Revolt. Despite Larkin's efforts, they were now fully

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[362]Larkin to Bennett, July 26, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, p. 169.

[363]Larkin to Buchanan, August 23, 1846. Ibid., pp. 215-216; Larkin to William M. Rogers, August 26, 1846. Ibid., pp. 220-221.

[364]Larkin to Beach, July 29, 1846. Ibid., p. 172. Larkin to Stockton, October 21, 1846. Ibid., p. 262.

prepared to oppose the imposition of United States rule. Throughout southern California, American forces retreated before the Californians. Only the arrival of General Stephen Watts Kearny and the combined forces of Frémont's "California Battalion" and Stockton's warships turned the tide against the determined Californians.

The Californian revolt came as a severe, personal jolt to the American Consul. He believed he had done all he could to persuade them of the great benefits of United States rule. The proud Yankee still could not quite understand why the Californians stubbornly resisted what he considered so desirable.[365] Although he had done more than anyone else to prevent it, the Californian revolt showed that his years of patient effort had been in vain. Americans and Californians now faced each other across the field of battle. What the Consul had most feared and worked against had nonetheless come to pass.

Ironically, Larkin suffered dearly from the event he had tried so hard to prevent. In November, he was on his way to Yerba Buena to confer with Captain Montgomery and visit his ailing wife and child. During the night of the fifteenth, the Consul was surprised by a group of Californians and taken prisoner. At first the Californians tried to force Larkin to divert some American troops, but he refused to cooperate. The Californians decided to use their valuable prisoner to obtain favorable treatment in any future truce, surrender or exchange of prisoners.[366]

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[365] Larkin to Rachel Larkin, November 9, 1846. Ibid., p. 271.

[366] Bancroft, Vol. V, p. 364-365.

Larkin's capture at the hands of the Californians clearly demonstrated the failure of his mission. Although he was well-treated by his captors, bitter feelings remained. Some Californians considered him the cause of the conflict and demanded he be sent to Mexico in irons. Others had seen loved ones killed and wished to wreak vengeance on the American Consul.[367] Larkin was forced to protect himself from personal attacks and lived in constant dread of being shipped off to Mexico.[368] During his imprisonment, tragic news arrived that his small daughter had died of fever.[369] Finally released shortly before Stockton recaptured Los Angeles, Larkin returned to his aggrieved wife, a sorrowed and deeply disappointed man.

Events had passed Consul Larkin by ever since the Sonoma Revolt. His capture during the Californian revolt only dramatized that his once leading influence had completely faded away. The American occupation and eventual annexation of California ended his duties as consul. Stockton appointed him naval agent and storekeeper and Secretary Buchanan asked him to continue as confidential agent until California was safely tucked away in American hands.[370] But Larkin's ability to influence the future destiny of California had long since ended.

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[367]Richman, p. 495.

[368]Larkin to Leidesdorff, February 11, 1847. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 88-89

[369]Rachel Larkin to Larkin, December 14, 1846. Hammond, Vol. V, pp. 315-316.

[370]Stockton to Larkin, August 13, 1846. Ibid., p. 198; Larkin to Buchanan, August 27, 1846. Ibid., p. 223; Larkin to Leidesdorff, September 21, 1847. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 93; Buchanan to Larkin, January 13, 1847. Manning, p. 197.

Thomas O. Larkin remained a leading figure in California politics for more than a decade. He served as a delegate to the California Constitutional Convention and became a founder of the new state.[371] Naturally he profited greatly from the prosperity that he had always foretold for California. The Gold Rush made him a very rich man, albeit not a "Bonanza King." In the new state of California Larkin continued to pursue his personal goals of financial wealth and a respected position in society. He had lived to see his cherished dream of United States rule come to California. Still on October 27, 1858, Larkin died of typhoid fever, yearning for the "Halcyon days" before July, 1846 when a Yankee merchant enjoyed the esteem of pioneer and caballero alike.[372]

Beginning in 1843, Thomas O. Larkin laid the groundwork for the American advance to the shores of the Pacific. He represented the "forward observer" of American expansion in California; promoting American settlement and interest in the rich province, and keeping the United States government well-informed of developments there. Larkin believed that the American takeover of California was inevitable, thus he labored diligently to achieve it in the best possible way for both Americans and the Californians he liked and respected so well. Considering United States rule beneficial for all, Larkin hoped to see

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[371]Larkin's signature on the California Constitution is in Walter Colton, Three Years in California (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1850), pp. 412-413.

[372]Larkin to Stearns, April 24, 1856. Hawgood, First and Last Consul, p. 104; Underhill, p. 255.

his fellow countrymen and adopted neighbors live in peace in a stable, prosperous California. Due mainly to his persuasive influence, the Polk administration adopted his program to win California through the wishes of the Californians as well as the always increasing number of American settlers.

Consul Larkin meant to insure that California was indeed won for the "area of freedom." His suspicions of European interference in California prompted the Polk administration to undertake vigorous action to keep the province safe for American expansion. A significant part of Polk's plan to win California was to have Larkin encourage the Californians to take the first steps toward United States rule. Never more than an uncertain prospect, the Larkin mission began to show hopeful signs of ultimate success. Then Captain Frémont's encounters with the Californians first crippled, and then dashed the slight hopes of the Larkin mission. In addition to Frémont's disruptive actions, the selection of the military option at Washington spelled the end of Larkin's influence. The Larkin mission did not fail as much as it was never given a fair chance to succeed. Still the administration hoped to ease the occupation of California through Larkin's good works with its people.

The Larkin mission was the most attractive method available to acquire California. It promised to secure the province through the free will of California's residents, thus fulfilling the democratic precepts of manifest destiny and soothing the sensitive American conscience. Moreover, the success of the Larkin mission might have made the bloody conflict of the conquest of California and the Mexican War

unnecessary. The story of the Larkin mission, however, is one of rash actions, lost opportunities and complete failure. Considering this failure, Larkin did not "win for us California." Rather, California was wrenched from Mexico by an expansionist administration, determined to obtain the province by almost any means—including war. Thomas O. Larkin was not the man "most responsible for the acquisition of California," but his efforts as consul and confidential agent mark him as the one who "best did his duty" to achieve the acquisition of the province through peaceful means.[373]

Consul Larkin's devotion to his mission was so intense that he refused to abandon it, even when it was clear it was hopelessly obsolete. He sincerely hoped to see California enter the American Union with the consent of its people and under his stewardship. In trying to persuade the Californians to accept imposed United States rule, however, he became merely a tool of American expansion. Before this he had been its guide, pointing to California as a ready target for expansion and leading the way to the best method to acquire it.

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[373]Royce, pp. 161-162.

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