

JOHN M. CLAYTON AND THE SEARCH FOR ORDER,
A STUDY IN WHIG POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY

by
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ABSTRACT

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As a Whig politician and diplomatist John M. Clayton participated in the search for an orderly republic to be achieved and maintained by the politics of moderation. Driven by a sense of duty but haunted by a recurring feeling of desolation in his personal life, he did make some important contributions to that search for order. Ultimately, however, his limited success epitomized the plight of a moderate politician in an age of growing instability.

Clayton was born and educated in downstate Delaware and the Connecticut River Valley where society was characterized by respect for order. A lawyer by profession, he defined order in legal and constitutional terms. Above all, he urged a reliance on the institutions and standards of the past, which, he believed, needed continuing but relatively minor modifications to meet the needs of the present.

For Clayton the road to power lay in manipulating institutions and the men in those institutions. The state legislature elected him to the United States Senate four times, the Governor appointed him Delaware Chief Justice in

1837, and President Zachary Taylor named him Secretary of State at midcentury. Stable institutions and a generation of Whig ascendancy in Delaware gave him a secure, if not large, power base from which to enter national politics, where he served from 1829 to his death in 1856.

In confronting the question of slavery extension during the late 1840's, Clayton urged Congress, and later President Taylor, to bring order and civil authority to the territories gained from Mexico in a way that would not jeopardize the stability of the Union. In 1848 the House of Representatives rejected the Senate-passed Clayton Compromise bill, which embodied a judicial solution of that question by appealing ultimately to the Supreme Court. Shortly afterwards, as Secretary of State, he proposed that the constitutional question of congressional power over slavery in the territories be obviated by admitting California and New Mexico as states and thus enabling them to deal exclusively with the peculiar institution. Congress, however, discarded the so-called Taylor plan and, following the General's death, passed the Compromise of 1850, a dubious accomplishment in Clayton's opinion.

Although Clayton's sensitivity to criticism made him impulsive at times in his diplomacy, as Secretary of State he tried to strengthen the fabric of an orderly world. For strategic and commercial reasons he challenged British domination of Central America and attempted to bring about Anglo-American cooperation concerning the isthmus and its

projected interoceanic canal. Through the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 he obligated Britain to abandon its unilateral policy in Central America and pursue a bilateral policy there.

During the final six years of his life, Clayton tried to halt the fragmentation of American conservatism and unify the proponents of an orderly republic. He first sought to make foreign policy, particularly the enforcement of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, the basis of national political reorganization. In doing so, he misjudged the prospects of avoiding sectional agitation at home by emphasizing the British threat abroad. After realizing his mistake, he attempted to compromise the question of slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territories and postpone disruptive decisions until time had permitted passions to cool and reason to reassert itself. Despite his best efforts, however, the politics of accommodation gave way to the politics of confrontation, and the Union began to divide.

In his personal life Clayton's search for order was thwarted early by the death of his young wife, later by that of his two sons, then by the disappearance of the old Whig organization leaving him a man without a party, and finally by the steady erosion of the Union he loved so much. In the last months of his life, therefore, he turned to the Christian faith as the consummation of his search for order.

PREFACE

Growing out of a general concern with Whig politics, this dissertation portrays John M. Clayton as a moderate politician in an age of increasing sectional agitation. According to its conclusions, his efforts to achieve, or restore, a republic of order faltered and collapsed in the mid-1850's when the politics of confrontation superseded the politics of accommodation. As his hopes for the national community diminished, he carried his personal search for order beyond the realm of state, national, and international politics. By turning to the Christian faith, he probed the eternal dimension of order and community.

Previous historical literature on Clayton has been limited almost entirely to his sixteen-month tenure as Secretary of State. Therefore, while not neglecting his diplomacy, this dissertation has given primary attention to his political career. Consideration of his family life and legal career, furthermore, has been essential to an understanding of Clayton both as a politician and as a diplomatist. Finally, the religious experience which consummated his search for order illustrates the impact of evangelical Christianity on America during the middle of the nineteenth century.

The need for a full-length biography of Clayton has long existed. The only comprehensive book on him is the impressionistic and eulogistic Memoir of John M. Clayton (1882) by Joseph P. Comegys, his former law-apprentice, the husband of his niece, and his successor for a short time in the United States Senate. It has value as primary source material but must be used with some care. Many decades ago Mary Wilhelmine Williams wrote a brief sketch of Clayton for the Dictionary of American Biography and a detailed account of his diplomacy for volume VI of Samuel Flagg Bemis, ed., The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy. In these efforts Professor Williams drew on her earlier study, Anglo-American Isthmian Diplomacy, 1815-1915 (1916), which superseded Ira Dudley Travis' The History of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty (1900) as the standard monograph on the subject. The time has thus come for a reexamination of Clayton's diplomacy, and this dissertation begins that task.

Although I have not yet examined the diplomatic records so thoroughly as the political sources, I am convinced that Clayton merely escalated his search for order to the international level when he became Secretary of State. The general picture of Clayton the diplomatist is sufficiently clear. Further research, however, will undoubtedly add important nuances.

For their assistance during the various stages of the dissertation, I am indebted to many persons and institutions. Clayton Douglass Buck, Jr., of Wilmington, Delaware, kindly

granted me access to his extensive collection of Clayton correspondence. Professor John A. Munroe of the University of Delaware permitted me to use his transcriptions of the Clayton letters in the John W. Houston Manuscripts, with the approval of Miss Elisabeth W. Houston of Georgetown, Delaware. The staffs at numerous institutions facilitated my research, particularly those at the Library of Congress, the Interlibrary Loan Department of the University of Maryland, the Historical Society of Delaware, the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, the Delaware Public Archives, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania Library, Yale University Library and Archives, and the Western Reserve Historical Society.

My special thanks go to Professors Wayne S. Cole and Elbert B. Smith for reading the dissertation and offering helpful suggestions, to Ginger Molvar for typing the manuscript, and to my parents for lending their moral and financial support. Finally, I wish to thank my adviser, Dean David S. Sparks, for his understanding and guidance during the period of my graduate training. In a Middle Period seminar several years ago, he called my attention to the need for a biography of Clayton and has since inspired me to formulate and develop the main theme of the dissertation. For his kind and patient supervision I am most grateful.

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canal, but "nothing has yet been attempted with success to save our commerce the dangerous navigation of nine thousand miles around the cape."

Within the past month New York merchant William Henry Aspinwall, head of the Pacific Railroad and Panama Steamship Company, had visited Clayton to seek government help in constructing a railroad across the isthmus. In his letter of introduction for Aspinwall, Charles du Pont reminded his Senator that for three hundred years the feasibility of a carrier road across the isthmus had been discussed. "This," he boasted, "Yankee enterprise can effect in three Years, with the proper furtherance of our Government." For Clayton, then, commercial expansion abroad as well as moderate politics at home was a major aim of an orderly republic.⁷⁴

During the months following the 1848 presidential election, reports circulated that John M. Clayton would receive an appointment to a prominent post in Zachary Taylor's Cabinet. In November 1848, for instance, Washington banker W. W. Corcoran assured the British investment house of Baring Brothers "that Clayton is to come into either the State or Treasury Dept." Private reports reached the Delawarean, but he protested rather ritualistically that he could be of more use in the Senate. "Still," he wrote Crittenden, "I will await events and not hastily or obstinately baffle the intentions of wiser men." He granted that

⁷⁴Cong. Globe, 30th Cong., 2d sess., p. 414; DAB, I, 396; Charles du Pont to JMC, Dec. 11, 1848, JMC MSS, LC.

maintaining the unity of Taylor forces in the all-important state of Pennsylvania might require his presence in the Cabinet. When, in mid-February 1849, the President-Elect visited Crittenden at Frankfort, the Kentucky Governor declined any position in the Cabinet and helped secure for his close friend Clayton the post of Secretary of State.⁷⁵

Ironically, the long expected Cabinet appointment coincided with the burial of Clayton's younger son, Charles. Forced to withdraw from the study of law by failing eyesight, the young man had contracted "pulmonary consumption," or tuberculosis, and had slowly wasted away. The critical stage began the previous summer with an ill-advised voyage to Britain. "I was going to S[outh] America for a short trip," Charles wrote, "when some friend of ours (who has more gab than brains) persuaded father to alter my destination." Thereafter his health rapidly deteriorated. In early December he set sail with a companion for Cuba and died in Havana on January 20, 1849, two weeks before his

⁷⁵Corcoran's statement quoted in James P. Shenton, Robert John Walker: A Politician from Jackson to Lincoln (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 115; Wm. D. Perimos to JMC, Dec. 3, 1848, JMC MSS, LC; JMC to Crittenden, Dec. 13, 1848, Crittenden MSS, LC, in which he referred to the Governor's "kind letter" of Nov. 26 which he had now burned "lest indeed some fool or knave, not understanding us, should read and misrepresent [it]." Crittenden to JMC, Feb. 17, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 144-45. News of Clayton's appointment came in time to permit the Delaware Whig legislature rather than the Democratic Governor to select his successor in the U.S. Senate. It elected John Wales to the remaining two years of Clayton's term. See Governor's Register, State of Delaware, I, 489; John W. Houston to Crittenden, Jan. 15, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; Crittenden to JMC, Jan. 30, 1849, JMC MSS, LC.

twenty-fourth birthday. Unlike his older brother, Charles had been a brilliant student and had had high promise of assuming the professional and political mantle of his father. In addition, he had been a devout Christian.⁷⁶

His death evoked many expressions of religious comfort for the bereaved father. "Dear Mr. Clayton[,] make Charles' God your God," a former neighbor lady wrote. His protégé George P. Fisher reminded him "that all our afflictions are blessings in disguise" and directed his attention to the heavenly reunion of mother and son. But one newspaper obituary probably best reflected the feelings of the non-churchgoing Senator when it concluded by paraphrasing the ancient Psalmist: "For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; he heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them."⁷⁷

"But you speak of going home—of seeking quiet & rest—in other words," Robert M. Bird wrote his friend, ". . . of going into retirement for the purpose of indulging an uninterrupted grief." On the contrary, Bird warned that such a course would merely increase the sorrow. Clayton should instead find his consolation in an active public life, in insuring "the safety of the republic," rather than in

⁷⁶Charles M. Clayton to Miss Cornelia, Aug. 8, 1848, and Jim [Clayton] to Cornelia, Dec. 8, 1848, Woodhall Coll., HSD; JMC to Crittenden, Dec. 13, 1848, Crittenden MSS, LC; Robert B. Campbell to JMC, Jan. 22, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; genealogical section, JMC Bible, Buck Coll.

⁷⁷[Mrs.] Mary A. Morris to JMC, Feb. 18, 1849, and Fisher to JMC, Jan. 31, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Delaware State Journal, Feb. 2, 1849, paraphrasing Psalm 39:6.

brooding over the loss of his son. "You never before were in such a position for doing good as now," his friend continued. "It would be a great wrong to surrender it. And you now, more than at any previous time, require the occupation & excitements of public life at Washington."⁷⁸

When the telegram from the President-Elect reached Washington on the night of February 16, 1849, John M. Clayton was in Delaware attending his son's funeral. When the telegram finally overtook him two days later, he sent a dispatch to Elisha Whittlesey in Washington requesting him to wire Taylor of his acceptance of the appointment of Secretary of State. After the Senator returned to the nation's capital, Delawarean Samuel Francis du Pont proudly wrote his brother Charles of Clayton's high reputation among "the first men of the land," and added that the Secretary-designate "bears his honors meekly, but is already overloaded with business & letters, with troops of friends of course."⁷⁹

Despite the generally favorable press reaction and the congratulations by friends and colleagues, in private not all praised the appointment. Vice-President Dallas and Whig journalist Horace Greeley criticized Clayton for his drinking habits. Furthermore, Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi had earlier observed to Crittenden, "Clayton is true and

⁷⁸Bird to JMC, Jan. 29, 1849, JMC MSS, LC.

⁷⁹JMC telegram to Whittlesey, Feb. 18, 1849, Whittlesey MSS, WRHS; Whittlesey to JMC, Feb. 22, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Washington Daily Union, Feb. 22, 1849; Frank du Pont to Charles du Pont, Feb. 25, 1849, Longwood MSS, EMHL.

talks right, had he the necessary nerve." Whig Senator Badger feared the Delawarean lacked the required tact and reminded Crittenden that the Taylor Administration would need other qualities besides zeal. Although the Washington Daily Union described the Secretary-designate as "the Atlas of the administration," its primary objective in doing so was to discredit Taylor's own abilities. Still, Daniel Webster, while personally unfriendly toward Clayton despite their similar views, agreed with the description. "Gen[era]l Taylor means well," he wrote in late February, "but he knows little of public affairs, & less of public men." Since the Massachusetts Senator saw that the various factions of the party were pulling different directions in the selection of a Cabinet, he concluded, "The main hope for a favorable issue of things must be, that, in this scrambling, he may lean to the jud[gmen]t of his Secretary of State."⁸⁰

Politically experienced yet impulsive at times, capable of massive outpourings of hard work but sometimes given to despondency and listlessness, John M. Clayton now reached the pinnacle of his career. One of the five or six most prominent Whigs in the country, he had in recent years sought to still the discord growing out of war and territorial

⁸⁰Glyndon G. Van Deusen, Horace Greeley: Nineteenth-Century Crusader (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), p. 137; Roy F. Nichols, "The Mystery of the Dallas Papers, [Part] II: Diary and Letters of George M. Dallas, December 4, 1848—March 6, 1849," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXXIII (Oct. 1949), 516; George E. Badger to Crittenden, Jan. 13, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; Washington Daily Union, Feb. 22, 1849; Webster to _____, [Feb. 25, 1849], Webster MSS, LC.

expansion and to establish a republic of order, governed by the politics of moderation. As Zachary Taylor's Secretary of State he would soon endeavor to achieve stability and true progress abroad as well as at home.

CHAPTER VI

A NEW ERA IN THE HISTORY OF THE REPUBLIC

"All the world is in Washington, and the rest are coming. There is every thing to be done, nothing can be done, and there is no time to do any thing." So William H. Seward described the nation's capital a week before the inauguration. "I have seen the lions," he added, "—General Taylor, his daughter Betty, and the Secretary of State that is to be." John M. Clayton, at age fifty-two, had met the President-Elect only a few days before and now prepared to become premier of the Cabinet. On February 26, 1849, he and Taylor called briefly at the White House where President Polk and his successor met for the first time.¹

The Polk Administration was fast drawing to a close. What Clayton later termed "a new era in the history of the Republic" was about to begin, an era in which moderate politicians of the Taylor Administration would seek to bring peace and stability to the nation. Yet in their task of reconciliation and consolidation, they were to encounter unprecedented partisan opposition in Congress, gargantuan

¹Seward to Mrs. Seward, Feb. 27, 1849, in Seward, Seward, I, 100; James K. Polk, The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849 [hereafter cited as Polk, Diary], ed. Milo Milton Quaife (4 vols.; Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1910), IV, 352; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 149.

problems of patronage, an ossifying British unilateralism in Central America, the divisive question of slavery in the territories, and the precarious health of the old soldier.²

The rush of events and the pressure of time impinged upon those who would soon be at the center of power. With Clayton at his side, the President-Elect had scarcely a week before he took office to select the other six members of his Cabinet. In general, Taylor wanted his Cabinet to be "harmonious[,] honorable, patriotic, talented, & hard working." For advice regarding particular men and political considerations, he looked to Clayton, Seward, and others. Sectional balance and rewarding state political machines were two such considerations.³

For Secretary of the Treasury, some had earlier proposed Abbott Lawrence, a wealthy Boston merchant and textile manufacturer. Whig critics pointed out, however, that identifying the Treasury so closely with manufacturing would arouse "strong popular prejudice" against such a conflict of interest. Furthermore, the Treasury post was slated to go to Pennsylvania. Although the state's Whig Congressmen recommended Andrew Stewart, Clayton secured the position for William Meredith, a noted lawyer and president of the Philadelphia city council.⁴

²JMC, Speech of Nov. 16, 1850, p. 13.

³A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, Jan. 12, 1848 [actually 1849], Crittenden MSS, LC.

⁴DAB, XI, 44-46; Hamilton Fish to Col. [James Watson] Webb, Feb. 27, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; S. F. du Pont to Charles

The bulky, pugnacious-looking Meredith appealed to Clayton's friends because of his discretion, general knowledge and cultivation, business experience, high tariff position, and political reliability. Morton McMichael had assured the Delawarean that Meredith "would add especial strength to our views," while Robert M. Bird denied rumors that the Philadelphia lawyer was Webster's friend. On the state level Meredith, like Clayton, supported the Pennsylvania Whig faction led by Governor William F. Johnston and opposed the one led by Senator James Cooper. At first overshadowed by Clayton's prestige and governed by his counsel, the new Treasury Secretary would eventually emerge as a strong leader in the Cabinet and, with the help of his wife's hospitality, become intimate friends with President Taylor.⁵

After some shuffling of portfolios, Thomas Ewing of Ohio became Secretary of the newly-created Interior Department. At fifty-nine, the oldest member of the Cabinet, he was a tall, stocky, bald-headed man whose gruff appearance once led Harriet Martineau to describe him as "the most

du Pont, [March] 7, [1849], Longwood MSS, EMHL; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 163.

⁵DAB, VI, 548-49; Nicholas B. Wainwright, ed., A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834-1871 (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), p. 220; McMichael to JMC, [ca. Jan. 1849] and Bird to JMC [ca. Jan. 1849], JMC MSS, LC; Henry R. Mueller, The Whig Party in Pennsylvania, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, vol. CI, no. 2, whole no. 230 (New York: Columbia University, 1922), pp. 160-62; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 163.

primitive looking of senators." A capable lawyer, Ewing arrived in the Senate in 1831; only two years after Clayton, and, despite his defeat for reelection in 1836, served in 1841 as Treasury Secretary, first for Harrison and then briefly for Tyler. A consummate spoilsman, he and Clayton would cooperate during the Taylor era in restoring power and dispensing patronage to the faithful.⁶

With the help of Clayton, Reverdy Johnson of Maryland became a last-minute choice for Attorney General. Of medium build and blind in one eye, the fifty-two-year-old wealthy Baltimore lawyer had held state office and since 1845 had served with the Delawarean in the United States Senate. Opposed to territorial expansion and the extension of slavery, he, like Clayton, thought that the latter question should be appealed to the Supreme Court. Though quite capable, Johnson would become preoccupied as Attorney General in the routine affairs of the Justice Department and consequently fail to rise above mediocrity.⁷

William Ballard Preston, a young Virginian, became Secretary of the Navy. The tall, slender, redheaded Congressman had no special knowledge of the sea, but his position as a southern moderate who favored the admission of California as a free state recommended him to Taylor and Clayton.⁸

⁶DAB, III, 237-38; Martineau, Retrospect of Western Travel, I, 179; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 151-52, 163-64.

⁷DAB, V, 112-13; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 152, 165-66.

⁸DAB, VIII, 206-7; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 151-52.

Vermont Congressman Jacob Collamer was named Postmaster General. A last-minute replacement for Ewing, who was needed in the Interior Department, the fifty-eight-year-old New Englander was, as Clayton once wrote Crittenden, "a glorious fellow," though perhaps too softhearted in dispensing patronage. Still Taylor thought he could also be rather formal and blunt. Dominated by his colleagues and his assistant, Collamer proved to be nearly the weakest member of the Cabinet.⁹

Finally, at the importuning of Georgia Whigs, including Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens, the post of Secretary of War went to George W. Crawford. The well-groomed, two-term Georgia Governor looked innocuous enough, especially as head of the War Department during peacetime. However, his long-standing financial interest in the Galphin Claim, though apparently unknown to Clayton and the rest of the Cabinet, would result in a scandal which would rock the Taylor Administration during its last days.¹⁰

Far from being what Horace Greeley considered "a horrid mixture" or a random selection of Whig leaders, the Taylor Cabinet, though of necessity hastily assembled, represented both sectional balance and loyalty to the General. The New York Herald correctly noted the chief strength of the selection: "The North have three men, Messrs. Meredith,

⁹DAB, II, 300; JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 152, 165.

¹⁰DAB, II, 520-21; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 151, 164.

Collamer, and Ewing; the South have three, Messrs. Johnson, Preston, and Crawford; Mr. Clayton occupying the middle ground of Delaware." Yet even this bisectonal distribution was centered in the eastern border region. Three of the seven—Clayton, Meredith, and Johnson—lived within a fifty mile radius of one another. Five of the seven came from states forming a solid middle bloc—Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The two on the geographical periphery—Collamer of Vermont and Crawford of Georgia—had little influence on policy-making.¹¹

In addition to its middle America geographical preponderance, the new Cabinet's composition encouraged loyalty to the President by excluding close associates of either Henry Clay or Daniel Webster. The decision was understandable. Neither had supported the General's election with enthusiasm, and to have included intimates of either would have conjured up the old Whig past rather than the anticipated Taylor Republican future.¹²

During the sixteen months of its existence, Taylor's Cabinet came under heavy attack, in part because of the Administration's weakness in Congress. Not only was it the first new Administration in American history to face opposition majorities in both Houses of Congress, but the presence of Clay and Webster in the Senate further weakened

¹¹Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, I, 230; New York Herald, March 10, 1849; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 167.

¹²Hamilton, Taylor, p. 167.

the Whig minority there. The middle-ground Cabinet headed by John M. Clayton indeed encountered formidable opposition in its attempt to stabilize the nation.¹³

On Monday, March 5, 1849, a cold day marked by intermittent snow and rain, Zachary Taylor became the twelfth President of the United States. After hearing his successor stumble through his brief inaugural address, James K. Polk caustically characterized the General as "a well meaning old man" but "uneducated, exceedingly ignorant of public affairs, and . . . of very ordinary capacity." From his cursory knowledge of the new President, the retiring Democrat jumped to the conclusion that Taylor would have to depend entirely on his Cabinet to operate the government.¹⁴

Though poorly delivered, Taylor's inaugural address reflected Clayton's pen and thinking and constituted an incipient plan for the restoration of an orderly republic, governed by a devotion to moderation and nationalism. "Elected by the American people to the highest office known to our laws," the General came to take his oath and comply "with a time-honored custom" of addressing those assembled. He realized that the position of President, "though sufficient to satisfy the loftiest ambition, is surrounded by fearful responsibilities." Yet he would look to Congress and the Court for cooperation and to his Cabinet for assistance.

¹³Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 167-68.

¹⁴Polk, Diary, IV, 375-76; Philip Hone, The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851, ed. Allan Nevins (new and enl. ed.; New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936), pp. 874-75.

In both domestic and foreign affairs, Taylor took George Washington as his model. He assured his listeners that his Administration would be national, not sectional or local, in its policies. It would have a "fixed determination to maintain . . . the Government in its original purity and to adopt as the basis of my public policy those great republican doctrines which constitute the strength of our national existence." Besides maintaining an efficient army and navy, his Administration would seek strict neutrality and peace with all nations. It would endeavor to resolve international problems by "wise negotiation," by promising "to exhaust every resort of honorable diplomacy before appealing to arms."

In appointing and removing officeholders, the new President would demand "honesty, capacity, and fidelity." He would recommend "constitutional measures to Congress" relating to agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing as well as government economy and the improvement of rivers and harbors. Finally and most significantly, he called for "prudence and moderation in our councils, . . . well-directed attempts to assuage the bitterness which too often marks unavoidable differences of opinion, . . . and . . . an enlarged patriotism."¹⁵

¹⁵Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of Presidents, V, 4-6; see also JMC to B. Hammatt Norton, Jan. 30, 1849, printed in Washington Daily Union, March 1, 1849, for reference to Taylor's election as signifying the restoration of the doctrines of George Washington.

The nation's new leader was an unpretentious, even commonplace, man in appearance. Now sixty-four, he was of medium height, muscular and big-boned, with hazel eyes, long nose, prominent brow, weather-beaten face, and graying hair. Simple, open, and affable, the General neither smoked nor drank, though he chewed tobacco. Happily married, with children and grandchildren, he enjoyed teasing his bachelor friends about marrying wealthy ladies. Doubtless Clayton, long a widower, came in for similar joshing. Transparent honesty, informality, good-natured humor, and unstinting devotion to the nation were all qualities which insured the loyalty and aroused the enthusiasm of the Delawarean. After only six weeks in office Clayton wrote Crittenden, "General Taylor is the greatest man, in truth before God, I ever knew! He is to a common observer only a kind benevolent man—an honest man—a sensible man & a brave one. But he grows greater every day and is the wisest man in every thing. You would be astonished if I should tell you what I know about his knowledge both of men & things."¹⁶

Twenty years after his entrance into national politics, John M. Clayton now looked older than his fifty-two years. Nearly all his hair had turned white; and his six-foot, one-and-a-half-inch frame was even paunchier than before, leading Charles du Pont to call him "our 'Mastadon,' from Delaware." His dark bushy eyebrows, long sideburns, and

¹⁶Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 21-23; JMC to Crittenden, April 18, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC.

large gray eyes all remained unchanged; but his normally cheerful face now showed some of the strain of recent bereavement and of present and future responsibilities as Secretary of State.¹⁷

After quickly moving into James Buchanan's former residence as well as his State Department office, Clayton threw himself into his labors with abandon. "In the midst of ten thousand hopes & fears," he wrote Crittenden on March 16, "I snatch a brief moment to say that the former greatly preponderate—that I have now ten hopes to one fear, and that while we are 'benetted 'round' with many cares, I firmly adhere to the belief that Taylor's administration will be one of the most glorious in our history." Yet he warned, "If Taylor's administration fails you will find me with a drag net at the bottom of the Potomac." Often limited to one full meal a day and four hours of sleep a night, the new Secretary worked incessantly to perform his duty and to achieve a republic of order.¹⁸

Although the formulation of foreign, and to a lesser extent domestic, policy demanded most of Clayton's time during his tenure in the State Department, still the

¹⁷Charles du Pont to Frank du Pont, March 4, 1849, Winterthur MSS, EMHL; Comegys, Memoir, pp. 16, 46; Delaware State Journal, June 23, 1840; newspaper clipping of Feb. 23, 1848 [actually 1849] correspondence, JMC MSS, LC; Delaware Republican, Aug. 13, 1849; Hynson, ed., Historical Etchings, p. 114; Williams, "John Middleton Clayton," DAB, II, 185; Houston, "John M. Clayton," Houston MSS, Houston Coll.

¹⁸Morning Courier and New York Enquirer, March 23, 1849; JMC to Crittenden, March 16, April 18, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC.

distribution of "the loaves and fishes" to the Whig faithful preoccupied the President and his Cabinet during their first months in office. Two circumstances compounded their patronage problem. First, not only Whigs but also independent Democrats and Native Americans had made possible Taylor's election. To sustain and formalize this electoral coalition, the Administration would have to reward each element by its policy of removing or not removing officeholders. Secondly, the Whigs themselves had virtually been denied federal office since the party's establishment. The brevity of Harrison's Administration and the dubious nature of John Tyler's Whiggery had made it so. Consequently, the new Administration found itself in the unenviable position of having to satisfy both independent Taylor men and old Whigs.¹⁹

As Clayton wrote his Delaware friends in early July, "The Departments at Washington have been crowded by a host of expectants of office, never before exceeded, not even in the first year of the advent of Jacksonism." But he did not apologize for this fact. He merely reasoned that after twenty years of proscription by Democratic regimes, simple justice required the restoration of "equal privileges as American citizens."²⁰

In this context Clayton seemed to equate audacity in a removal policy with progress. He wrote Crittenden in July

¹⁹New York Herald, Sept. 4, 1849.

²⁰JMC to [John] Wales et al., July 2, 1849, printed in Delaware State Journal, July 6, 1849.

that Postmaster General Collamer, among others, was "too tender for progress. He has been often indeed at 'his wit's end'—frightened about removals & appointments. But I cry courage to them all & they will go ahead—all—by & by." He saw that without a progressive patronage policy, Administration forces, recently rebuffed by independent Democrats, would suffer further defeats in the remaining elections for the Thirty-First Congress.²¹

In addition to receiving foreign diplomats, Clayton was deluged with letters of application and recommendation and with hordes of office seekers. He and his fellow ministers sat from early in the morning till late at night interviewing the applicants who crowded into their antechambers. One day, a journalist later recalled, the Secretary of State became so disgusted with the long, tedious process that he threw open the doors of his office and allowed the entire crowd to enter. Then, while sitting watch in hand timing them, he gave each five minutes to tell his story and be gone. Yet even by midnight he had gotten only halfway through the assembled throng.²²

Unsuited by temperament or experience for administration, Clayton tended to greet visitors either ardently or coldly. Orlando Brown, for instance, found him to be

²¹JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.

²²Morning Courier and New York Enquirer, March 13, 1849; John Baldwin to JMC, June 6, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Wainwright, ed., A Philadelphia Perspective, pp. 220-21; Philadelphia North American, March 12, 1853.

earnest, friendly, joking, and full of praise for their mutual friend Crittenden, whereas journalist A. T. Burnley criticized the Secretary for being "thin skin[n]ed" toward others. "But if I am kind in manner to some men," Clayton protested to Crittenden, "they take occasion to construe that into a promise of an office. The President says that it has now come to such a pass, that if he does not kick a man down stairs he goes away & declares he promised him an office!" After hearing various reports, the Kentucky Governor advised him to "act with the caution & reserve of the Statesman, rather than with the free speech & bold carelessness of John M. Clayton— This sort of reserve is altogether necessary to prevent the abuse of your confidence & the repetition & misrepresentation of your conversations—." But the Delawarean never satisfactorily learned how to be reserved and civil rather than ardent on the one hand or cold on the other.²³

Except for some personal favorites, President Taylor generally left the selection of appointees to the discretion of his Department heads, subject, of course, to his final approval. Thus while Clayton influenced the selection of officeholders in other Departments—obtaining, for instance, the Philadelphia customs collectorship for William D. Lewis, the Wilmington post for William P. Brobson, and the office

²³Orlando Brown to Crittenden, June 23, 1849, and A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, June 22, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.; Crittenden to JMC, Sept. 29, 1849, JMC MSS, LC.

of first Comptroller of the Treasury for Elisha Whittlesey—he handled the appointment of most diplomatic Ministers, chargé d'affaires, and consuls as well as his Department assistants. After spring elections in Virginia and Connecticut disclosed that independent Democrats were not disposed to return Whigs to Congress, he and Ewing led the rest of the Cabinet in an active policy of removing Democratic incumbents.²⁴

The diplomatic appointments of the Taylor Administration were, on the whole, fairly strong by nineteenth-century standards. Boston merchant-manufacturer Abbott Lawrence, denied an important Cabinet post, was sent to London to replace George Bancroft. Though the New York Herald derided the selection as "an exchange of money for brains," Lawrence performed creditably despite his late departure and his severe illness while abroad. William C. Rives replaced Richard Rush at Paris. A former Congressman and Senator from Virginia, Rives had earlier served as Minister to France in the early Jackson years when Clayton first entered the Senate.²⁵

²⁴William D. Lewis to JMC, Feb. 20, April 22, May 10, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; DAB, VI, 227; Brobson accepted after Major Nathaniel Young, Taylor's friend and a son-in-law of Thomas Clayton, declined; Charles du Pont to Frank du Pont, March 12, 1849, Winterthur MSS, EMHL; Taylor to Young, April 19, 1849, Taylor MSS, LC; Delaware State Journal, May 8, 1849; JMC to Bird, April 8, 1849, Bird MSS, UP; William H. Seward to JMC, April 9, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; B. Rowan Hardin to Crittenden, May 8, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; New York Herald, March 31, 1849; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 204, 206.

²⁵New York Herald, June 3, 1849; JMC to Crittenden, April 18, May 31, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; JMC to Lawrence,

As Minister to Spain, Daniel Barringer was a marked improvement over Romulus Saunders, who even former Secretary of State Buchanan admitted "speaks no language except English & even this he sometimes murders." George P. Marsh of Vermont, an able linguist, went to Constantinople; Balie Peyton, a former New Orleans District Attorney, to Chile; Robert P. Letcher, former Kentucky Congressman and Governor, to Mexico; Thomas W. Chinn, former Louisiana Congressman, to Naples; and J. Trumbull Van Alen, a close associate of the President, to Ecuador. The selection of Alexander K. McClung of Mississippi, a hard drinker and avid gambler, might have been most unfortunate if he had not been exiled to the Bolivian post. As a gesture of friendship for a popular former Senate colleague who had recently been defeated for reelection and was financially hard pressed, Clayton permitted the commissioning of Indiana Democrat Edward Hannegan, named by Polk, as Minister to Prussia.²⁶

After Governor Crittenden declined a diplomatic post, Clayton took great pleasure in securing for Thomas Crittenden, his son, the lucrative Liverpool consulate, a post worth about twenty or thirty thousand dollars a year in the hands

June 18, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Rives to JMC, Feb. 21, June 24, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Jno. Pendleton to Rives, March 7, 1849, Rives MSS, LC; JMC to Rives, July 31, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; U.S., Congress, House, Biographical Directory of the American Congress, p. 1742.

²⁶JMC to Buchanan, April 14, 1849, and Buchanan to JMC, April 17, 1849, Buchanan MSS, HSP; JMC to Crittenden, May 31, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 208.

of a smart man. In this and other consular appointments, the Secretary took great care not to remove a man without "good cause." Young Crittenden's predecessor was accused of intemperance; many others were dismissed for not making their semiannual reports. Hence Clayton's Whig conscience would never permit him to become an unqualified spoilsman but necessitated his perceiving just grounds for removal.²⁷

New York newspaper editor James Watson Webb longed for an appointment as Minister to Spain or Russia, but the President made clear to Webb's friends that the New Yorker's political enemies in both parties and his past participation in a duel would make such an appointment futile and even harmful. However, in November 1849 the President, at Clayton's urging, named Webb as chargé to Vienna, but anti-Austrian sentiment and opposition to the New Yorker himself led to a decisive Senate rejection of his nomination after he had already traveled to Europe.²⁸

Besides dispensing patronage to woo such like-minded Democrats as Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, the Taylor Administration gladly met Henry Clay's request that his son James Brown Clay be named chargé to Lisbon. Secretary Clayton hoped that the appointment would mean a reconciliation

²⁷JMC to Crittenden, April 8, May 31, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; Crittenden to JMC, April 16, 1849, JMC MSS, LC.

²⁸June 1, 1849, memorandum of May 31, 1849, meeting between Taylor and Webb's friends, JMC MSS, LC; JMC to Webb, Sept. 24, 1849, Webb MSS, Yale U.; James L. Crouthamel, James Watson Webb: A Biography (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), pp. 110-14; New York Herald, Dec. 7, 1849; Philadelphia North American, Feb. 11, 1850.

between the President and the old Whig leader, but Clay's private correspondence to others revealed deep dissatisfaction with the Administration's patronage policy. Still the Kentuckian advised his friends to withhold their attack on the Administration until it could be mounted on the grounds of principle rather than patronage.²⁹

Although a study of all successful applicants for Executive patronage shows that the Taylor Administration did not omit any Whig group—friends of Clay and Webster as well as of Crittenden, Lawrence, and the Native Americans—still attacks on patronage distribution came from all segments of the party, and those attacks were concentrated on the Cabinet members rather than the President. In early July Crittenden wrote Clayton that an erroneous idea was circulating that Taylor delegated everything to his Cabinet and that this idea tended to weaken respect for official actions among the people. Abraham Lincoln, an Illinois Whig recently retired from a single term in Congress, agreed. He warned the Secretary that the President's image as "a mere man of straw" had to "be arrested, or it will damn us all inevitably." He then gave some sage advice: "The appointments need be no better than they have been, but the public must be brought to understand, that they are the President's appointments. He must occasionally say, or seem to say, 'by

²⁹Crittenden to JMC, Feb. 18, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; New York Herald, July 29, 1849; Taylor to Henry Clay, May 28, 1849, Clay MSS, LC; JMC to Crittenden, May 31, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC; James B. Clay to JMC, June 6, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Henry Clay to Nicholas Dean, June 21, 1849, Clay MSS, LC.

the Eternal,' 'I take the responsibility.' Those phrases were the 'Samson's locks' of Gen. Jackson, and we dare not disregard the lessons of experience."³⁰

Crittenden's confidant Orlando Brown wanted the Cabinet "to drop some of their ridiculous formalities," become sociable outside their offices, and "act more like plain Republicans." He believed that Taylor should become more accessible to citizens and "talk more about himself and less about his Cabinet." The Washingtonian theory of President-Cabinet relations had to give way to a quasi-Jacksonian theory if the ceremonial functions of the President were to evoke popular approval.³¹

The fundamental problem, then, was one of image and not of substance. The delegation of powers to the Secretaries would necessarily continue, but the Administration's public relations needed considerable improvement. Otherwise the propaganda of Democrats, who would control both Houses of the new Congress, and the dissension within the heterogeneous Whig party might undermine the substantive search for domestic and international order on the part of the Taylor Administration.³²

³⁰Hamilton, Taylor, p. 208; Crittenden to JMC, July 8, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Lincoln to JMC, July 28, 1849, in Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols.; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), II, 60.

³¹Orlando Brown to Crittenden, June 27, July 10, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC.

³²Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 216-17.

While primarily engaged in the thankless task of dispensing patronage to "office hunting d—d brigands," Clayton also led the Administration in formulating its domestic policy toward slavery in the territories. "As to California & New Mexico, I have been wide awake," the Secretary wrote Crittenden in mid-April. "Every thing is done as you would wish it," he added. "The plan I proposed to you last winter will be carried out fully. The States will be admitted—free and Whig!" He realized that the recent discovery of gold in California and the large influx of population there necessitated the extension of civil authority to the area. Statehood for California as well as New Mexico would obviate domestic dissension over the Wilmot Proviso and would help stabilize the highly volatile society in those former Mexican territories still under U.S. military rule.³³

With the approval of the President and the rest of the Cabinet, Clayton dispatched Thomas Butler King, a Whig Congressman from Georgia, as a special agent to encourage California leaders to organize an overtly spontaneous statehood movement. Although the Secretary's written instructions to King were circumspect, his oral instructions were presumably to work for a "free and Whig" state government for California. After arriving there in early June

³³JMC to Bird, May 21, 1849, Bird MSS, UP; JMC to Crittenden, April 18, 1849 (referring to Dec. 13, 1848, letter to Crittenden), Crittenden MSS, LC; in Jan. 1849, Elisha Whittlesey had notified President Polk of Clayton's support for immediate California statehood; see Polk, Diary, IV, 308.

1849, the Georgian consulted with the "more quiet and well disposed portion of the people," addressed mass meetings, and soon found that even the disorderly elements, previously committed to a territorial form of government, now joined with the others in working for admission. Assisting King in his mission were the military commanders there, Generals P. F. Smith and Bennet Riley, who were "prompt and zealous" and not simply perfunctory in carrying out the Administration's wishes. In September delegates met in Monterey to draw up a constitution excluding slavery; and when Congress convened in December, the President commended the impending California petition, as well as a possible New Mexico petition, for admission to the Union.³⁴

On April 18, 1849, six weeks after the inauguration, John M. Clayton was still sanguine about prospects in both national and international affairs. "Congress must settle all questions of domestic policy," he wrote Crittenden; and, indeed, he believed that it could if it accepted the statehood plan for unorganized former Mexican areas and avoided the divisive issue of slavery in the territories. "I will settle the questions of foreign policy," he continued, "& I will give you leave to hang me like an acorn if I do not bring

³⁴JMC to Thomas Butler King, April 3, 1849, Diplomatic Instructions of the Department of State, 1801-1906 [hereafter cited as DIDS], Special Missions, I, in the National Archives; also printed in Washington National Intelligencer, Jan. 22, 1850; King to JMC, April 27, June 20, July 22, Sept. 29, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Edward M. Steel, Jr., T. Butler King of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), pp. 72-78; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 179, 182; Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of Presidents, V, 18-19.

out the glorious old man's administration in its foreign relations without cause for a complaint even from his enemies."³⁵

Soon, however, the realities and limitations of his office tempered his initial optimism. "Chained down to a spot from 14 to 16 hours a day . . .," he wrote some Delaware friends in July, "while every act I do or can perform is not only liable to misconstruction but certain to be misconstrued from some quarter or other, a man in my situation is compelled to throw himself upon the charity as well as the justice of his countrymen, or abandon his position." During the next twelve months he was to discover how elusive was the goal of achieving orderly progress at home and abroad.³⁶

Assisted by a small State Department staff of fourteen, including veteran chief clerk William Hunter and confidential clerk George P. Fisher of Delaware, Secretary Clayton grappled with the foreign policy problems facing the American republic at midcentury. Two interrelated considerations dominated his thinking as he undertook this task—national honor and commercial expansion. Accordingly, he sought strict enforcement of America's neutrality and its treaties

³⁵JMC to Crittenden, April 18, 1849, Crittenden MSS, LC.

³⁶JMC to [John] Wales et al., July 2, 1849, printed in Delaware State Journal, July 6, 1849.

with other nations and also the maintenance of peace by negotiating prudently from a position of strength.³⁷

As Secretary of State Clayton worked for the expansion of America's informal, commercial empire through trade negotiations but opposed the further extension of the nation's formal, territorial empire. In December 1849, for instance, he personally negotiated a Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation with the Hawaiian commissioner James J. Jarves. This first formal treaty between the United States and Hawaii, soon ratified by the Senate, signified growing American commercial and Protestant missionary interest in the Pacific islands.³⁸

Furthermore, in 1849 Clayton laid the groundwork for future Oriental trade by sponsoring a report on the subject by Aaron Haight Palmer, former Director of the American Foreign Agency of New York and a spokesman for New York and Baltimore merchants. "It is eminently the policy of

³⁷White, The Jacksonians, p. 98; Fisher to JMC, May 21, 1856, JMC MSS, LC; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 162, 187.

³⁸Hunter Miller, ed., Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America [hereafter cited as Miller, Treaties] (8 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-48), V, 591-600; Rufus Anderson, Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Missionary House, Boston, to James J. Jarves, Oct. 24, 1849, copy, JMC MSS, LC. Since at Yale College Clayton had known the impact of Protestant Christianity on the Hawaiian Obookiah, who lived with President Dwight, one may conjecture that as Secretary of State he regarded commerce and Christianity as merely two aspects of America's informal, civilizing expansion into the Pacific; see Ralph Henry Gabriel, Religion and Learning at Yale: The Church of Christ in the College and University, 1757-1957 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 77-79.

our Government," Palmer concluded, "not only to adopt early measures for opening friendly intercourse and trade with all the Oriental nations . . . but also to make our star-spangled banner known and respected from the Arctic to the Antarctic oceans . . . and extend its protection over American citizens and their lawful commerce in every sea." Devoting half of his long report to Japan, he argued that this "isolated and mysterious empire," closed to nearly all foreign contact since 1637, would have "to succumb to the progressive commercial spirit of the age" and open itself to foreign navigators and merchants.

Significantly, with the advice of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, Palmer proposed a U.S. naval mission to Japan. Such a mission would impress the people there with American strength and the wisdom of encouraging American commerce and of welcoming rather than mistreating shipwrecked U.S. sailors. Although domestic difficulties and more pressing foreign problems prevented Clayton from implementing Palmer's report, he did give it wide circulation and thus helped prepare the way for Perry's mission of 1853-54.³⁹

³⁹Palmer's report first came in the form of a long letter to JMC, dated April 14, 1849, which was printed by direction of the State Department in the Washington National Intelligencer of Sept. 6, 1849, under the title "American Commerce in the East," and which was revised and published in pamphlet form as a Letter to the Hon. John M. Clayton, Secretary of State, Enclosing a Paper, Geographical, Political, and Commercial, on the Independent Oriental Nations; and Submitting a Plan for Opening, Extending, and Protecting American Commerce in the East . . . (revised with app.; Washington: Gideon & Co., Printers, 1849); quotations are from the former; see also Philadelphia North American, Aug. 22, 1849.

Likewise, sending Joseph Balestier on a special mission to Southeast Asian states accomplished little at the time, though it foreshadowed much. Clayton instructed him to seek treaties protecting American lives and permitting American commerce there. Balestier was to inform the sovereign of Cochin-China at Hue that America was a non-colonial power and wanted only peace and commerce. He was to thank the King of Siam for extending his hospitality and protection to American missionaries residing there.⁴⁰

In most cases, however, the American envoy to Southeast Asia was either ignored or rebuffed. He chafed under the Siamese nobles' "tone of arrogance towards Europeans" and found kowtowing before these "naked dark savages" repulsive and humiliating. He also reported "that just dealings & faithful adherence to solemn treaty contracts are not [to] be expected from the Siamese unless enforced by brutal force." Since American power was negligible in the region, Balestier was able to obtain a treaty only with Brunei, a sultanate on the island of Borneo; but his mission represented another American attempt to capitalize on the Eastern Trade.⁴¹

On April 14, 1849, in the midst of his patronage woes and early concern with foreign relations, Secretary Clayton wrote his Democratic predecessor, James Buchanan, and

⁴⁰JMC to Joseph Balestier, Aug. 16, 1849, DIDS, Special Missions, I.

⁴¹Balestier to JMC, May 10, Oct. 21, 1850, JMC MSS, LC; Miller, Treaties, V, 826-43.

complained good-naturedly about the problems of continuity. "If I go to the devil," he declared, "it will be because I am here daily engaged in covering up and defending all your outrageous acts. I have already gone so far in this, that I now feel that I am 'little better than one of the wicked.'" He then proceeded to enumerate several problems, two of which merit consideration here.⁴²

First, the Mexican protocol concerned Clayton. As a Senator he had opposed Buchanan's argument that the preliminary agreement between American and Mexican negotiators did not weaken any provisions of the final Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As Secretary, however, Clayton now defended the course of the Polk Administration in the matter and privately labeled as "moonshine" the Mexican argument in favor of the protocol's validity. After a conference with Senator Henry S. Foote and former Secretary Buchanan, he dictated a resolution to that effect which the Senate, then in executive session, promptly passed. As he wrote Senator Berrien, "We can know no party in our intercourse with a foreign nation." Throughout his tenure the new Secretary would strive with some success to gain bipartisan support for his diplomacy.⁴³

⁴²JMC to Buchanan, April 14, 1849, Buchanan MSS, HSP.

⁴³Ibid.; Cong. Globe, 30th Cong., 2d sess., p. 499; JMC to Luis de la Rosa, Mexican Minister to the United States, April 11, 1849, in William R. Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860 [hereafter cited as Dip. Corres.; IAA] (12 vols.; Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1932-39), IX, 19-27; Henry S. Foote, Casket of Reminiscences (Washington: Chronicle Publishing

A second problem carried over from the Polk Administration was an apparent German violation of American neutrality. After resuming war with Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein, the German Confederation continued fitting out the vessel the United States in the harbor of New York. When the Danish chargé complained, Clayton warned the German Minister, Baron Roenne, of the palpable violation of the Neutrality Act of 1818. He declared that the vessel would be permitted to leave port only if Roenne posted bond and gave solemn assurances that it would not be used against any nation with which America was at peace. When Roenne questioned Clayton's interpretation of the 1818 law, the Secretary revealed his diplomatic inexperience by unnecessarily defending that interpretation of domestic legislation with an opinion from Attorney General Reverdy Johnson. Despite this slip, the Secretary finally gained the required assurances from Roenne, and the German vessel set sail without violating America's neutrality.⁴⁴

As many Americans viewed the turbulence of revolution and reaction in mid-nineteenth century Europe, they probably

Company, 1874), pp. 335-36; JMC to Berrien, March 22, 1849, Berrien MSS, Southern Historical Coll., U. of N.C.; Samuel Flagg Bemis, ed., The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy [hereafter cited as Bemis, American Secretaries of State] (10 vols.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927-29), VI, 16. Mary Wilhelmine Williams is the author of the section on JMC in Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 1-74.

⁴⁴Roenne to JMC, April 15, May 9, 31, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 16-18; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 191; Crittenden to JMC, June 24, 1849, JMC MSS, LC.

agreed with the New York Herald's observation that the two extremes of chaotic socialism and enslaving monarchy threatened the continent. "In either case," the paper asserted, "Russia is the master of Europe. Nothing can save the States or the people of the old world, but honest, straightforward, downright American democracy."⁴⁵

While adhering to the traditional policy of noninterference in the domestic affairs of Europe, Secretary Clayton realized that it was impossible for the United States "to look on as unconcerned spectators" when republican movements stirred the continent and commercial prospects beckoned. "We have important interests at stake in the movements of Europe," he wrote A. Dudley Mann, "and it is our duty to watch over those interests with a wise vigilance, and to stand prepared to take advantage of every opening occasion. . . . Peace and Commerce are the noble aims of our happy Land," he continued. "The former, by God's blessing, we enjoy. Let us omit no exertions to secure the most liberal and beneficial extension of the latter."⁴⁶

Particularly alluring to Clayton in its republicanism and its anticipated commercial potential was the fledgling, and short-lived, independent government of Hungary. As part of a wave of largely premature revolutions which swept Europe in 1848-49, the establishment of a Hungarian republic

⁴⁵New York Herald, Dec. 31, 1849.

⁴⁶JMC to A. Dudley Mann, June 18, 1849, DIDS, Special Missions, I.

in April 1849 under the leadership of Louis Kossuth moved the American Secretary to send A. Dudley Mann as a special agent to Vienna. There he could watch developments across the border. Although conscious that prospects for permanent Hungarian independence were "gloomy," Clayton hoped that the United States could be the first nation to extend diplomatic recognition in case of Magyar success and to take advantage of the new republic's trade potential through her Adriatic port of Fiume.⁴⁷

By the time Mann reached Vienna in late July, however, the Hungarian forces had already confronted insuperable external opposition in a two-pronged Austro-Russian invasion and formidable separatist movements among the South Slavs and the Rumanians. As a result, the republic collapsed by mid-August, Kossuth fled to Turkey for refuge, and the United States had no stable republican government to recognize. Although the discovery of America's willingness to extend such recognition strained relations with Austria under Clayton and his successor, the episode demonstrated the nation's desire to wield ideological and commercial influence in Europe, despite its military impotence there. "Our example as a free and prosperous people," Andrew J. Donelson wrote Clayton, "is worth more than all the armies in the world."⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid.; JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.

⁴⁸Donelson, Frankfurt [German Confederation], to JMC, Aug. 6, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 198-99;

Clayton's diplomacy exhibited a mixture of humanitarianism and self-interest in the search for Sir John Franklin, the famed Arctic explorer. Franklin and his men had recently disappeared while looking for the Northwest passage. When Sir John's anxious wife wrote President Taylor for help, Clayton gladly replied that the U.S. government would respond wholeheartedly to her appeal within its constitutional limitations. In a typical reaction Governor Crittenden congratulated the Secretary of State on his reply and called his offer of aid to Lady Franklin "a grand act of Nationality & humanity . . . [which] makes an American Citizen feel great & good."

Clayton himself considered the opportunity "a pretty feather in the President[']s cap" but soon saw the Navy Department delay so long that it was too late to undertake an expedition in 1849. He could only blame the unprogressive commodores and regret that bureaucratic intransigence had prevented him from sending another "jewel of a letter" to Lady Franklin. Even early the next year Congress neglected to provide for the necessary appropriation, and only the private philanthropy of Henry Grinnell permitted an American expedition to set sail in the spring of 1850. The appeal of a lady in distress and the opportunity to improve relations with Great Britain through such a humanitarian gesture

Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 15-16. President Taylor reiterated Clayton's position toward Hungary in his first annual message; see Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of Presidents, V, 12.

had moved the Secretary to act, though he accomplished nothing tangible. The bodies of Sir John Franklin and his party were not to be discovered in the Arctic wasteland until the turn of the century.⁴⁹

In handling private American claims against Portugal, the Secretary of State sought primarily to vindicate the national honor. The oldest and most contested of the claims involved the privateer General Armstrong which the British had destroyed during the War of 1812 under the guns of a Portuguese fortress in the Azores. Since the Treaty of Ghent had relieved Britain of any responsibility, the United States had long attempted and failed to obtain compensation from Portugal for allegedly violating its responsibilities as a neutral. In his instructions to George W. Hopkins, the incumbent U.S. diplomat in Portugal, Clayton threatened "ulterior measures" including suspension of relations and "Reprisals" if the Portuguese government failed to heed "this final appeal." Although he obtained settlement of one of the lesser claims, Clayton refused to allow the case of the General Armstrong to go to arbitration. Consequently, U.S. chargé James Brown Clay returned from Lisbon, and settlement was delayed until 1851 when Secretary Daniel

⁴⁹Lady Franklin to Taylor, April 4, 1849, JMC to Lady Franklin, April 25, 1849, and Lady Franklin to JMC, May 24, 1849, all quoted in Comegys, Memoir, pp. 180-87; Crittenden to JMC, June 8, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; JMC to Crittenden, July 11, 1849, Crittenden MSS, U. of Ky.; Thomas Aspinwall, London, to JMC, June 15, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Hamilton, Taylor, p. 353.

Webster submitted the matter to arbitration and saw the decision go against the United States.⁵⁰

Relations with Spain, particularly over Cuba, illustrated Clayton's views toward expansion, neutrality, and the national honor. He privately characterized the attempt on the part of his predecessor, Buchanan, to purchase Cuba as "a blunder worse than a crime." But the Pennsylvanian retorted, "We must have Cuba. We can't do without Cuba & above all we must not suffer its transfer to Great Britain. We shall acquire it by a coup d'etat at some propitious moment which from the present state of Europe may not be far distant." Clayton agreed with the no-transfer principle but declined to renew the effort, so offensive to Spain, to buy Cuba. Any proposition for its sale would have to come from Spain. He wanted commercial concessions, not additional territory.⁵¹

When Cuban exiles and American sympathizers undertook filibustering expeditions against Spanish-controlled Cuba, Clayton tried to block them by vigorously enforcing America's neutrality laws. As soon as the first reports reached Washington in August 1849 of clandestine preparations for one such armed expedition, the Secretary had Taylor issue a proclamation denouncing such conduct as "criminal" and

⁵⁰JMC to George W. Hopkins, April 20, 1849, and JMC to James Brown Clay, March 8, 1850, DIDS, Spain, XIV; Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 32-37; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 190-91, 371; see also Samuel C. Reid to JMC, April 3, 1848, JMC MSS, LC.

⁵¹JMC to Buchanan, April 14, 17, 1849, Buchanan MSS, HSP; JMC to Daniel M. Barringer, Aug. 2, 1849, in Manning, Dip. Corres.: IAA, XI, 69-70.

bound to be crushed by all lawful means. In compliance warships dispersed trainees on Round Island in the Mississippi River, and federal officials detained two vessels about to set sail from New York.

Early in 1850 the vigilant Spanish Minister to Washington, Calderón de la Barca, complained of preparations being made for an expedition headed by Narcisco Lopez, a Venezuelan adventurer who had lived in Spain and Cuba. This time, however, the filibusters cleverly claimed to be headed for California or Oregon via the isthmus. Although federal officials had no legal power to prevent the suspects from embarking, three U.S. naval vessels patrolled the waters off Cuba and intercepted all but the craft carrying Lopez and part of his band. After Spanish authorities in Cuba repelled this rump expeditionary force, Lopez and a few followers escaped to Key West, Florida. Clayton later had Lopez twice arrested and tried, but southern juries acquitted him in both cases.⁵²

While resisting expansionist and filibustering schemes, Secretary Clayton also defended the national honor by demanding the protection of innocent American citizens in Cuba and even would-be American filibusters captured by Spanish authorities outside their jurisdiction. Most notably, when Spanish officials seized forty or fifty men at the

⁵²Thomas Ewing to JMC, Aug. 7, 1849, JMC MSS, LC; Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of Presidents, V, 7-8; Angel Calderón de la Barca to JMC, Jan. 19, 1850, in Manning, Dip. Corres.: IAA, XI, 473-74; Delaware State Journal, May 28, 1850; Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 37-38.

expedition's rendezvous point of Contoy off the Yucatan coast of Mexico, imprisoned them, and prepared for their summary executions as "pirates," he intervened forcefully in their behalf. The President backed him in a virtual ultimatum to Spain, though all the Cabinet members except Secretary of War Crawford opposed such a hard line. The Secretary of State argued chiefly that the Contoy prisoners were guilty of no overt crime, only the intention to commit it, and that Spanish authority did not extend to neutral waters.

In a series of diplomatic moves Clayton pressed his point. As a result, in July 1850, a Spanish court released all but three of the Contoy prisoners on grounds of insufficient evidence, and the remaining three obtained pardons from prison terms in October. Clayton's diplomacy had thus upheld neutral obligations, on the one hand, and protected American citizens, on the other. His good working relationship with the Spanish Minister in Washington, the wholehearted support of the President, and the desire of Spain to avoid war with the United States all contributed to his diplomatic success.⁵³

⁵³ JMC to George P. Fisher, Jan. 14, 1851, Fisher MSS, LC; Ewing memorandum [June 1850], Ewing MSS, U. of Notre Dame; JMC to Robert B. Campbell, June 1, 1850, JMC to Angel Calderón de la Barca, June 3, July 9, 1850, and JMC to Daniel M. Barringer, July 1, 1850, all in Manning, Dip. Corres.: IAA, XI, 78-81, 87-90; Washington National Intelligence, July 18, 1850; Bemis, American Secretaries of State, VI, 38-40; Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 369-70.

Sending the capable Benjamin E. Green, son of newspaper editor Duff Green, as a special agent to the Dominican Republic and Haiti indicated the importance of commercial expansion in much of Clayton's diplomacy. The sole purpose of Green's mission, as the Delawarean later informed Whittlesey, was to promote commerce, not to negotiate annexation of the Dominican Republic or to interfere with black-dominated Haiti. The fear that France or especially Britain would gain the upper hand and obtain a valuable commercial depot in the Dominican Republic's Bay of Samana spurred the mission. Though Clayton would not have accepted the island of Santo Domingo even as a gift, he concluded that the value of U.S. commerce with the two nations located there exceeded the combined value of trade with the remainder of the West Indies. He therefore sought commercial concessions but avoided diplomatic recognition of either nation on the island till each should prove its stability against internal and external threats. In the end, Green helped block British and French moves on the island but obtained only a favorable consular agreement with Haiti.⁵⁴

Relations with Peru revolved primarily around the guano trade with its implications for the restoration of the depleted agricultural lands along the Chesapeake. A British company's virtual monopoly of the export of Peruvian guano resulted in charging American farmers exorbitant prices for

⁵⁴DAB, IV, 538-39; JMC to Whittlesey, July 6, 1851, Whittlesey MSS, WRHS; JMC to Green, June 13, 1849, in Manning, Dip. Corres.: IAA, VI, 5-9.

the claim was awarded by Meredith with Johnson's advice. But the alleged scandal apparently had the President considering the replacement of these three Cabinet members a week before his death.⁴⁶

In June 1850, in the midst of the Contoy prisoner affair with Spain and the furor over the Galphin Claim, Clayton again attempted to resign. In a letter of resignation which he drafted on June 18, he expressed his agreement with all Administration measures but cited the long neglect of his private affairs as his reason for departing. In addition, he recommended a substantial increase in the State Department's clerical force. "It has been only by the devotion of all my time," he explained, "denying to myself any period for amusement or recreation and endeavoring to perform the duties of a clerk as well as a Secretary of State, that I have succeeded in keeping up the business of the Department." Taylor, however, wholeheartedly supported his Secretary's firm stand in the Contoy affair and persuaded him to continue. With a showdown nearing on the President's territorial policy, he needed Clayton's services more

⁴⁶The Galphin Claim went back to the days before the American Revolution. At that time George Galphin, a trader in the Georgia Indian territory, received royal certificates in exchange for his products. When the Revolution came, however, Galphin sided with the colonists and consequently never received payment from the British. Since the state of Georgia could not afford to compensate him or his heirs, an Indian treaty of 1835 transferred that responsibility to the federal government. In 1848 Congress finally approved the Claim. The Polk Administration then awarded the principal but left the larger question of interest to the Taylor Administration. See Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 345-52, 355-56; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, I, 325-27.

than ever. After the exchange of ratifications for the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty on July 5, the Delawarean might well have been able to devote considerably more time to domestic affairs.⁴⁷

But signing the proclamation of that Treaty on July 5, 1850, proved to be the last official act of Taylor's Presidency. His health impaired by the rigors of office, the previous day the old soldier had overexposed himself to the sun and the heat at an Independence celebration, then ate raw fruit or vegetables, and drank cold liquids. The result, according to his chief biographer, was an acute case of gastroenteritis, the inflammation of the lining of his stomach and intestines, attributable to an unhealthful water or milk supply. During the ensuing five days, his condition gradually worsened. "The President is sick, of a bilious attack," Senator Seward wrote his wife on July 8. "The Vice-President is 'tempted to strange thoughts.'" On the evening of July 9, Cabinet members, relatives, and close friends assembled to await the inevitable. At 10:30 the General died, and the mournful tolling of the State Department's bell announced to the world that "a new era in the history of the Republic" had ended. Millard Fillmore had succeeded to the Presidency.⁴⁸

⁴⁷JMC to Taylor, June 18, 1850, JMC MSS, LC; see also JMC to Taylor, June 24, 1850, JMC MSS, Buck Coll.; for the Contoy affair see chap. VI of the dissertation.

⁴⁸Hamilton, Taylor, pp. 388-93; Seward to Mrs. Seward, July 8, 10, 1850, in Seward, Seward, I, 143-45; Ben: Perley Poore, Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National

The shock of Taylor's death left Clayton ill for several days, and he did not fully recover until he was relieved, as he told Crittenden, "by a flood of tears." But practical decisions could not await emotional catharsis. When Fillmore arrived at the White House shortly after Taylor's death, the Secretary of State immediately announced his determination not to serve under him under any circumstances. Indeed, within half an hour all the Cabinet members had tendered their unconditional resignations, effective as soon as their successors were named.

Clayton's antipathy for the new President and his Administration was apparent. "Mr. Fillmore," he later recalled, "was false to President Taylor by whose popularity, he a dead weight on the ticket was accidentally made what God never meant should be made of such small timber—a President of the United States." In fact, the day after Taylor's death, he wrote his friend Bird, "I am sure we shall have cause to mourn. If D[aniel] W[ebster] rules," and Clayton predicted he would as Fillmore's Secretary of State, "we are gone & may as well give up the political game. Whiggery is d—d."⁴⁹

On July 21, 1850, after scarcely five hundred days in office, John M. Clayton and his colleagues gave way to Daniel

Metropolis (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, Publishers, 1886), I, 378.

⁴⁹JMC to Crittenden, Aug. 8, 1850, Crittenden MSS, LC; JMC to John W. Houston, July 11, 1856, Houston MSS, Houston Coll.; JMC to Bird, July 10, 1850, Bird MSS, UP.

Webster and the rest of the new Cabinet. "I feel like a man with a mountain taken from his shoulders," Clayton wrote Crittenden, now Attorney General, two weeks later. "I have worked and toiled, as man never toiled before, amidst embarrassments and difficulties unequalled." "I have, he concluded, "fought a good fight, though I think I have got no credit for it; and henceforth there is laid up for me, not indeed any crown [of] glory, but, a place of rest, where in the retirement of private life, I shall remain contented."⁵⁰

But his contentment would prove short-lived, for he regarded retirement as an opportunity to "have a lick at some enemies before I die." His position as Secretary of State had prevented him from replying effectively to his critics. The Cabinet, like the Presidency, was no place for an orator in the mid-nineteenth century. "But at my convenient leisure," he wrote a Philadelphia friend, "I will hereafter take a raking fire at the flock of calumniators who slandered me for the purpose of breaking down the [Taylor] Administration."⁵¹

In November 1850, for instance, Clayton defended his record and that of the past Administration before a large Wilmington banquet given in his honor. Significantly, he also proclaimed his "love and veneration for the institutions which our fathers have left us, and for the country, the

⁵⁰JMC to Crittenden, Aug. 8, 1850, Crittenden MSS, LC.

⁵¹JMC to Wm. D. Lewis, Aug. 9, 1850, Lewis-Neilson MSS, HSP.

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