

LETTER FROM COLONEL JOHN T. PICKETT, OF THE
SOUTHERN CONFEDERACY, TO SENOR DON MA-
NUEL DE ZAMACONA, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AF-
FAIRS, MEXICO

Early in 1861, Colonel John T. Pickett of Virginia was sent to Mexico as the diplomatic agent of the Confederate States. He soon found that, while Corwin, the minister from the United States, and the people from the North who happened to be in the country were in high favor, he himself was regarded with coldness and suspicion. The unfriendliness of the Mexicans towards him and his government was augmented by the efforts of the Northerners, with one of whom—"an unlucky pill-vender by the name of Bennett"—he got into a quarrel. Bennett refused to respond to a challenge to a duel and the Southern diplomat went to the former's place of business and, after calling him a liar, struck and kicked him. This incident resulted in Pickett's arrest by the Mexican authorities on the charge of assault and battery. Pickett claimed immunity on the basis of his diplomatic character, and, this being refused him, finally secured his release from jail by means of bribery. In December he left Mexico, by which time the government of the Republic had virtually ceased to function, and the European creditors of the hapless nation had begun to crowd it badly.

Among the Pickett Papers in the Map Division of the Library of Congress are to be found copies of the Mexican correspondence of Pickett, from which the following letter (marked "with No. 10"), which indicates the nature of Pickett's negotiations and the general character of the correspondence, has been reproduced. The volume containing the copy of the letter is number 26 of the Papers of the Confederate States.

MARY WILHELMINE WILLIAMS.

MR. PICKETT TO MR. DE ZAMACONA

Mexico September 16th 1861.

Hotel Iturbide, N° 64.

The note of His Excellency, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, dated the 28th Ultimo, was received by the undersigned, Confidential Agent of the Government of the Confederate States of America, in time to be transmitted to Richmond, (the actual capital of the C. S. of A.), by the last packet, and H. E. will please accept the thanks of the undersigned for having so graciously complied with his request in regard to a prompt reply to his last note.

The undersigned can only express his deep regret at the permission accorded by the Mexican Government for the passage of troops of the United States from Guaymas, in the State of Sonora, to Arizona,—since, in view of the assurance given by the undersigned that, Arizona is under the protection of the Confederate States, the permission referred to is certainly violative of that strict and perfect neutrality which the Government of Mexico so emphatically declares to be its purpose to observe with regard to the intestine disputes of foreign nations. It is true the U. States likewise claims to exercise authority over the said territory—or district of Arizona; but this permission (to adopt the implied theory of the Mexican Government, that the late U. States is still one nation), conceded to the U. States as a matter of right were a pretension on the part of Mexico to decide a purely domestic question of a foreign power.

It may here be observed as not a little singular, that although a similar privilege had been more than once asked in former times by the late U. States, it had never been effectively granted until now, when, in consequence of the revolution, it can only be rendered available by one section of the late U. States against another section. However, as the chief object of the mission of the undersigned is the preservation of peace and the cultivation of the best relations between two neighboring nations, this grave matter has been reported to the Government of the Confederate States with every possible circumstance of extenuation,—the undersigned dwelling especially upon the fact that he has been assured by H. E., the Minister of Foreign Affairs, that Mexico was not, at the time of granting the obnoxious permission, aware the Confederate States claimed to exercise jurisdiction over the territory in question. The subject is therefore dismissed by the undersigned with a friendly remonstrance,—not doubting the Government of Mexico will

see the justice and propriety of hastening to retrace a step, which if persisted in cannot otherwise than prove fatal to the peace of the frontier.

As the impression appears to prevail in this capital—and in fact throughout the Republic—that the policy of the Confederate States toward Mexico will be aggressive, the undersigned desires to assure His Excellency, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, that such impression is entirely erroneous, and wholly without foundation.

Formerly, the policy of the Southern part of the late American Union was *extension* no doubt; the object having been to maintain its equilibrium with the North,—which section was adding to itself State after State, with the main object of securing a majority in the National House of Representatives and in the Senate, (which latter body was a Council of Ambassadors of Sovereign States), and thus to control the other coordinate powers of the Government, namely: the Executive (President) and Judiciary. Succeeding it was avowedly their purpose to remodel the Judiciary,—placing their own creatures on the Supreme Bench, and thus have the Constitution interpreted in accordance with their own peculiar views. The President also whatever might have been his views and principles would have been powerless for good in the hands of a Sectional Senate, as that body exercises co-equal power in all appointments to office, in the ratification of treaties, in the levying of war, in the suspension of the *habeas corpus* (*garantias personales*), and in short, in all the high prerogatives of Government.

The North having succeeded last Autumn in electing a Sectional President upon a *Plan* at once destructive and insulting to the South, and having already secured a majority of the House of Representatives—with every certainty of a majority in the Senate within two years—the latter Section had presented to it the alternative of a withdrawal from the Union, or submission to a most degrading vassalage. The former alternative was chosen and as recent events have proved, not too soon for the preservation of Southern honor and liberty. True, President Lincoln received only about one third part of the entire popular vote cast on the occasion, but he was elected according to the *form* (though not in the *spirit*), prescribed by the Constitution, and the South could rid itself of the despotism prepared for it only by revolution. Thus the war made upon the South and its institutions for thirty years was hastened to a culmination.

It must be manifest to H. E. that, with the establishment of its Independence the policy of extension of territory on the part of the South

ceases to exist—in fact dies a natural death. The Confederate States have now more territory than they can cultivate and people for a century to come, and so far from desiring to acquire any portion of the lands of its Mexican neighbor, the undersigned would be happy to receive and transmit to Richmond proposals for the retrocession to Mexico of a large portion of the territory hitherto acquired from her by the late U. States.¹

Nevertheless, the Confederate States will not look with indifference upon the acquisition—by force or otherwise—of Mexican territory by the present U. States, nor by private companies organized in that country. The following passage from the first note of the undersigned to H. E. is sufficiently significant upon this subject. “The grant to the United States of commercial, political, or territorial advantages which may not be accorded to the Confederate States would be regarded by that Government as evidence of an unfriendly disposition on the part of Mexico which it would sincerely deplore and protest against in the promptest and most decided manner.”

The Government of the Confederate States does not assume to restrict Mexico as to the manner in which she may dispose of her own property; but self-preservation is the first law of nature and of nations, and is therefore the cardinal principle of international law, and the Confederate States cannot permit themselves to be flanked by the radiation upon their Southern borders of a powerful, fanatical, unscrupulous and deadly hostile Government, namely: that of the actual United States. Neither would the Confederate States be indifferent to European recolonization, or the re-establishment of a monarchy in Mexico.²

The undersigned trusts H. E. will excuse the frankness of these remarks and that they will be received in the sincerely friendly spirit by

¹ On August 1st, Pickett had written in a letter to Toombs: “No one is more impressed than the writer with the great truth that *Southward* the Star of Empire takes its way!” On October 29th, he expressed the fear that colonies of Germans, whom he found especially hostile to slavery, were to be planted in northern Mexico, and suggested to Toombs the seizure of Monterey and the ultimate control by the South of the whole northern part of the Republic.

² On November 29th, when on the point of departing from Mexico, Pickett wrote the secretary of state of the Confederacy: “Our revolution has emasculated the Monroe Doctrine, in so far as we are concerned. The Spaniards are now become our natural allies, and jointly with them we may own the Gulf of Mexico and effect a partition of this magnificent country. I little thought a few years ago ever to counsel a Spanish alliance, but revolutions bring us into strange company, and I am now prepared to advocate an alliance which may tend to check the expansion of the North.”

which they are dictated. It is far from the intention of the undersigned to assume to instruct Mexico upon the subject of international law, nor to offer gratuitous information as to the form of Government of the late United States—seeing that H. E. cannot be less informed than himself upon that subject. But he, the undersigned, has felt that he would be guilty of dereliction of duty should he fail to consign the foregoing to writing—freighted as it is with weighty considerations to the respective Governments, and which cannot, therefore, be otherwise than of deep interest to Mexican Statesmen.

As H. E., the Minister of Foreign Affairs, appears to have deemed the proposal of the undersigned to the effect, that existing treaties between Mexico and the United States be considered as of force and effect between Mexico and the Confederate States, was intended as an indirect method of securing a recognition of the Independence of the Confederate States by Mexico, the undersigned begs permission to assure H. E. that no such motive governed him in advancing that proposition. In the same communication he, the undersigned, distinctly avows, (as H. E. has not failed to perceive), that “It is not the wish of the Government of the undersigned to *ask* for a formal recognition of the Independence of the Confederate States by Mexico.” The object of the undersigned was purely and simply to cause as little inconvenience as possible to Mexico, and to citizens of the respective countries in consequence of the disruption of the late American Union; in the hope that, thus the people of Mexico and of the Confederate States should continue to occupy precisely the same relations toward each other as heretofore. In fact, notwithstanding the denial of H. E., those treaties *are* of force and effect and in full operation,—certainly in so far as the ordinary commercial relations are concerned. Consuls of the Mexican Republic remain and perform their functions in the cities and ports of the Confederate States, by virtue of those treaties, under the sanction of that Government, and the traffic of the frontier continues uninterrupted. Moreover, the Congress of the Confederate States in making it a penal offense to export cotton across the frontiers expressly excepted Mexico from that prohibition, to the end that this country might not be incommoded by being deprived of her usual supply of that article. The amount of that product usually exported to this country is so insignificant in comparison with the immense crop gathered, that it was scarcely an object of special legislation, except from the motive just explained. The bar at the mouth of the Rio Bravo del Norte has so little water on it that it was not hoped the said river could be rendered available for

the exportation of cotton to Europe. The legislation was therefore for the benefit of Mexico and of the few cotton planters in that part of Texas. This otherwise irrelevant matter has been introduced for the purpose of showing that the relations of the two countries are closer than those relations which exist merely by the comity of nations.

When the great European powers admitted the belligerent rights of the Confederate States they impliedly acknowledged the independence of those States as a *de facto* Government, and the full operation of the treaties as between their subjects, respectively, and the citizens of the said States. The *formal* recognition of a Government *de jure* were of course, another affair. If the Confederate States fail to maintain their independence such recognition will assuredly and properly be withheld. The undersigned has not permitted himself to suppose the Mexican Government is less a free agent in such matters than the European powers, and that, in consequence, she (Mexico) recognizes the belligerent rights of the Confederate States,—would respect the flag of those States on the high seas, in her ports, &c. Indeed it was considered unnecessary to propound such a question, though an admission of those rights would be agreeable to the undersigned if expressed in acknowledgment to this note.

Whilst fully recognizing the harmonious and cordial spirit pervading the note of H. E., it is a source of surprise to the undersigned the Mexican Government should not have perceived that, in repudiating the treaties referred to as between Mexico and the Confederate States, the autonomy of those States is thereby confessed; *id est*,—they have successfully thrown off the binding effect of those treaties, and have boldly asserted their independence of the U. States. It is, however, a theory of the publicists that, a revolution in a Federal, or in a Confederate Government, and the withdrawal of a member from the Federation, does not release the seceding State from its obligations to foreign powers previously contracted. Upon the disruption of the Columbian Confederation the late members were held rateably responsible for the debts and other treaty obligations incurred whilst in the Union. Thus, if a treaty existed between Mexico and the U. States by which the latter had engaged to pay the former \$10,000,000 in 1862 would not Mexico expect the Confederate States to pay their proportion in the event of the U. States repudiating the whole or any part of that debt? And if the Confederate States were bound by such obligations and willingly admitted them, would it not oblige Mexico to fulfill her portion of the treaty stipulation by which such debt may have been incurred? It

were a matter a reciprocal obligation, and this reasoning applies precisely to the proposal of the undersigned with regard to the treaties; the only difference consisting in the fact that no money is due to Mexico and therefore the point and full force of the argument may not be so clear.

Finally, in as much as Mexico declines to consider the old treaties as of force and effect the undersigned hereby withdraws the affirmative proposition, and would be happy, (pending the full recognition of the Confederate States by other powers), to exchange with H. E. confidential protocols as the bases of an entirely new treaty of amity, commerce, navigation, &c. [Limits & extradition.]

The undersigned trusts to the patience of H. E. to excuse the great length of this communication,—especially if any of the topics may be deemed premature. It has been the anxious desire of the undersigned that it may not be said hereafter, should misunderstandings unfortunately arise between the respective Governments, that such a result could be attributed in the slightest degree to neglect or omission on his part seasonably to perform his whole duty as an expositor of good intentions and a conservator of the peace between two countries which require only to know each other better to ensure the most intimate relations.

The undersigned cannot refrain from felicitating the Mexican people upon the return of the anniversary of the glorious *Grito* of *Dolores*, and particularly upon its celebration, in the ancient capital of the Republic, by a Constitutional Government.

The undersigned has the honor to renew to His Excellency, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the assurance of his distinguished consideration.

JOHN T. PICKETT.

[Addressed:] To His Excellency,

El Señor Don Manuel M.^a de Zamacona, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mexico.