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# The Expedition that Never Sailed\*

*A Mystery of the Civil War*

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EVERY GREAT WAR in which the United States has engaged has produced innumerable military amateurs with schemes for revolutionary weapons and for operations calculated to lead to quick victory. Nothing in the world is easier than to sit in front of a map and plan a campaign, particularly if the planner is unhandicapped by any responsibility, any personal knowledge of the complexities of feeding, equipping and moving large numbers of men, or any detailed knowledge of the country into which he proposes to move them. In the opening months of the Civil War these military amateurs had their day, as did the immense number of civilians, without any technical background, who had been catapulted into positions of high command. It cannot be denied that a few of the plans had solid merit, but others approached closely to the realm of hopeful fantasy. To the latter category must be assigned the scheme for an invasion of the Confederacy from California through Mexico.

The first public intimation that something extraordinary was afoot was on August 14, 1861, barely four months after the war opened. On that date the secretary of war sent a request to the governor of California to organize, equip, and muster into the federal service four regiments of volunteer infantry and one regiment of cavalry. This request must have caused some surprise, for, only a few days before, a requisition had been made on the state of California for a single regiment of infantry and a battalion of cavalry, to take over from the regulars the mission of safeguarding the overland-mail route. The vast distance from the theater of war in the east made the use of forces from California impracticable, and it was tacitly understood that no further demands for Cali-

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\*EDITOR'S NOTE: The account of this incident as given here by Colonel Clendenen emphasizes mainly its repercussions in California, and thus complements Mr. Watford's account of the same incident as it was viewed farther east. (See this QUARTERLY, pp. 134-35.)

ifornia volunteers would be made. The first request stated specifically the mission for which the troops were destined, but the request of August fourteenth merely added the statement that the regiments were "to be placed at the disposal of General Sumner."<sup>1</sup>

Two days later, on August 16, 1861, a telegram-pony express from the war department informed General Sumner that he had been selected to command an expedition which was to land at Mazatlan, Mexico, and march across Mexico to Texas. The mission was to recover the government posts and stores in Texas and to draw the insurgent forces southward from Missouri and Arkansas. His force would consist of the volunteer infantry and cavalry just requested from the governor of California, plus two batteries of artillery and ten infantry companies which he would select from the troops already in his department. Brig.-Gen. J. W. Denver was designated as second in command, and Capt. R. L. Ogden, assistant-quartermaster at San Francisco, was named as quartermaster for the expedition.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a message to Captain Ogden directed him to start assembling shipping and land transportation, but no information whatever was given as to the directive's purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Several months of secret negotiations lay behind these sudden and inexplicable orders. On May 7, 1861, scarcely a month after the opening of the war, the secretary of state, William H. Seward, addressed a note to Sr. Matias Romero, the Mexican representative in Washington, informing him that the United States proposed to concentrate a strong force in California and requesting permission from the Mexican government<sup>4</sup> to move the troops via Guaymas and Mexican territory into Arizona—a term loosely applied to the area of the Gadsden purchase. After the lapse of almost a century it is impossible to say whose brain first conceived the idea, nor is it possible to determine the reasoning by which it was concluded that a movement of federal troops into western Texas would divert Confederate forces from Missouri and Arkansas.

On May thirty-first, President Benito Juarez forwarded Seward's message to the Mexican congress.<sup>5</sup> Its reception of the request was far from unfavorable. In the internal strife that had torn Mexico apart for several years, the policy of the United States, although neutral, had been distinctly sympathetic toward the liberal party of President Juarez. Indeed, on one occasion neutrality had been so far forgotten that U. S. ships had fired upon and captured Spanish vessels from Havana carrying arms and equipment for the rebels, on the grounds that they were "pirates"; in his action the naval commander had been supported.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the greater part of the impulse for the expansion of the United States at the expense of Mexico had come from the South, and there can be no doubt that information as to the Confederate constitution's provision for acquisition of additional territory had been transmitted by Romero to his government.<sup>7</sup> Hence, when the Mexican congress referred Seward's request to its committee on foreign affairs for recommendation, the committee voted unanimously in its favor,<sup>8</sup> their action being confirmed by the congress at its night session June 20-21, 1861, in spite of fear on the part of several Mexican congressmen that passage of U. S. troops through Mexican territory would incite the Confederacy to an immediate act of war. This fear had been so well countered by an unidentified deputy's argument, namely, that an independent Southern Confederacy would be a standing menace to Mexico, that the vote at the end of his speech disclosed not a single dissenter.<sup>9</sup>

The news had been promptly forwarded to Secretary Seward by Thomas Corwin, U. S. minister to Mexico. Earlier—in fact on the very day after the night session of the Mexican congress—the minister of foreign affairs, Sr. Lucas de Palacio y Magarola, had sent an official copy of the congressional decree to Romero, for transmittal to the U. S. government.<sup>10</sup> Yet Romero did not inform Seward of the approval of the Mexican congress until August twenty-sixth, over two months later.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that part of the delay was caused by the difficulties of war-time communication and by the delicate situation, then current, arising from Spanish, French, and British intervention in Mexican affairs; but even these circumstances could hardly have caused a delay of such length. Further, the telegram to the governor of California, requesting him to raise the troops for the expedition, was sent from the war department on August fourteenth, and the initial instructions to General Sumner (“by telegraph to outer station, thence by pony express and telegraph”) were dated August sixteenth—both dispatches thus originating a little short of two weeks before Romero's notification to Seward.<sup>12</sup>

The obscurity that clouds the entire matter is further intensified by the fact that, although Seward's request was for the landing of U. S. troops at Guaymas, the orders to General Sumner directed him to land his forces at Mazatlan. Just how and why Guaymas was transmuted into Mazatlan is beyond explanation, but it may be conjectured that the amateur strategist who prepared the orders did not have a map of Mexico available, or that he did not realize that they are two distinct cities, hundreds of miles apart.

The exact date upon which Sumner received his instructions is not recorded, but on August 30, 1861, he wrote to the war department, expressing his gratification at being selected to command the expedition; "... I feel flattered by this selection, and willing to undertake it, especially on account of the almost insuperable difficulties that will attend it. . . ." <sup>13</sup>

Unlike the unknown author of the order, Sumner was an experienced soldier. A hasty glance at a map of Mexico revealed to him the gross weakness of the plan he was directed to follow, as he explained in his letter, informing his Washington superiors that, "In marching to Texas I would respectfully represent that Guaymas will be a much better point of departure than Mazatlan. The roads and country from the former are much better than the latter. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

Although it was obvious that Sumner did not regard the proposed plan with any real enthusiasm, he set about at once making his preparations. To conserve the slender supply of arms and munitions in California, he requested the collector of customs of the port of San Francisco to hold and under no circumstances to release all powder, shot and weapons in the port, or that might arrive later in the port. <sup>15</sup> At the same time he started to collect all available information about the country through which the expedition would have to march.

At that time the surveyor general of California was Edward F. Beale, who was reputed to know more about the northern part of Mexico and the newly acquired southwestern part of the United States than any other person. <sup>16</sup> Sumner immediately addressed a series of questions to Beale, to which Beale replied on September fifth. Beale's answer was not encouraging, and fully confirmed Sumner's anticipation of "almost insuperable difficulties."

In reply to your interrogatories of yesterday concerning the roads by which a force could be marched through Mexico to Texas, I have to reply that the only practicable one . . . is that from San Blas by Tepic, Guadalajara, and Querétaro. The road from Mazatlan northward by Durango is impassable for wheeled vehicles. That from Guaymas might be traveled, though the scarcity of water would present an almost insuperable difficulty to an army. By Guaymas, admitting its practicability, you would reach El Paso, but from that point to the settlements of Texas—say San Antonio—you would meet with very great difficulties with a large command, and an insignificant force could easily cut off your supplies . . . I see no way, if Texas is to be attacked from this side, except that of passing through the most thickly settled parts of Mexico . . . My knowledge of the country enables me to assert with confidence that a large force—say 5,000 men—can-

not march from here by the Gila to Texas and keep up its supplies, nor by Guaymas and El Paso, nor by Mazatlan and Durango. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile there had been several almost-simultaneous leaks of information about the expedition. In Mexico City, "Colonel" John T. Pickett, unofficial Confederate commissioner, expressed to the Mexican minister of foreign affairs his "deep regret" at the granting of permission for passage of U. S. troops, calling it "certainly violative of . . . strict and perfect neutrality."<sup>18</sup> Pickett vehemently assured the minister that the new and independent South had no territorial aspirations, but privately he predicted that the South would seize the state of Tamaulipas within sixty days if the objectionable decree were not rescinded.<sup>19</sup> There can be little doubt that the Mexican authorities were fully aware of all of Pickett's ideas and activities.

In California rumors regarding the expedition were bruited in the streets within a few days after the governor received the request for troops. For a variety of reasons there was a feeling of alarm. On August twenty-eighth a large number of business and professional men of San Francisco sent a strong letter of protest to the secretary of war, informing him that the Knights of the Golden Circle were strong in California and were actively plotting against the Union. This made it dangerous to send large numbers of troops out of the state.<sup>20</sup>

For another reason Brig.-Gen. William C. Kibbe, adjutant-general of the California militia, also wrote a lengthy letter to the secretary of war. Kibbe protested bitterly against the appointment of Brig.-Gen. J. W. Denver as second in command of the expedition. Denver was a Democrat, who had been one of the territorial governors of Kansas and in whose honor a new city, then rising at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, had been named. The adjutant-general was positive, and offered what he believed to be conclusive evidence, that Denver was a secessionist at heart whose appointment to the expedition was an insult to every loyal Union man in California; furthermore, recruiting had fallen off sharply as soon as it became known that he was to go with the expedition.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the barriers imposed by deserts and mountains, rumors of the expedition found their way into the Confederacy. In late October 1861, Lt. Col. John R. Baylor, commanding a force of Texas cavalry, informed his superiors of a report that "General Sumner is on the way from Guaymas with 2000 regular troops. . . ."<sup>22</sup> And a few days later (Nov. 6), a George L. Macmanus wrote from Chihuahua to the Con-

federate commander at Fort Davis, Texas, "There is a rumor in town, said by persons that pretend to know to be official, that 7,000 Federal troops had landed at Guaymas from California, destined to operate against Texas."<sup>23</sup>

One is tempted to speculate as to whether or not these rumors were deliberately circulated by Union sympathizers and agents. The "war of nerves" is not a new phenomenon in warfare.

However, long before these rumors reached Baylor's ears the project for an invasion of Texas via the west coast of Mexico had passed into oblivion, as suddenly and as mysteriously as it had emerged. On September ninth, before his letters in reply to his orders could have reached Washington, General Sumner received a telegram which informed him, "Lieutenant General Scott, with the assent of the Secretary of War, directs that you suspend preparations for the expedition against Western Texas, via Mazatlan."<sup>24</sup>

A few days later Sen. Milton S. Latham mailed a personal note to Sumner from Washington: "The expedition to Texas is suspended for the present, at least. It will be renewed in due time, but for the present it is discontinued. . . . I will tell you, when we meet, who it was that secretly got the expedition . . . countermanded."<sup>25</sup>

What Latham may have told Sumner later is unknown. The expedition to Texas via Mexico was never renewed, and quietly died. Sumner was shortly after transferred to the army of the Potomac, where he distinguished himself as a corps commander. The California volunteers, raised for the expedition, within a few months were scattered over the far west from the Pacific to the eastern borders of Kansas. Few of them ever fought Confederates, but their casualty lists from battles with a score of Indian tribes mounted to a conspicuous total. They established posts and built roads and trails—duties which few of them visualized in the summer of 1861.

It is, of course, pure conjecture what the outcome would have been had a force of Californians attempted to strike the Confederacy across Texas. It is not conjecture, however, to say that the odds against success and in favor of disaster were impressive. The mysterious individual who secretly got the order countermanded deserved fully the gratitude of the Union.

NOTES

1. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion* [hereafter cited as O. R.] (Washington, D. C., 1897), ser. 1, L, pt. 1, p. 569.

Brig.-Gen. Edwin Vose Sumner, at that time the commanding general of the Pacific with headquarters at San Francisco, was a native of Massachusetts and had served with distinction in the Mexican War, in which he was wounded, and in several Indian wars. In April 1861 he had summarily relieved Brig.-Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston (whose loyalty was doubted) from the command of the Pacific department. Sumner commanded a corps in the army of the Potomac. He died suddenly in 1863 while en route to a new command in the Mississippi Valley. (DAB)

2. O. R., ser. 1, L, pt. 1, p. 572.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 573-74.

4. *Sen. Ex. Docs.*, no. 17, 39th Cong., 1st sess., I.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Herbert I. Priestley, *The Mexican Nation, A History* (New York, 1924), pp. 336-37.

7. *House Ex. Docs.*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., I, pt. 1, pp. 15-17.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.* Thomas Corwin, U. S. minister to Mexico during the Civil War, had served several terms as a representative from Ohio; he was in the senate at the time of the Mexican War (which he bitterly opposed), and was President Fillmore's secretary of the treasury. Disagreeing with the stand of the Democratic party on the slavery issue, he joined the Republican party in 1858, although he never concurred fully with many of the details of its policy. He died on Dec. 18, 1865. (DAB)

11. *House Ex. Docs.*, *ibid.*, p. 19.

12. O. R., *ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 593-94.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 596.

16. Edward Fitzgerald Beale (grandson of Commodore Thomas Truxtun) was born in Washington, D. C., on Feb. 4, 1822. Entering the navy in 1842, he was with the landing forces in California during the Mexican War, and, as a bearer of despatches, made six transcontinental journeys in two years. He resigned from the navy in 1850, settled in California, and conducted extensive surveys and explorations for possible road and rail routes in the southwest and in northern Mexico. He died in California in 1893. (DAB)

17. O. R., *ibid.*, p. 605.

18. Mary Wilhelmine Williams, ed., "Letter from Colonel John T. Pickett, of the Southern Confederacy, to Señor Don Manuel de Zamacona, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mexico," *Hispanic-American Hist. Rev.*, II (Nov. 1919), 611-17.

19. *House Ex. Docs.*, 37th Cong., 2d sess., VIII, 20-21.
20. *O. R.*, *ibid.*, pp. 589-91.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 607-609.
22. *Ibid.*, ser. 1, IV, 127.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
24. *Ibid.*, ser. 1, L, pt. 1, p. 613.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 624.