

JUSTO SIERRA O'REILLY AND YUCATECAN-UNITED STATES RELATIONS, 1847-1848

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The middle years of the nineteenth century comprised a period of extraordinary instability and faction in Yucatan. Until 1846, parties within Yucatan were usually in agreement, for the object of their collective distrust was Santa Anna, whose attempts to reduce Yucatecan autonomy led to *pronunciamientos* of independence from Mexico in 1839 and in 1842. An outgrowth of long-standing geographical and political isolation, this unified separatist tendency was submerged, in 1846, by faction within Yucatan.

In that year, the outbreak of war between Mexico and the United States prompted Santa Anna to seek a reconciliation with Yucatan. The concessions he offered satisfied the Yucatecan Congress and, on November 2, at the urging of President Miguel Barbachano, it voted to rejoin the Mexican federation.¹ The action was distinctly distasteful, however, to the political faction centering about Campeche, for the merchant and shipping interests there feared a United States naval blockade of the nearby Laguna de Términos and Carmen Island might result. The *campechano* party therefore issued a *pronunciamiento*, on December 8, rejecting reunion with Mexico and proclaiming neutrality in the Mexican war with the United States. To enforce its decision on the rest of Yucatan, the party that same month recruited an army composed largely of Indians. One column of troops was promptly sent toward Mérida, while another marched in the direction of Valladolid in the interior. In January, the insurgents besieged Mérida and Barbachano resigned, to be replaced by Provisional President Domingo Barret.²

The column sent into the interior reached Valladolid on January 15. A reign of terror ensued when the white officers of the column found themselves unable to control their Indian troops,

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¹ Albino Acereto, *Evolución histórica de las relaciones políticas entre México y Yucatán* (Mexico City, 1907), p. 84.

For a detailed discussion of Yucatecan-Mexican relations between 1839 and 1853, cf. Mary Wilhemina Williams, "Secessionist Diplomacy of Yucatan," *HISPANIC AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW*, III (1920), pp. 132-143.

² Joaquín Baranda, *Recordaciones históricas* (2 vols., Mexico City, 1913), II, 17-18; Eligio Ancona, *Historia de Yucatán desde la época más remota hasta nuestros días* (4 vols., Mérida, 1878-1880), III, 466-467.

who embarked upon a spontaneous campaign of looting and murder. Victims were dragged through the streets and cast upon pyres of furniture from the sacked homes and offices. Only after eight days of such terror was a semblance of order restored.³

The incident was prophetic of much more serious Indian revolts that were to break out later in the year. Oppressive debt slavery, the loss of large areas of *ejido* land, and heavy taxes had given rise among the natives to smouldering resentment that threatened momentarily to burst into flame. The white minority in Yucatan, however, was so absorbed in factional dispute and mutual recrimination that it failed to recognize the greater danger of a general Indian uprising and refused to make concessions that might have avoided the threat.

In the meantime, since the peninsula had become part of the enemy nation through a proclamation of its own government, United States naval forces occupied Carmen Island on December 21, thereby effectively blockading the Laguna de Términos. Worse, the naval commander set up a scale of duties to be levied on domestic products carried from the mainland to the island.⁴ This last was a heavy blow to the already restricted commerce of Campeche and environs.

At this juncture the new government sent José Rovira to the United States to seek recognition of Yucatan's neutrality. Rovira left Campeche on January 10, 1847, for New Orleans and went at once to Washington to confer with Secretary of State Buchanan.⁵ The latter agreed that Yucatecan neutrality would be respected, but, if Rovira attempted to have the duties levied at Carmen lifted, his efforts met with failure. Rovira's conversations with Buchanan afford the first inkling that there may have been persons in Yucatan anxious to see the territory joined with the United States. The Yucatecan emissary, observing that there were "a few who desired annexation by the United States," asked Buchanan point-blank if he thought his government would give such a move serious consideration. The secretary replied that it seemed to him impossible to get a single vote in favor of such action in either the House of Representatives or the Senate because of the distance separating Yucatan and the United States.⁶

In July an Indian uprising occurred at Tepich and the rebel-

³ Ancona, *op. cit.*, III, 468.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 473.

⁶ José Rovira to Domingo Barret, Washington, February 16, 1847, as quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 473-474.

lion rapidly spread to the south and east among the discontented Indians under the leadership of Cecilio Chí and Jacinto Pat. Here was an opportunity to expel the hated white man from Yucatan and regain the country for themselves. The Indians had been provided with the arms they were now using in 1839 and in 1843 when they had been formed into a rude army and issued rifles for use against Santa Anna's troops in Yucatan. In 1846 the *campechanos* had done the same thing to strengthen their ranks in the move to depose Barbachano. In each instance the end of hostilities was followed by an attempt to collect the weapons issued to the natives. Only partial success was achieved, with the result that in 1847 the Indian leaders were able to arm a respectable force.

It was apparent quite soon that the government must seek aid abroad, else the white population might at the very least be forced to flee Yucatan. Thus, Barret appointed Justo Sierra O'Reilly as "commissioner and agent" to go to the United States in search of relief. Sierra was apparently chosen for this mission largely because of family ties: his father-in-law was Santiago Méndez, the leading figure in the *campechano* party and governor of Yucatan from September 1, 1847.⁷

Sierra had gained prominence in Yucatan on the basis of merit as well as marriage. Born September 24, 1814, in modest circumstances, his obviously superior talent gained him patrons who financed his course through an education which ultimately led to the degree of doctor of laws. His photograph shows a man with a small, sensitive mouth, piercing, close-set eyes, and a thatch of wavy hair. (One wonders if it was red!) He early evinced a fondness for writing and it was as a result of this aptitude for literature that he established the short-lived *Museo Yucateco*, Yucatan's first literary journal, in 1841. In 1845 he began publication of the more successful *El Registro Yucateco* of Mérida and Campeche. He was editor and publisher of that magazine when he left for the United States in September of 1847.⁸

Apparently, the Indian uprising in Yucatan had not yet reached alarming proportions for, at the time of Sierra's departure, his major concern seems to have been the matter of the tariffs then being collected by United States agents at Laguna. Sierra sailed from Campeche September 12 on the American ship *Essex*, stopping

⁷ Justo Sierra O'Reilly, *Diario de nuestro viaje a los Estados Unidos*, Hector Pérez Martínez, ed. (Mexico City, 1938), xlii.

⁸ Gustavo Martínez Alomía, *Historiadores de Yucatán* (Campeche, 1906), pp. 166 and 168; *Enciclopedia universal ilustrado europeo-americana*, LV, 1535.

briefly in Veracruz for an interview with Commodore Matthew Perry.⁹ On October 4, he arrived at New Orleans, where both he and his secretary promptly contracted what may have been malaria.¹⁰ The next month, however, they left for Washington, arriving November 16.¹¹ Sierra went to work promptly, for the following day he sent a note to Buchanan requesting an interview.¹² The latter replied that he would be glad to see Sierra at noon on November 22.¹³ The Yucatecan agent and a translator arrived at the appointed hour and were promptly ushered into the secretary's office. There Sierra presented his credentials to Buchanan, whom he described as "a handsome old man of about sixty years, full of affability and courtesy," and after about an hour's conversation regarding affairs in Yucatan it was agreed that Sierra should write a memorandum embodying the desires of his government.¹⁴

The memorial Sierra prepared with exceptional rapidity, for, though lengthy, it was in Buchanan's hands only two days later. There can be little doubt that the Yucatecan commissioner had been given confidential written instructions by his government, for such was the practice of the day, but the directive is not to be found among the printed documents available. Thanks to Sierra's very frank diary, however, at least an idea may be had of the directions he was given. The Indian revolt had not yet reached alarming proportions; thus it was only later that Sierra was to seek aid against the Mayas. At this juncture he seems to have had but two major objectives: one was to persuade the government of the United States to withdraw its naval forces and to lift the tariffs imposed by the latter, while the other was to seek some sort of guarantee protecting Yucatan against possible reprisals by Mexico once the war with the United States ended.¹⁵

⁹ Sierra, *op. cit.*, xlv.

¹⁰ Sierra to Government of Yucatan, New Orleans, October 5, 1847, in Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 63; same to same, New Orleans, October, 1847, *ibid.* Sierra refers to the illness merely as "las fiebres reinantes en el país."

¹¹ Sierra to Government of Yucatan, October, 1847, *ibid.*; Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, November 17, 1847, 30 Cong., first sess., *Sen Exec. Doc. 42*, p. 2.

¹² Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, November 17, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³ Buchanan to Sierra, Washington, November 19, 1847, in Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-23.

¹⁵ The following paragraph from Sierra's diary probably reflects his confidential instructions: "He tomado como el primer punto la desocupación militar de la Laguna tanto porque creo este asunto de suma importancia para Yucatán, como porque viendo algo distante la realización de la Paz entre México y los Estados Unidos no me parece oportuno aún entrar en ciertos detalles que podrán dar buen o mal resultado según sea acogida la coolicitud [sic] sobre la Laguna" (Sierra to Government of Yucatan, Washington, November 26, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 72).

Sierra's memorial of November 24 was concerned solely with the first point; from the action taken on that request he hoped to gain an idea of the success the second might be expected to have.

In his memorandum Sierra briefly reviewed events leading to the occupation of Carmen, then tacitly admitted the island had been a base from which contraband arms had found their way into Tabasco, the neighboring Mexican state. He assured Buchanan, however, that the people and government of Yucatan regarded United States possession of Carmen as "a moral attack on their honor and dignity, and a physical attack on their material interests." His government, he went on,

authorizes me to solicit . . . the evacuation of the island, promising [on its part] to display the utmost zeal, activity, and efficiency in the repression of the contraband trade, leaving the vessels of the American squadron which the government of the United States may think proper to maintain at that port and its dependencies free to cooperate in such suppression. Our government desires the evacuation of the island, not only because it considers it just in all respects, but also because it would end the ominous tariff of duties which weighs upon our little vessels and upon the products of the soil of Yucatan.¹⁶

Sierra was to wait more than a month for a reply from Buchanan, of whom he became increasingly critical, but he did not wait passively. Rather, he assiduously cultivated the friendship of the few congressmen he had come to know; they in turn introduced him to others. To all he presented the problems of Yucatan and sought their aid, as he expressed it in his diary, "toward obtaining some decision by this hypocrite Mr. Buchanan."¹⁷

The Yucatecan was apparently one who grew fretful in the face of delay and as time passed he came to suspect a Machiavelian intent on Buchanan's part. The truth probably is that the document had to find its way through the laboriously slow State Department sifting accorded non-urgent matters. At last, on December 24, Buchanan answered Sierra's petition, suggesting "important and pressing duties connected with the meeting of Congress" as the reason for what he himself admitted was a long delay.¹⁸ He reported that the president had been consulted on the matter, and it had been his opinion that circumstances would

¹⁶ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, November 24, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Buchanan to Sierra, Washington, December 24, 1847, in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan* (12 vols., Philadelphia, 1908-1911), VII, 485.

not permit the United States to abandon its position at Carmen. Had not the Yucatecan Congress issued its decree of August 25, 1846, whereby the state returned to the Santa Anna fold, the United States probably would have overlooked the contraband arms trade with Tabasco rather than interfere with a state professing neutrality. Yucatan had again become neutral, it was true, but the continuing rebellion of those whom Buchanan called "enemies of neutrality and partisans of Mexico" made possible a regular movement of arms and munitions into Tabasco. To abandon Carmen, asserted the Secretary, would be to strengthen the Mexican enemy. Adverting to the request that tariff restrictions at Carmen be lifted, Buchanan replied that the president looked with favor upon this petition and that Commodore Perry would be instructed to permit the duty-free entry of strictly domestic products.¹⁹

Though Sierra complained that the government in Washington not only failed to recognize the true nature of the discontent in Yucatan but also deemed it a manifestation of hatred for the United States, still he had gained at least half a loaf.²⁰ The day he received Buchanan's letter he wrote that "though Yucatan has not been granted all there is a right to expect, something has been granted at last."²¹

Sierra's impatience with the half-measure promised by Buchanan was heightened by information he received from his government in late December. The Indian uprising had gained such momentum that the Yucatecan capital was moved to Maxcanú to be nearer what Sierra, in significant terminology, referred to as the "theater of war."²² It is rather surprising, under such circumstances, to find Sierra's next letter to Buchanan dated February 15, 1848.²³ The message certainly was not couched in the phrases of a suppliant; indeed, it was virtually a demand. Commodore Perry had failed to honor Buchanan's promise that tariff restrictions at Carmen would be removed; on the contrary he had extended the blockade by warning the Yucatan government that, "if the introduction into Yucatan of chocolate [*sic*]

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 485-486.

²⁰ Sierra to Government of Yucatan, Washington, December 26, 1847, Sierra, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² Sierra to Government of Yucatan, Washington, January 4, 1848, *ibid.*, p. 80.

²³ There is no communication from Sierra to his government that explains the delay, while a gap in his diary from December 31 to March 15 precludes any explanation from that source.

and other natural products elaborated in Tabasco were allowed, he . . . would take such measures as might weigh very heavily on the country."²⁴ "I do not see," insisted Sierra, "why Yucatan should be treated with severity and rigor in violation of her neutral rights, as Commodore Perry assumes to do."²⁵ Perry's threats were having an unhappy effect, continued Sierra, since many Yucatecan merchants were cancelling armament orders in the United States for fear of confiscation en route as contraband destined for Mexico.²⁶ While the government was thus deprived of the means of defending itself, the Indians were being supplied with arms by the British. Sierra assured Buchanan that "it is known that the revolted Indians have had, and still have, very frequent communication with the British establishments at Belize."²⁷ Perry himself confirmed the fact. In January he wrote the secretary of the navy that "the Indians [are] receiving their arms from the settlements in the bay of Honduras."²⁸

Sierra had been in Washington long enough to become aware of President Polk's Anglophobia and now he tried to use the executive's fear of England as a means of coercing the United States into a more favorable attitude toward Yucatan. He informed Buchanan that, "notwithstanding all this [British activity], and perhaps in consequence of it, there are in Yucatan those who think it is absolutely necessary for the country, in order to avoid total extermination in this continual strife with the savages, to submit to English power and solicit its aid and protection. . . ."²⁹

With the hope that fear of such a British extension in Central America would speed action in Washington, Sierra now presented his demands:

I limit myself now to asking of Mr. Buchanan the following: first, that the neutrality of Yucatan be communicated to all the appropriate authorities of the government of the United States; second, that all the principles which constitute neutral rights be observed towards that country; third, that, in accordance with them, the notifications which Commodore Perry has given to the government of Yucatan be looked upon as non-existent and never made; and fourth, that, as Yucatan is in need of armaments and munitions of war for its defense against the

²⁴ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, February 15, 1848, in Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁷ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, February 15, 1848, *ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁸ Perry to Mason, Veracruz, January 30, 1848, in 30 Cong., first sess., *Sen. Exec. Doc.* 43, p. 2.

²⁹ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, February 15, 1848, Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

aggressions of the savages, no impediment whatever be placed in the way of the importation of these articles.³⁰

Again, in March, Sierra raised the specter of possible European aggrandizement. There is no direct evidence that he did it as a conscious move to pry aid from the United States, but such an inference is not too tenuously drawn. On March 7 he wrote Buchanan that a Spanish warship carrying an offer of help from the captain-general of Cuba had appeared in Yucatecan waters. Sierra assured the secretary that "this opportune offer, evincing the lively sympathy of Spain for her old colonies, was accepted without hesitation. . . ."³¹ He wisely omitted from his note all reference to the fact that the communications from the Cuban government disclaimed any but strictly humanitarian motives.

The considerations which influenced Sierra on this occasion were quite different from those which prompted his earlier efforts to provoke the interest of United States officials. The commercial difficulties of Carmen had now been completely overshadowed by the increasingly serious war with the Maya. Their predominant numbers enabled the Indians to muster a force vastly superior to that of the whites and their advance appeared inexorable. The plight of the white minority in Yucatan was indicated by the capture, on February 12, of the town of Sotutá, only about twenty-five miles from Mérida and but little more from the temporary capital at Maxcanú.³² Thus it was that Sierra, in his note of March 7, asked, not for abolition of the tariff, but rather for "two thousand troops and a half million dollars."³³

Again his plea went unheeded, for the matter which demanded most attention in the United States at this time was the war with Mexico. The Senate was examining the draft treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; Polk and his secretary of state were similarly preoccupied. Moreover, Buchanan was looking toward the May

³⁰ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, February 15, 1848, *ibid.*, p. 88.

³¹ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, March 7, 1848, in *ibid.*, p. 96. On January 29, 1847, the *Churruca* called at Sisal to inquire concerning the military needs of the Yucatan government and to evacuate any persons who might want to abandon the country. On March 9, the *Juanita* and the *Luisa Fernanda* put in at Sisal and turned over to the Yucatan government 22,161.75 pesos in cash, two thousand rifles and bayonets, two hundred cavalry sabers, two cannons, some small carronades, and two hundred quintals of powder (Carlos R. Menéndez, *Noventa años de historia de Yucatán, 1821-1910* [Mérida, 1937], pp. 33-34).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³³ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, March 7, 1848, Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

convention of the Democratic Party, for he hoped to be the party's presidential candidate. When Sierra went to see Buchanan to deliver his note of March 7 he complained of this engrossment. "I was hardly able to say two words to him," he wrote in his diary. "The silly old man is profoundly preoccupied with the coming election. . . . He received me very agreeably, gripping my hands with much cordiality, but he concedes nothing nor do I believe he pays any attention to what I say."³⁴

Lending further difficulties to Sierra's campaign was the hostility of a considerable segment of the press in the United States. Particularly bitter was the opposition of *La Patria*, a Spanish-language paper, and the *Delta*, both of New Orleans. The attacks launched by the latter, according to Sierra's claim, stemmed from the fact that he had refused to buy the favor of the paper's Washington correspondent.³⁵ Intensifying this problem was the extraordinary laxness of the government of Yucatan in keeping him advised of the course of domestic affairs. The fact that he had had no communication from Yucatan since December 31 made it impossible adequately to refute the charges of the press.³⁶ "My situation becomes more and more embarrassing . . . and I find myself more in the dark than ever," he lamented.³⁷

A letter of late January from Méndez reached Sierra on March 23,³⁸ it brought alarming news concerning the course of the Indian revolt, thus both depressing him and stirring him to new activity. March was passing and still there was no reply from Buchanan. Sierra therefore redoubled his earlier efforts to interest as many congressmen as he could in the plight of Yucatan; he urged them to bring pressure to bear on the executive and his cabinet for an early decision. At the same time, a somewhat exaggerated impression of the power of the press led Sierra to write frequent letters to those papers friendly enough to print them. He noted that "the press in this country has a decisive influence in all matters affecting public affairs; it is the final authority in the policy of the country and by all means possible I have tried to make it favorable toward me in the matter of the aid and resources I have asked of this Government."³⁹

In the meantime, events in Yucatan gave added color to

³⁴ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25. Sierra's annoyance and anxiety were heightened by the fact that Méndez urged him to act with all speed on the orders—and then neglected to enclose the papers to which he referred (*ibid.*)!

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Sierra's correspondence. Despatches of February 1 and 22 painted a dire picture of the course of the Indian uprising and must have left Sierra in a decidedly disturbed frame of mind, wondering, as he must have been, what might have happened in the peninsula since then.⁴⁰ Following the instructions in these February despatches, Sierra at once memorialized Buchanan, asking formal intervention by the United States in the struggle against the Maya. He again referred to the assistance afforded the insurgents by the British colony at Belize. As before, the implication was clear that the refusal of aid would force Yucatan to seek men and materials from Spain or Britain. And, for the first time in his negotiations, Sierra now referred to the Monroe Doctrine. He assured Buchanan that Yucatan much preferred to apply to Washington for aid, since assistance by a European state, in violation of the principles of 1823, might put the United States in a most awkward position. Intervention by an old world power might make of Yucatan the battleground between that nation and the United States; such an eventuality, Sierra assured Buchanan, he and his government certainly would not welcome.⁴¹

The message was one well calculated to attract Polk's attention, but it happened that, soon after Sierra wrote the note, Buchanan left Washington for a ten-day rest in Pennsylvania.⁴² The acting secretary of state apparently failed to bring the matter to the president's attention. When Buchanan returned from his vacation, however, he found on his desk another note of April 18 in which the Yucatecan reminded the secretary that he had had no reply to his "very urgent" memoranda of March 7 and April 3 and again asked for "arms, ammunition, a few troops, and a very small quantity of money."⁴³

At about the same time, perhaps in anticipation of no more favorable response from the Secretary of State than before, Sierra violated protocol, went over the head of the cabinet member, and

⁴⁰ Sierra to Government of Yucatan, Washington, April 6, 1848, *ibid.*, p. 97. The Indians, according to these despatches, had burned four towns and over fifty villages, had destroyed some two hundred haciendas, as well as cotton and sugar plantations, and had killed many white families. They were now masters of all of eastern Yucatan and were continuing to gain in the western half of the state (Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, April 3, 1848, *ibid.*, pp. 98-99).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

⁴² Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (4 vols., Chicago, 1910), III, 427.

⁴³ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, April 18, 1848, Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

sent a note to Polk requesting an interview. The latter promptly set aside the following Saturday evening for the Yucatecan.⁴⁴

On the same Saturday, either by chance or as a result of a presidential inquiry, Buchanan read Sierra's latest note at the usual cabinet meeting. The matter of aid to Yucatan was "discussed at some length" but no decision was reached.⁴⁵

That evening Sierra met the president, for whom he had only favorable comment:

He listened to me with ample courtesy [*bastante deferencia*]. He indicated the most lively sympathy and he assured me that he would soon do all he could within his constitutional powers, and that insofar as they were inadequate he would ask for Senate action. Mr. Buchanan arrived almost at the end of the interview and of course took an active and determined part in it. I don't know if I may have deceived myself, but he directed certain questions and observations at me which seemed to me to involve the sinister intent of weakening or modifying the intentions and views of Mr. Polk. About eleven we said goodbye and aside from the incident that resulted from the presence of this deceiver Mr. Buchanan, I cherish only very good hopes. . . .⁴⁶

Of the same interview Polk wrote that "I finally told him I would determine in the course of two or three days what assistance, if any, could be given to his distressed countrymen."⁴⁷

It was at this juncture that Sierra learned of the crisis which had occurred in Yucatan almost exactly a month earlier. Dispatches from Maxcanú advised him that the Indian revolt remained unstemmed, while the government was rapidly depleting its meager stock of arms and soldiers. Aid from abroad was desperately needed, if only to evacuate the harried white population, all else failing. Thus it was that on March 25 Governor Méndez wrote nearly identical appeals to the United States and to the governments of Spain and Britain through their diplomatic representatives in Mexico.⁴⁸ Each letter echoed Sierra's previous requests for immediate and adequate aid. The exceptional feature of the messages was the offer of "dominion and sovereignty" over Yucatan to whichever of the three powers should afford the assistance so desperately needed!⁴⁹

The message was sent to Sierra for transmission to the De-

⁴⁴ Polk, *op. cit.*, III, 431.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁵ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ Polk, *op. cit.*, III, 432.

⁴⁸ Méndez to the Secretary of State, Maxcanú, March 25, 1848, Menéndez, *op. cit.*, pp. 518-520.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

partment of State. Though it reached him before the day of his interview with Polk, the Yucatecan was apparently so thunderstruck by the proposal that he failed to mention it to the president. On April 21 he sent the appeal on its way through State Department channels, but with grave misgivings. "I have sent the papers with the greatest repugnance," he wrote in his diary, "because their content seems to me an absurd monstrosity. . . . My God, how unwise is the measure!"⁵⁰

However regrettable Sierra may have thought the offer, Buchanan carried it to the next cabinet meeting. More than that, he correctly anticipated Polk's reaction; after the secretary had read Méndez' letter, he presented the draft of a presidential message to Congress reflecting his own ideas. Polk approved submission of the problem to congressional consideration, but he asked Buchanan to prepare another document "placing the interposition of the U. S. upon the ground that it would be dangerous to us, and a violation of our settled policy, to permit either Great Britain [!] or Spain to possess & colonize the country, and to [prevent] this the U. S. ought to afford the aid asked."⁵¹

For several days the president devoted considerable time to the proposed message. Buchanan's first and second drafts were not to Polk's liking; a revision he himself prepared was widely discussed with Democratic legislators and cabinet members. At last, satisfied with the message, Polk sent it to Congress on April 29.⁵²

While the president studiously avoided a direct recommendation looking toward outright acquisition of Yucatan, he countenanced such a move, at least by implication, should it be necessary to prevent a transfer of authority to either Britain or Spain. Polk invoked not only considerations of strategy but also the principles of the Monroe Doctrine as justification for excluding European powers from the peninsula. He would approve sending troops to Yucatan while the United States was still at war with Mexico, just as occupation forces had gone into other parts of Mexico to afford security against the Indians, but these prior

⁵⁰ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 31. It was probably in this same packet of letters that Sierra learned Méndez had resigned, appointing Barbachano governor. Purpose of the move was to facilitate the conclusion of a truce with at least part of the Indians who had indicated a willingness to treat with their opponents, but only through Barbachano (Méndez to Perry, Campeche, May 9, 1848, in 30 Cong., first sess., *Sen. Exec. Doc. 49*, p. 6). The new governor disavowed neither the Yucatan agent in Washington nor the offer of sovereignty made by Méndez to the three powers.

⁵¹ Polk, *op. cit.*, III, 433-434.

⁵² Dexter Perkins erroneously gives the date of the message as April 19 (*The Monroe Doctrine, 1823-1867* [Baltimore 1933] p. 174).

commitments would allow no transfer of troops. The United States could despatch part of its Gulf fleet to Yucatecan waters, though this obviously would not provide adequate protection.⁵³ With these observations Polk submitted the matter "to the wisdom of Congress to adopt such measures as . . . may be expedient to prevent Yucatan from becoming a colony of any European power . . . and, at the same time, to rescue the white race from extermination or expulsion from their country."⁵⁴

Sierra's reaction to the president's message was mixed. He welcomed the possibility of aid, but he shied away from the method suggested by Polk. "Between the two of us," he wrote his wife, "it seems to me to be written with Machiavellian intent. Should it succeed I fear it might cause more harm than good."⁵⁵ The Yucatecan was disturbed, moreover, by Buchanan's attitude, which he took to be almost hostile. A few days earlier he and the secretary had had words over the seemingly trival matter of the selection of the correspondence to accompany Polk's message to Congress; each insisted the other should make the choice! Sierra felt Buchanan was becoming increasingly ill-disposed toward him and Yucatan; he was much disturbed by fear of a growing rift, for he well knew the influence of one in the secretary's position.⁵⁶

Actually, Sierra's apprehension would seem to have been misplaced. In response to a request by the chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs for certain information concerning

⁵³ Polk to the Senate and House, Washington, April 29, 1848, in Buchanan, *op. cit.*, VIII, 54-55.

As a matter of fact, Polk was using some license in applying the Monroe Doctrine to the Yucatan case. Were either Spain or Britain to gain control of the peninsula it would not be by benefit of conquest but rather by the invitation of the Yucatecan government itself. The policy envisioned by Monroe foresaw no such eventuality and hence made no mention of it. Much of the debate in the Senate concerning what came to be known as the "Yucatan bill" was concerned, not with the problem of aiding the white population of Yucatan, but rather with the question of whether the scope of the Monroe Doctrine should be extended to cover the exigencies of this situation.

Though the Yucatan problem brought about the first extensive review of the Monroe Doctrine since its enunciation in 1823, the matter is not dealt with at length here. To do so would be to gild the lily, for Perkins has given an excellent account (*The Monroe Doctrine, 1826-1867*, pp. 171-192).

⁵⁴ Polk to the Senate and House, Washington, April 29, 1848, Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁵⁵ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33. Among other factors there were two which Sierra thought particularly galled Buchanan. One was the fact that an influential Philadelphia newspaper both ardently urged aid to Yucatan and "waged cruel war" against Buchanan. Another was the fact that Sierra had gone directly to the president in seeking aid (*ibid.*).

the situation in Yucatan, Buchanan replied with a letter distinctly sympathetic toward the idea of lending aid.⁵⁷

Action on Polk's message was desultory only in the House of Representatives, for the Senate promptly took the matter under consideration. Despite objections from some members, the Senate at once turned the question over to the Committee on Foreign Relations, which reported, on May 4, a measure authorizing the temporary occupation of Yucatan.⁵⁸ The proposed legislation, known as the "Yucatan bill," became from the first the tool of partisan politics in an election year. Indicative of the delay engendered by this circumstance was the fact that the greater part of the first day's debate degenerated into a bitter dispute between Calhoun and Foote of Mississippi over the latter's charges that the senator from South Carolina was obstructing administration policy.

Sierra quickly recognized the development as a danger to his interests. Debate had continued a fruitless week when he wrote in his diary that "the Whigs have taken their stand in the matter and the Democrats theirs. Thus the question of Yucatan is a party question and, as such, God knows the fate that will befall it."⁵⁹

Fearful that the Yucatan bill might not pass, Sierra turned to the development of an alternative which had earlier suggested itself. What may have been among the first manifestations of the spirit that was to lead to the Central-American filibusters of the next decade began to appear. Letters from individuals offering to organize volunteer regiments and groups of colonists to go to Yucatan began to reach Sierra in April. Because he had

⁵⁷ Buchanan did not feel that aid to Yucatan would interfere with treaty negotiations with Mexico. "On the contrary," he argued, "this could not be viewed by them in any other light than as a voluntary sacrifice made by the United States in the cause of their brethren of Spanish origin." Nor did he believe, as Sierra thought, that the warfare in Yucatan was entirely of a factional nature. Buchanan believed "that the primary cause of the war will be found in the inveterate hostility of the Indians against the Spanish race" (Buchanan to Henry W. Hilliard, Washington, May 3, 1848, Buchanan, *op. cit.*, VIII, 57-58).

⁵⁸ *Congressional Globe, Appendix*, 30 Cong., first sess., XIX, 591. Among those objecting to immediate action was John C. Calhoun, who took the opportunity to present Yucatan as a warning to abolitionists in the United States. He noted (erroneously), that the people of Yucatan had bestowed equality on the aborigines who, too ignorant to enjoy liberty, turned on their liberators and murdered them. "Such," he warned, "are the fruits of a misguided, misjudging philanthropy, combined with erroneous political notions, which is so prevalent at the present time, in more enlightened and civilized countries, but which, whenever reduced to practice, must lead to disastrous consequences" (*ibid.*).

⁵⁹ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

neither the authority nor the money requisite for encouraging such adventures, he found himself obliged to refuse all such offers.⁶⁰ When letters continued to reach him and when debate on the Yucatan bill continued, he gave the idea more serious consideration. "In order that Yucatan shall be saved," he wrote, "it is not enough that an expedition from the United States shall go there temporarily; it is necessary that the means of gaining a permanent white population be devised." He added the caustic observation that "our thinking men have given this the least thought."⁶¹ In the face of the difficulties mentioned, Sierra began to formulate a plan of large-scale colonization.⁶²

The scheme was nothing more than some jottings on paper when, on May 16, the Yucatecan read in the New Orleans papers reports from Veracruz that his government had signed a treaty with the Indians.⁶³ Sierra was dumbfounded, for he saw all his efforts wasted. Confirmation of his worst fears came the next day when the Senate met again to consider the Yucatan bill. But for the reports from New Orleans the question would probably have come to a vote on that day. Now, however, the Democrats welcomed the opportunity to drop what had become a political hot potato. Senator Hannegan of Indiana, chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations and once one of the more ardent supporters of the bill, rose to suggest that, since a treaty

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 34.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶² Though the plan bore no immediate fruit, it was adopted later. Some time after Sierra's return to Yucatan, Barbachano sent agents to the United States to form a volunteer regiment. Inducements included a wage of eight dollars a month, a new suit of clothes every three months, and the gift of 320 acres of land to each soldier! In October, eighty North Americans were already in Yucatan, while another 150 were on their way there. The total reached some 250 men, but in March of 1849, this small army of mercenaries returned to the United States when the Yucatan government proved able to pay them only ten dollars each for several months' fighting (*Niles' Register* [Baltimore] LXXIV, 319; LXXV, 205).

⁶³ Any doubts Sierra may have had as to the veracity of the report from Veracruz were dispelled a few days later when the text of the treaty was published in the newspapers. The terms of the pact were humiliating for the Yucatan government. Virtually dictated by Jacinto Pat, the leader of the Indian rebels, the agreement was signed by Barbachano on April 23. By its terms the Indians were allowed to keep their arms, while the government was to surrender to Pat the rifles and ammunitions collected from the Mayas at a much earlier date (Ancona, *op. cit.*, IV, 107-110; Menéndez, *op. cit.*, p. 131). Barbachano agreed to the treaty only as a means to a respite during which it was hoped aid from abroad might finally arrive. The Indians apparently used the agreement only as a device for obtaining more arms. The ink was scarcely dry when a group of them fell upon the town of Maní, killing more than two hundred people (Ancona, *op. cit.*, IV, 112).

between the Indians and the Yucatan government had been signed, the measure now had no meaning.⁶⁴ Thus died the Yucatan bill.

Sierra was furious. "I have been placed in a position of complete ridicule before the government and people of the United States. . . . I cannot contain my indignation against the *indecent* conduct of the government in treating me thus. . . ." ⁶⁵ Sierra may have been grimly amused when, a few days later, he received a dispatch from Yucatan informing him that the Indians had failed to honor the treaty. He was again instructed to ask the aid of the United States.⁶⁶

Once more he began writing to sympathetic newspapers, but he found that even those most favorable the week before now refused to print his letters. His report on the situation is not without an element of humor: "The papers have loosed a thousand eulogies of Jacinto Pat [the Indian leader] . . . ; they say he is a descendant of an Irish gentleman, the best educated man in Yucatan, and the one best suited to bring good fortune to that country."⁶⁷

Sierra returned to the Senate, where he tried to revive interest among those who before had supported his cause. His failure was complete: on the one hand, the Senate expressed its opposition to intervention; on the other, it passed a resolution calling on Polk to advise the British government that the United States would oppose any interference in the Yucatan peninsula.⁶⁸

"I no longer hold the slightest hope of remedying our difficulties," lamented Sierra, "and all my anxieties, all my sacrifices, are miserably wasted. . . ." ⁶⁹ Thus despairing of favorable action by any agency of the United States government, he prepared to return to Yucatan. Almost on the eve of his departure he received one more despatch from his government ordering him to press for aid to Yucatan. Dutifully, he wrote a rather dispirited note to Buchanan.⁷⁰ Then, harboring indignation toward his own

⁶⁴ Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁶ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, May 23, 1848, in Sierra, *op. cit.*, p. 117. Sierra waxed most eloquent in his appeal. "Give us, sir, arms, arms and munitions of war, in the first place; a little assistance in money, if possible, in order to clothe the nakedness of our wretched people; and some regiments to assist us in repelling the savages; who are murdering us, robbing us, and destroying all the wealth of the country" (*ibid.*).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55, footnote.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷⁰ Sierra to Buchanan, Washington, June 16, in *ibid.*, p. 118.

government and resentment against what he deemed unfair treatment by elements in the United States, Sierra left Washington in June, his mission a complete failure.⁷¹

The fault was not Sierra's; indeed, he acquitted himself well in this, his first adventure as a diplomat. Three reasons would seem to account for the lack of success. One was the changing course of events in Yucatan which alternately strengthened and weakened his position. Another was American preoccupation with digesting the huge area that was Texas. Even were the expansionist tendencies of the time to seek expression beyond contiguous territory, Cuba was more attractive than comparatively remote Yucatan. Polk cherished serious hopes of acquiring Cuba; the assignment of similar motives to his interest in Yucatan is largely conjectural. The third reason for Sierra's failure lay in the fact that he had to treat with the administration and Congress in an election year when issues were judged in terms of political expediency.

⁷¹ When he left Washington he probably would have expressed himself just as indignantly as he had a few weeks earlier: "I have grown tired of fighting against the prejudices of ill-disposed people, against the passions of some rascals, against the insupportable charlatanism of some newspapers and the stupidity of others" (*ibid.*, p. 36).

Mention should be made of the outcome of the renewed warfare with the Maya of Yucatan. On April 19, Barbachano issued a decree withdrawing Méndez' March 25 offer of sovereignty to the power assisting the government in its struggle with the Indians. He also commissioned Pedro de Regil y Estrada and Joaquín Garcí Rejón to go to Cuba to sound out sentiment there concerning aid for Yucatan (Menéndez, *op. cit.*, p. 130). The agents were authorized to offer dominion over Yucatan if that were to prove necessary to get the desired assistance (Secret instructions, Mérida, April 18, 1848, *ibid.*, pp. 521-522). Their efforts in Havana met with failure so that, in accordance with their instructions, they then went to Mexico to discuss the same problem. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was now concluded and the Mexican government was well disposed to discuss the problem with the Yucatecan agents. The upshot of the talks was prompt financial aid to the hard-pressed Yucatan government. On August 17, 1848, Barbachano issued a decree by which Yucatan again became a Mexican state. The struggle with the Indians had already begun to turn in the government's favor by the time Mexican aid was secured. The new resources available accelerated the reconquest and most of Yucatan was retaken by the end of 1849, though the struggle continued on a diminishing scale until 1853 (Menéndez, *op. cit.*, pp. 130 and 255; Acereto, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92).