Great Britain and the Oregon question

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GREAT BRITAIN AND THE OREGON QUESTION

by

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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN OF THE OREGON QUESTION

The Oregon boundary question presents to the student of history an interesting phase of Anglo-American relations: it is simple, illusive and complex all at the same time. During the period of dispute both Great Britain and the United States resorted to almost every diplomatic device available to their governments to attain their immediate goals in the northwestern territory. Both countries resorted to exaggerated land claims, secrecy, belligerency, bluster and the outright threat of war. Yet the final solution proved to be a satisfactory compromise based on the forty-ninth parallel, a boundary line that was proposed by both sides on numerous occasions during the two decades prior to the settlement of the controversy in 1846.

It is necessary at the onset to clarify the term Oregon as it was used by the disputants. The term Oregon, in the Oregon question, changed meanings from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. When used by the early Indians the term "originally referred to the Columbia-Snake River System."¹ By the early eighteen hundreds the disputants generally referred to the Oregon country as the "lands lying between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean and extending northward indefinitely from the forty-second parallel

of latitude."² By 1821, definite boundaries for the Oregon territory were established as a result of treaties signed by the United States with Spain and Russia. The boundaries of the territory included all lands from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean between the 42° and the 54°40' parallels. The actual area in dispute between Great Britain and the United States was the region lying north of the Columbia River and south of the 49° parallel between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. This triangular area, consisting of 360,000 square miles, proved to be the basis for the Oregon dispute.

During the course of the conflict over Oregon, which lasted from 1815 until 1846, two differing viewpoints were put to a severe test. The United States as a young and fast growing republic was passing through a phase of territorial expansion called Manifest Destiny. For this reason the United States was not only somewhat jealous of Great Britain, but strongly suspicious of British motives in the northwestern territory. The idea of sovereignty had become an inherent part of the American way of life based to a large extent upon the example that Great Britain had set for the young republic many years before, when Britain was attempting to consolidate her holdings in the New World. Dorothy Johansen very aptly summarizes the American position, "The new nation inherited from its colonial experience a continental viewpoint. British imperialism of the mid-eighteenth century had required the expulsion of the French Empire from North America. The United States' imperialism now required, at most the elimination of the British Empire or at least

² Hubert Bancroft, History of Oregon (San Francisco, 1886) XXIX, p. 1. (Hereafter cited as Bancroft, History of Oregon XXIX).
its containment.  Great Britain and all other foreign powers posed a serious threat to American expansion, growth and security on the continent.

The American attitude of distrust and suspicion was difficult for the British government to comprehend. Even though Great Britain possessed the most powerful navy on the high seas, the British at no time during the Oregon controversy demonstrated a desire to colonize permanently the disputed territory, nor did they desire to precipitate a crisis by attempting to push the Americans out of Oregon. Britain's only desire was that the Oregon country be left open so that she might use it as a base for the Hudson's Bay Company to secure furs and as a commercial outlet across the continent for carrying on her lucrative far eastern trade. By the early nineteenth century Britain began to realize that colonies and possessions that were taken simply for territorial aggrandizement were very seldom profitable enterprises. Therefore, the British, who preferred no new colonies and who were interested primarily in pursuing a free trade policy, were often offended and deeply insulted by the attitude and actions of the United States during the Oregon controversy. These two conflicting viewpoints, the American desire for growth and territorial acquisition and the British desire to pursue their free trade policies without the threat of intimidation from the United States, may very well form the basis for the Oregon controversy, a controversy that was to eventually force two major powers (Spain and Russia) to relinquish their claims in the

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northwest and almost cause Great Britain and the United States to engage in a third war.

In the early nineteenth century four powers—England, the United States, Spain and Russia—claimed portions of the Oregon territory. As was often the case, many of these claims overlapped and conflicted with each other; these conflicting claims contributed quite naturally to much of the controversy that surrounded the territory. To all outward appearances, Great Britain and the United States seemed to have valid claims to the territory, although with the passage of years, as the controversy became more heated, each country tended to exaggerate its own claims to a large extent and belittle the claims of the other. Spain and Russia, though possessing legitimate claims to the area, did not press them with the same vigor. One thing that the four powers had in common was that none of them realized the true value of the Oregon territory.

In order to understand the Oregon dispute one must first become familiar with the early claims and actions of the powers involved. The first country to lay claim to Oregon was Spain. The Spanish based their claim to Oregon on the early exploration of Balboa, who crossed the Isthmus of Panama in 1513 and claimed all of the lands that bordered the Pacific Ocean to be the property of Spain. In 1602, Lt. Aquilar sailed as far north as the 43° parallel claiming the lands for Spain. In 1774, two Spanish seamen named Pérez and Martinez sailed as far north as the 55° parallel. The following year a Spanish squadron of ships under the command of Hecata, Ayala and Quadra explored the coast from the 27° parallel up to the 58° parallel. These early Spanish

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Hugh L. Keenleyside, Canada and the United States Some Aspects of Their Historical Relations (New York, 1952), p. 155.
explorations, which led to the establishment of a few isolated Spanish posts in the area, formed the basis of all Spanish claims in Oregon.

In 1741, Vitus Bering, sailing for Russia, discovered Alaska and also explored many of the islands in the Bering Sea. His discoveries made possible the creation in 1799 of the Russian-American Company, to take advantage of the fur trade in America. The Company's headquarters were at Sitka. As the Russian interest in furs expanded, so did their company posts along the coast of western America. It is often not realized the extent to which the Russians built fur posts along the west coast; as early as 1816 the Russians built Fort Ross at Bodega Bay, just north of San Francisco. For the most part all of the Russian claims to Oregon were based upon the exploration of Vitus Bering and upon the Russian settlements established in the area.

Even though Spain and Russia had legitimate claims to the territory, they were not as impressive as those of the United States and Great Britain. The United States had a logical base for its claims to Oregon. These included the exploration of Captain Robert Gray, who discovered and explored the lands adjacent to the mouth of the Columbia River in 1792; the overland journey of Lewis and Clark from St. Louis to the Pacific and back between 1804 and 1806; and, finally, upon the building of Astoria near the Columbia River in 1811 by the American Fur Company. These early American claims to the territory were later elaborated upon and made much more complex in an attempt to prove their validity.

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British claims, like the American claims, rested largely upon early exploration. The British claimed that Captain James Cook first sailed off the coast of Oregon as early as 1778. Also, as early as 1793, Alexander Mackenzie crossed the continent and ascended part of the Fraser River. The Hudson's Bay Company, of course, had been engaged in active trading in the Oregon territory—as defined by the British—at the turn of the century even though the first British settlement, Fort McLeod, was not built in the interior until 1805. The British, very much like their American cousins, later added other reasons as proof of their claims, but by 1810 these were basically the claims of the four powers involved in Oregon.

To most contemporaries it seemed inevitable that Great Britain with her powerful navy and the United States because of its close proximity to the territory would soon attempt to force Spain and Russia out of the disputed territory. For the most part, early negotiations between the United States and Britain were handled as though these two countries were the only powers with a vital interest in the area and Spain and Russia were seldom consulted.

The first major dispute to occur over the Oregon territory involved Spain and Great Britain. The Spanish, who were still pursuing a rather obsolete mercantilistic course in the Americas, became quite concerned about the number of British in the territory so they decided to reaffirm their right of exclusive sovereignty in Oregon. In order to accomplish this in a convincing manner, Don Martínez, the commander

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of a Spanish force took formal possession of a small British post at Nootka Sound on June 24, 1789. "Harsh treatment of British traders and forcible seizure by Don Martinez," wrote Schafer, "... of several British owned vessels at Nootka precipitated the quarrel which at one time seemed to foreshadow war." The situation that developed as a result of this Spanish action caused Great Britain to demand equal privileges in Oregon and compensation for the damage caused by the Spanish. Before yielding to the British demands, Spain sought support from France, but when the Spanish became convinced that they would receive no support from Britain's traditional enemy, they yielded to the English demands. In 1790, Great Britain and Spain reached an agreement when the Nootka Convention was agreed on between the two parties. "In it Spain conceded the right of British subjects to trade and make settlements upon any part of the coast not already occupied. In other words, Spain gave up her exclusive claim so far as the coast above California was concerned." Spain was also required to pay Britain a small indemnity besides granting equal rights to all Englishmen north of the 38° parallel. The Nootka Convention was the first step in the removal of Spain from contention in Oregon. For their part, the British government had no desire to colonize the area. What they really wanted was to prevent any one country from acquiring exclusive control in the region.

The first major disagreement between Great Britain and the United

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8Ibid., p. 19.
States with regard to the Oregon territory stemmed from the British seizure of Astoria during the War of 1812. Fearing that the British would take Astoria, the American Fur Company's post on the Columbia River, Duncan McDougal, a partner in the company, sold the post to the British Northwest Company for $80,500. Other members of the company who felt they had been betrayed by McDougal later estimated the true value of Astoria at $1,000,000. Oddly enough, shortly after selling Astoria to the Northwest Company, McDougal soon became a partner in that organization. Even though he was accused of betraying the interests of the American Fur Company, he evidently had some foresight, however, for within two months after the sale the British twenty-six gun warship Racoon, under the command of Captain Black, officially captured Astoria.

After the War of 1812, John Jacob Astor urged the United States government not to let the British keep Astoria. During the negotiations that took place at Ghent the Americans, keeping Astoria in mind, succeeded in inserting into the treaty a clause that in general terms stated, "All territory, places, and possessions whatsoever, taken by either party from the other during the war, . . . [should] be restored without delay. . . ." The British negotiators saw no objection to the statement as they well knew that Astoria had been purchased by the Northwest Company and in their opinion had not been captured.

The first formal opening of the Oregon question came in July of

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10Schafer, The Pacific Northwest, p. 90.
1815, when Secretary of State James Monroe called to the attention of British Ambassador Baker the fact that an expedition had been sent by the British government "against a post of the United States, established on the Columbia River, [and] had succeeded in taking possession of it."\textsuperscript{11} At the same time the British were informed that the United States planned to reoccupy Astoria in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Ghent. The British protested, saying that Astoria would not be included as a post taken by force during the war according to the terms of the treaty.

The United States refused to recognize the British position and began to make plans to retake the post. After nearly two years of delay a delegation was finally sent to Astoria to officially retake the post. Captain Biddle was sent on the American ship Ontario to peacefully re­store Astoria to the United States. Biddle accomplished this task with no opposition from either the British navy or the Northwest Company.

Even though the British protested against the way the Americans effected the restoration of Astoria, "Lord Castlereagh, British Foreign Secretary, found reasons of policy for conceding the right of the United States to be placed in possession of Astoria under the Treaty of Ghent, although he refused to concede the American right to the territory."\textsuperscript{12} It would appear that the British government regarded the restoration of Astoria to the United States as a type of recognition of the American claims to land south of the Columbia River, but nothing more. In restoring Astoria, as he did, Castlereagh did not lack critics. George Canning,

\textsuperscript{11}James S. Reeves, American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk (Balti­more, 1907), p. 209. (Hereafter cited as Reeves, American Diplomacy).

\textsuperscript{12}Schafer, The Pacific Northwest, p. 91.
who was eventually to become Castlereagh's successor in the Foreign Office, felt that the restoration of Astoria was a terrible blunder, and he feared that it would be "but the first symptom of weakness, the first of a series of compliances with encroachments which, if not resisted, will grow upon success." In retrospect, one must readily acknowledge that Canning displayed a great deal of foresight when he criticized his government's capitulation. Canning may well have been one step ahead of the firm believers in Manifest Destiny, a term that was not to be coined for another thirty years.

The next opportunity that representatives of the United States and Great Britain had to seriously discuss the Oregon territory came in October of 1818, when Albert Gallatin and Richard Rush began negotiations with the President of the Board of Trade Robinson and under-Secretary of State Goulburn in London. The purpose of the negotiation was to try to establish a boundary line between Canada and the United States from the Lake of the Woods westward. During the course of the discussions the British representatives pressed for recognition of their territory as far south as the Columbia River; but the American negotiators had previously been instructed not to accept any offers that would recognize British sovereignty below the 49° parallel in the northwest. Because no progress could be made on the Oregon question, it was finally agreed, although reluctantly on the part of the British, that both countries would have equal rights and privileges in the territory for a period of ten years.

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During the next few years the Oregon territory presented no particular problems between Great Britain and the United States. It was during this period, however, that both Russia and Spain were eliminated from contention as far as their claims or rights in Oregon were concerned. On October 31, 1819, as part of the Adams-Onís Treaty the United States obtained from Spain a renunciation of all claims and rights to any land west of the Rocky Mountains and north of the 42° parallel—territory that Spain had previously claimed. This effectively established a definite southern boundary for the Oregon territory and eliminated Spain from having any other claims in the area.

On September 4, 1821, the Russian Czar issued a ukase, which forbade any countries other than Russia from trading or coming within one-hundred miles of the west coast between the Bering Straits and as far south as the 51° parallel. This decree when it became known to the British and American governments on February 11, 1822, was not well received, as it was considered to be incompatible with the interests of both countries. Both felt that Russia had no right to attempt to restrict or limit foreign trade in the northwest. Even though there was a definite lack of cooperation between the United States and Great Britain in trying to override the Russian ukase, evidence would seem to indicate that both John Quincy Adams and George Canning were already quite apprehensive about Russian expansion on the west coast. Even though both men were uneasy about a possible Russian encroachment Canning refused to participate with the United States and Russia in negotiations at St. Petersburg to determine a northern boundary line. On January 9, 1821, he informed Richard Rush in London that, "The resumption of its original course by this Government [Great Britain] has
arisen chiefly from the principle which our government has adopted, of not considering the American continents as subject to future colonization by any of the European powers a principle to which Great Britain does not accede.\textsuperscript{14} This, naturally enough, was Canning's answer to the recent Monroe Doctrine and its "no future colonization" clause. Canning did indicate that he would have been willing to negotiate jointly Russia's claims over their rights on the sea off the coast, but he refused to consider a joint boundary negotiation.

Canning would have been exceedingly interested in a letter sent by John Quincy Adams to American Ambassador Middleton in St. Petersburg on July 22, 1823. Excerpts from this letter indicate the basic position of the United States in regard to the disputed area:

\begin{quote}
The right of the United States from the forty-second to the forty-ninth parallel of latitude on the Pacific Ocean we consider as unquestionable. This territory is to the United States of an importance which no possession in North America can be of to any European nation, not only as it is but the continuity of their possessions from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, but as it offers their inhabitants the means of establishing here-after communications from the one to the other.

By offering free and equal access for a term of years to navigation and intercourse with the natives of Russia, within the limits to which our claims are indisputable, we concede much more than we obtain.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Although Russia did not pose as serious a threat to American claims in Oregon, the American position was being made perfectly clear for the benefit of any, including Great Britain, who might have some doubts.

As the United States Minister in St. Petersburg began to prepare

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Reeves, American Diplomacy}, p. 234. (Quoted from Rush to Middleton, Jan. 9, 1824; \textit{American State Papers, Foreign Relations}, V, 463).

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 227.
a vigorous protest against the ukase, he was quietly informed that no protest would be necessary as "The Emperor has already had the good sense to see that this affair should not be pushed too far." This complete volte-face on the part of the Russian government made it possible in 1824 for a treaty to be agreed upon and signed between the United States and Russia. According to the terms of the agreement neither country would push their trade activities in areas conceded to the other, nor would the United States make any claims north of the 54° 40' parallel. The following year Great Britain signed a similar treaty with Russia recognizing the same boundary of 54° 40' and including the same general conditions.

As a result of these two separate treaties with Russia, Great Britain and the United States emerged as the only claimants to the Oregon territory between the 42° and the 54° 40' parallels. Thus, the stage was set by 1824 for these two powers to begin the contest over the Oregon territory, which was to last for twenty-two years and bring both countries to the brink of war on several occasions.

From the proposals and counterproposals made by the two governments in the ensuing years the intent of each party became relatively clear: Great Britain had no intention of colonizing the country but wished to maintain her territorial rights there, while the United States apparently would someday colonize the area and definitely felt that she had exclusive rights as far north as the 49° parallel. Actually the British had better claims to the lands north of the Columbia River,

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while the Americans had better claims to the land south of the river. The negotiations that ensued followed the usual diplomatic pattern in that the foreign secretaries of both countries generally claimed all of the land area in dispute between the $2^\circ$ and the $54^\circ 40'$ parallels, but consistently talked of compromise around the $49^\circ$ parallel.

During the period following the Convention of 1818, one man more than any other was to set the pattern of the Oregon negotiations. George Canning who "was hot with resentment over the Monroe message of December 1823; was annoyed by the agitation in Congress over the Oregon issue, . . . detested the republicanism of the United States; was utterly and openly contemptuous of its democracy; [and] thought its government tricky,"¹⁷ was to establish the basis of British policy in Oregon. This policy was such that it made a settlement of the problem virtually impossible until 1846. Foreign Secretary Canning's basic policy was presented to Richard Rush in 1824, when Rush was trying to secure a settlement along the $49^\circ$ parallel in compliance with instructions from John Quincy Adams. In his dispatch dated May 31, 1824, to the British commissioners who were negotiating with Rush, Canning stated that Britain had:

> . . . An equal right with the United States and all other powers, to make use of the entire territory from the $42^\circ$ to $54^\circ 40'$. A willingness to agree on a division of the territory with the United States, then the only power aside from Britain which had real interests there, on the joint principles of occupancy and reciprocal convenience. Britain would not give up any part of the Nootka Sound.

> Britain would not give up the Columbia, the only navigable communication, hitherto ascertained to exist, with the interior of that part of the country.

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The Americans are claiming under a French title, a Spanish title, and an American title, and they are supplying the deficiencies of each one of these titles by arguments drawn from the others. This could not be permitted. They might select the title they deemed best, and stand upon that, but must not attempt to use all three at the same time.18

Canning simply refused to consider any relinquishment of land north of the Columbia River. Yet, the United States accordingly refused to consider anything less than the 49° parallel. From 1824 on this triangular area between the Rocky Mountains, the Columbia River and the 49° parallel was the only land area in actual dispute. British claims to the land north of the 49° parallel were generally recognized by the United States as were the American claims south of the Columbia River. In April, 1826, the English Foreign Minister suggested that negotiations on the Oregon territory be resumed in London, as the ten-year limit in the Convention of 1818 was about to expire. Albert Gallatin was sent to Great Britain by President John Adams to negotiate with the British. Before leaving the United States, Gallatin received instructions to propose the 49° parallel as a compromise line and to accept nothing less than this same line.

However, Canning once again proposed that the territory be divided on the Columbia River, a proposal which Gallatin was expressly instructed not to accept or even discuss. It soon became apparent that no new agreement could be reached, so after prolonged debate the negotiators finally agreed to extend the period of joint occupation indefinitely, giving both countries the same equal rights and privileges in the territory that they had formerly possessed under the terms of the Convention

of 1818. Because no definite date was determined for this new agreement to expire both countries had the authority to terminate the joint occupation by giving notice to the other party one year in advance of their intention to do so.

Secretary Canning apparently felt that he could not make any concessions in Oregon that would not harm what he envisioned as a lucrative British trade. In a letter to Lord Liverpool, written on July 7, 1826, he said that,

... the trade between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres direct across the Pacific, is the trade of the world most susceptible of rapid augmentation and improvement. ... I should not like to leave my name affixed to an instrument by which England would have foregone the advantages of an immense direct intercourse between Canada and what may be, if we resolve not to yield them up, her boundless establishments on the N. W. Coast of America. 19

Canning felt that the restoration of Astoria had been a blunder and that any concession on his part to the United States would only lead to more demands; therefore, he seemed willing to accept the principle of joint occupation indefinitely.

On the other hand, Albert Gallatin saw the continuation of the joint occupation principle and the refusal of Canning to consider any concession to the United States in another light, when he forwarded the new treaty to Henry Clay on August 10, 1827. Gallatin believed that Great Britain was so anxious to prevent a rupture with the United States that she was willing to let the territory gradually slip into American hands. He also felt that the British only pretended to have vital interests in Oregon because national pride prevented the government from

relinquishing its claims to the territory. He concluded by predicting that the country would be settled by Americans and would of necessity fall into American hands. Later events were to prove Gallatin correct in his supposition in regard to Oregon. Canning's policy was designed to maintain the status quo, and what the United States needed most of all in Oregon was time for her settlers to move in and gain a foothold. The passing years also meant that the fur trade would soon become less profitable and the British would then have even less reason to fight for Oregon. "In retrospect, the fight to contain Europe in the Pacific Northwest was an interim phase of American policy. It was a negative phase. . . . It kept the Oregon issue and country open until the nation was ready to follow a more positive course." Such a course the United States would not be prepared to follow until the early 1840's.

In using Canning's foreign policies as a basis for future Oregon negotiations the British were destined to lose ground, and to continue losing ground in Oregon until a more realistic policy of compromise might be adopted. Such a realistic Oregon policy was not adopted by the British Foreign Office until 1841, when Lord Aberdeen became the new foreign minister in the Peel government. Under the guidance of Lord Aberdeen the Foreign Office took definite steps toward reaching a settlement in the Oregon territory by the adoption of a pacific policy designed to promote better Anglo-American relations.

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CHAPTER II

LORD ABERDEEN AND THE OREGON QUESTION

English foreign policy during the period of Lord Melbourne's ministry (1835-1841) was marked by strong feelings of instability and distrust. Because Great Britain was in a position where she maintained the balance of power in Europe, Melbourne's Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston, could and did practice power diplomacy. Because of this, Palmerston, who was known for his lack of tact and diplomacy, succeeded not only in causing many foreign nations to doubt the advisability of his foreign policy, but raised misgivings in the minds of many Englishmen as well. By 1841 Britain found herself almost friendless, after having alienated most European powers and the United States. Palmerston was not completely responsible for the rather sad state of affairs, but he did help to contribute to the perplexing situation.

When Melbourne's government fell, primarily as a result of its foreign policy in Europe, Sir Robert Peel was called upon to form a government. He did so on September 3, 1841. As his Foreign Minister, Peel selected Lord Aberdeen, a man who was highly respected in the Conservative Party and well qualified to fill the position. The appointment of Lord Aberdeen to this important post at a time when Great Britain was needful of friends in Europe was a wise move on the part of the new Prime Minister. Because both Peel and Aberdeen were strong advocates of peace, the government is often referred to as having been a "peace government."
In an attempt to repair some of the damage that had been done as far as foreign relations were concerned, Lord Aberdeen took steps to regain the friendship and confidence of France and the United States, both of whom had in years past allied themselves against Great Britain on two occasions. In order to win the friendship of the United States and France, Lord Aberdeen was prepared to adopt a pacific policy in regard to his relations with both countries. He recognized the fact that a possible rupture with the United States would mean that Great Britain would not only lose her best customer but might also become involved in a long and bitter war that could not possibly benefit either country. To launch this new conciliatory policy Lord Aberdeen sent Lord Ashburton (of the House of Baring, which carried on extensive banking operations in the United States) to America in the spring of 1842 to resolve all disputes between the United States and Great Britain. The choice of Ashburton was a good one, for he was well known and respected in the United States. The fact that he was married to an American helped the cause immensely. Ashburton soon met with Daniel Webster, the American Secretary of State. The two men approached their problems in a businesslike manner and soon succeeded in establishing a cordial relationship which made their task much easier.

The main area in dispute between the two countries at the time of the appointment concerned the boundary line between Canada and Maine. As part of his instructions, however, Ashburton was told that he might use Canning's basic policy in regard to any discussion of an Oregon boundary. Under no circumstances was he to accept any offer that would give the United States land north of the Columbia River. Any American
proposal suggesting a division along the 49° parallel was to be rejected immediately.²²

Even before the Maine boundary question had been settled, the discussions turned to the Oregon boundary, but unfortunately nothing much came of these discussions, as both Webster and Ashburton felt that the discussion of the latter boundary might seriously endanger the more important negotiations that were taking place on the northeastern boundary. President Tyler later stated that it was advantageous to waive the Oregon discussion as it was not so pressing at that time.²³ It would have been desirable to settle the Oregon question in 1842, but it was not imperative to do so. Thus, because neither power desired to place the Maine negotiations in jeopardy, both were willing to let the matter of Oregon rest until some future date. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty was ratified by both countries and promulgated in November, 1842. Even though the treaty was intensely attacked in both countries, and especially in England by Viscount Palmerston, no one condemned the treaty because it did not contain a settlement of the Oregon boundary.

Some critics, however, hinted that they would have been much happier if the Oregon boundary had been settled at the same time. One such critic was Lord Aberdeen, who, in keeping with his conciliatory attitude, soon instructed the British Minister Fox in Washington to ask that Edward Everett, the American Minister in London, be authorized to negotiate the Oregon boundary. On October 18, 1842, Aberdeen wrote,


²³Hubert Bancroft, History of the Northwest Coast (San Francisco, 1886), II, 391. (Hereafter cited as Bancroft, Northwest Coast).
It has appeared to Her Majesty's Government that both parties would act wisely in availing themselves of so auspicious a moment to endeavor to bring to a settlement the only remaining subject of territorial difference. . . . I speak of the line of boundary West of the Rocky Mountains. . . . You will propose to Mr. Webster to move the President to furnish the United States Minister at this Court with such instructions as will enable him to enter upon the negotiation of this matter with such person as may be appointed by Her Majesty for that object, and you will assure him, at the same time, that we are prepared to proceed to a consideration of it in a spirit of fairness, and to adjust it on a basis of equitable compromise. 24

Though this offer was made in good faith, it soon became apparent that President Tyler was more interested in playing politics than settling the disputed boundary. Aberdeen was deeply hurt and annoyed when he eventually learned that the President in his annual message on December 6, 1842, had said, "... he would not delay to urge upon Great Britain the importance of an early settlement of this long-standing controversy." 25 Believing that he had not been treated fairly in this exchange, Aberdeen betrayed his unhappiness with Tyler in a letter to J. W. Croker, a Conservative member of Parliament written on February 25, 1843:

You must know by this time, why I expressed myself greatly dissatisfied with the message of the President. . . . His mention of the Oregon question was also most uncandid. When he talked of pressing us to enter into negotiation, he had in his pocket a most friendly overture from us which he had already answered favourably. 26

This was but one of the many set-backs that Aberdeen faced in trying

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25Reeves, American Diplomacy, p. 244.

to open negotiations on the Oregon question. He was constantly reassured by the American ministers that the President and the Congress were also anxious to settle the question; but gradually, both Aberdeen and Peel began to feel that the United States was not really interested in a speedy settlement. Many Americans realized that time was on their side, and as each year passed, greater numbers of Americans moved into the Oregon territory. By 1843 the great mass migrations to Oregon had begun. This effective occupation gave the United States a much better claim to the land than it had ever had before.

After waiting for the American government to authorize Edward Everett in London to carry on the negotiations, Aberdeen finally decided that if something were to be done, it would have to be done in Washington. Even though Aberdeen would have preferred to negotiate with Everett who was very popular and highly respected in Great Britain, he soon began to make preparations to reopen the negotiations in America. Aberdeen correctly sensed that the United States had no real desire to authorize Everett to negotiate in London, so he decided to send Richard Pakenham as a special commissioner to Washington. On October 7, 1843, Pakenham departed from Great Britain for the United States. Almost a month later Aberdeen informed Charles Fox that he was being replaced:

It has been thought desirable and indeed necessary, that this [Oregon Question] should be treated at Washington, and not in London, as had formerly been proposed. There is too much reason to apprehend that your Relations with the American Government are not such as to contribute to the prospect of a happy result. We cannot send another special Mission; and under these circumstances, it has been thought expedient for the publick service that your place at Washington should be supplied by Mr. Pakenham.

Realizing that Fox was not very popular in the United States, the British Foreign Secretary decided to replace him with someone who might be better qualified and able to carry on the negotiations in a more favorable climate.

Ironically, on October 8, 1843, only a short time after Pakenham left for the United States to open negotiations, Edward Everett finally received his authorization from President Tyler to commence negotiating in London. In sending Everett full authority to negotiate, Tyler "privately . . . intimated to [his] Minister that the line of the Columbia could be made acceptable to the Senate, and to public opinion in the United States, if accompanied by a separate commercial treaty radically lowering tariffs on both sides." In transferring the negotiations to the United States, Aberdeen may have missed a good opportunity to reach a settlement that would have kept Great Britain on the Columbia River. But, of course, he had no way of knowing it at that time.

Aberdeen sincerely hoped that Pakenham, upon arriving in the United States, would be able to quickly settle the boundary dispute, but once again delay followed delay and the new negotiations were postponed for several months. Shortly after his arrival in the United States, on February 24, 1844, Pakenham informed the American Secretary of State Abel Upshur that his government was most anxious to obtain an early settlement of the Oregon dispute. But on the following day Upshur died, thus preventing a meeting between the two men. Out of diplomatic courtesy, Pakenham then waited a respectable length of time—in fact, five

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months—before communicating with the new American Secretary of State John C. Calhoun in regard to the settlement of the Oregon question.

Calhoun, who was very preoccupied and concerned with the Texas annexation question, tended to favor a plan of "wise and masterly inactivity" in regard to Oregon. He believed that time was working in favor of American interests in Oregon; therefore, it was not until August 23, that the two men met for the first time to discuss a possible settlement of the problem. At their first conference Pakenham immediately renewed the old British offer of establishing the boundary from the Rocky Mountains along the 49° parallel to the headwaters of the Columbia and then along the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. As a slight concession he did offer the United States the use of several free ports on Vancouver Island and south of the 49° parallel but he insisted upon the Columbia River as the boundary line. After a series of five conferences which lasted through September 24, the two men decided that it would be more profitable to prepare written arguments of their claims. As the British had refused to enlarge upon their minor concessions and as Calhoun had refused to surrender any American claims to the valley of the Columbia, the personal negotiations failed to satisfy either negotiator. Even the British offer to refer the question to arbitration was flatly rejected by Calhoun.

Even though the British proposals proved unacceptable to the United States, Aberdeen was not overly discouraged; he had anticipated that the United States would not accept the Columbia River as the boundary line and had informed Pakenham of the probable rejection as early as March 4, 1844. In the form of additional instructions he wrote:
Should my apprehensions be verified, you will endeavor, without committing yourself or your government, to draw from the American negotiator a proposal to make the 49th degree of latitude the boundary, with the proviso that the ports to the south of that parallel to the Columbia inclusive, shall be free ports to Great Britain. The navigation of the Columbia should be common to both; and care should be taken that the 49th degree of latitude, as a boundary, is to extend only to the sea; and not to apply to Vancouver's Island.  

Aberdeen felt that this offer, which incidentally was the first indication that he was ready to accept the 49° parallel as the boundary line, would be a fair compromise and would have a good chance of being accepted in Great Britain and the United States.

By the time that Pakenham had held his first discussions with Calhoun he strongly suspected that Edward Everett had convinced the American government that Aberdeen would accept the 49° parallel; therefore, Pakenham felt there could be no compromise because, as he put it, "The Americans knowing Aberdeen's pacifism and [being] encouraged to bank on it by Everett, believed a policy of delay would be in their interest, and would eventually bring a complete capitulation by Great Britain." Being convinced that the Americans were playing a waiting game, Pakenham did not endeavor to secure this offer from Calhoun; he believed if the offer were made and subsequently turned down by the United States, Great Britain would have lost any possible advantage she might previously have had in claiming the lands north of the Columbia River. If Calhoun was aware of the willingness on the part of Great Britain to accept the 49° parallel (and in all probability he was

30Jones, Lord Aberdeen, p. 56.
because of Everett's correspondence), he made no move that might have led to a settlement at this particular time. After September 24, 1814, little if anything was accomplished as far as the negotiations were concerned between Calhoun and Pakenham.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, Aberdeen who had not previously consulted the Cabinet on his proposed parallel concession, wrote to Peel on September 25 and committed himself to this particular policy of concession which he planned to follow. In his letter he outlined the proposal that he had sent to Pakenham on March 4. Peel, who was inclined to give Aberdeen a free hand, apparently approved of Aberdeen's policy of conciliation, for he made no particular comments or suggestions about it at this time. Almost a month later Aberdeen again wrote to Peel and complained that the Oregon territory had no real importance but,

... the Press of both Countries, and publick clamour, have given it a fictitious interest which renders it difficult for either Government to act with moderation, or even common sense. I have no expectation that Mr. Calhoun will agree to any terms that we could venture to propose; but this is no reason for our not exhausting all the means of settlement in our power. 31 Aberdeen began to sense the pressure of the newspapers in both countries. The Oregon question was a ready-made issue for the American election campaign of 1814.

Democratic Party leaders, keeping their ears to the ground, reacted to pressure from the northwestern states and the hundreds of Oregon pioneers who had moved into the territory since 1811. The Democratic nominee, James K. Polk, and his followers were boisterously

31 Ibid., p. 57.
claiming all of Oregon up to the 54° 40' parallel and coining phrases like "all of Oregon or none." Such talk and publicity eventually produced "Oregon fever," a disease that made an American settlement based on anything less than the 49° parallel an impossibility. The election of Polk in the fall of 1844 brought the Oregon question to the forefront in Anglo-American relations and precipitated an acute crisis between the United States and Great Britain which led the two nations to adopt a brink-of-war type of diplomacy.
CHAPTER III

BRITISH REACTION TO THE AMERICAN ELECTION OF 1844

The election of 1844 in the United States proved to be the turning point in Anglo-American relations in regard to the Oregon question. The American people had become Oregon-conscious, many Oregon conventions (meetings to promote the re-occupation of Oregon) were held throughout the country and the participants loudly proclaimed the right of the United States not only to the land north of the 49° parallel but as far north as the 54° 40' parallel. The Oregon supporters made it perfectly clear that they would consider any cession of lands to Great Britain south of the 54° 40' parallel an act of betrayal by their own government. This clamour for "all of Oregon or none" was quickly adopted by the Democratic Party and incorporated into the party platform.

When the Democrats met at Baltimore to nominate their candidate for the presidency on May 27, it soon became apparent that the logical contenders for the nomination were too evenly matched and an alternate would have to be selected. Much to the surprise of many people, a "dark horse" candidate from Tennessee won the nomination over such party stalwarts as John Tyler and Martin VanBuren. James Knox Polk, who succeeded in capturing the nomination, was often referred to as "Young Hickory" because of his fondness for Andrew Jackson. Polk, at an early date, had become closely associated with the supporters of the Oregon question and he also was known to be a strong supporter of the annexation of Texas. Such a background made Polk an ideal candidate...
for the Democratic Party.

This era of American history became a period of rapid American expansion. The Democrats, realizing this, included in their party platform a plank that caused Great Britain to seriously re-evaluate her position in Oregon. The fourth plank of the Democratic platform read as follows:

Resolved, That our title to the whole of the territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable; that no portion of the same ought to be ceded to England or any other power; and that the re-occupation of Oregon and the re-annexation of Texas at the earliest practicable period are great American measures, which this convention recommends to the cordial support of the Democracy of the Union.32

Little wonder that during the ensuing months of the campaign the Democrats coined phrases like "All of Oregon or none" and "54° 40' or fight." Such campaigning greatly appealed to the majority of the electorate, and of course Polk was quickly labeled as the man who would see to it that all of the democratic promises were faithfully carried out.

The Whigs, on the other hand, had nominated Henry Clay as their candidate. It soon became apparent, however, that Clay was straddling the fence as far as the Oregon and Texas questions were concerned. His failure to take a definite stand on these two issues cost Clay the support of the Whig nationalists and the free-soilers in New York state. This in turn cost him the election of 1844.

The election of Polk in the fall of 1844 gave the British every reason to be apprehensive about their future relations with the United States. The election campaign with all of its fancy phrases, threats

and premises concerning Oregon had been well publicized in the British press, and many of the American articles were not greatly appreciated in England. The British had always felt that the land between the 49° and 54°40' parallel was unquestionably theirs; the United States had never seriously questioned the British claims in this area before, just as Great Britain had never seriously questioned American claims south of the Columbia. When the Americans began to claim everything as far north as Alaska, this offended and angered many Englishmen who might never have given American politics a second thought. What the British did not understand about the American attitude, however, was the fact that most Americans considered the dispute over Oregon "... intimately bound up with those concerning Texas and Mexico, and felt that British animosity and intrigue against the United States must be countered by the use of the same means in each direction." What Americans did not comprehend was that the British had no great desire to interfere in the affairs of either the United States or Mexico. The British were interested only in protecting their rights and national honor in Oregon. British imperialism had reached a low ebb in the history of the empire; experience had shown that the acquisition of new lands proved in most cases to be an additional burden on the treasury and not an asset to the empire.

The campaign and subsequent election of Polk in 1844 once more brought the Oregon question to a position of prominence in Anglo-American relations. The campaign helped to make more people of both nations

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conscious of the dispute; these same people became more convinced that their nation's claims were the only legitimate ones to the territory. The value of the land in question became less important, while the question of national honor and prestige became an all important consideration. Many Englishmen had only a vague idea of where Oregon was, much less a knowledge of its true value; but they could and did understand that the United States was threatening the national prestige and honor of their homeland. The president-elect may have been prepared to "look John Bull squarely in the eye," but John Bull was slowly preparing to defend his own viewpoint. This emergent feeling of animosity on both sides of the Atlantic made attempts at conciliation very difficult in the months to follow. Lord Ashburton summed up the situation when he wrote John Croker the following letter on November 25, 1844:

Our cousin Jonathan is an offensive, arrogant fellow in his manner. By nearly all our people he is therefore hated, and a treaty of conciliation with such a fellow, however considered by prudence or policy to be necessary, can in no case be very popular with the multitude. Such public feeling as had been built up by the press in both countries and to a large extent by American political leaders during the campaign made Lord Aberdeen's task of settling the controversy very difficult. Conciliation or compromise might very quickly be interpreted as capitulation by the public or by the ever-watchful opposition.

The period of time between the election of Polk in the fall of 1844 and his inauguration in March 1845 was marked by a well planned wait and see policy in Britain. In early January 1845, Pakenham informed

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34 Rives, U. S. and Mexico, p. 16.
Calhoun that he had not received any new instructions from his government in regard to their last discussion. The British government merely bided its time and waited to see what Polk's new administration would do. They hoped that Polk, having won the election, would now adopt a more conciliatory policy.

In late January, Pakenham once more suggested that the question be referred to arbitration, but this offer was flatly rejected by Calhoun on January 21, 1845, as he did not want to commit the new government to a policy that the new administration might not wish to follow when in office after March 4.

After Calhoun's rejection of the British offer of arbitration as a means of solving the problem, Prime Minister Peel appeared to be quite disturbed, for on February 23, he wrote a long letter to Aberdeen in which he strongly emphasized the importance of an amicable settlement of the Oregon question. The bitter debates in the Congress, he felt, were going to make conciliation very difficult, if not impossible. Peel also wanted to ascertain if Great Britain was actually in a superior position in Oregon. He then suggested that Britain should send a frigate secretly to the mouth of the Columbia along with a small artillery force to bolster the strength of their forces there. \(^{35}\) Aberdeen put Peel off by finally convincing him that any preparations for war, such as sending additional British forces to Oregon, would only contribute to war hysteria and might even precipitate a war. Peel accepted this argument for the time being. When challenged in the House of Commons on March 3, by the Radical Roebuck, who demanded to see the papers

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\(^{35}\)Jones, Lord Aberdeen, p. 57. (Peel to Aberdeen, Feb. 23, 1845).
relating to the Oregon negotiations, Peel put him off by indicating that the government was aware of the importance of the question.

Upon President Polk's inauguration (March 4, 1845), the British government learned that the new President evidently planned to carry out his campaign promises in regard to Oregon. In his inaugural address, after first speaking of Texas, President Polk turned to the Oregon question:

Nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already are our people preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children . . . To us belongs the duty of protecting them adequately wherever they may be upon our soil. . . .

Even though President Polk had carefully omitted the word "whole" in front of Oregon, the tone of his message produced an angry and uniform reaction in Great Britain. The British newspapers all carried Polk's address, along with their own editorial comments about the new president's lack of manners and diplomatic tact. While Polk was generally derided in the papers for his attitude and comments, only one paper went so far as to suggest war with the United States. The London Colonial Magazine stated:

A war with America cannot but be productive of good. Never before were the states of the union in a worse condition for carrying on a war; never . . . was England better fitted. . . . To appease the United States would be merely to pave the way for fresh insults from a country on which little reliance is to be placed. 36

36 Blair and Rives, eds., The Congressional Globe (Washington, 1845), XIV, 400.

While such a radical step as war with the United States did not reflect the thinking of the majority of the populace, the article certainly must have caused many Englishmen to seriously consider the possibilities of such a war. The very tone of the article seems to suggest that this might be the ideal time to teach those wayward Americans a lesson that was long overdue.

Parliament reacted in a like manner. A series of rather heated debates took place in early April (these debates will be discussed in their entirety in Chapter IV). Members of the Parliament deeply resented the implications of the address, especially the Whig opposition under the leadership of Lord John Russell. Lord Aberdeen, in his defense of the British interests in Oregon, tried to pass the matter off lightly by saying:

I wish to observe that this speech is not an address made to the Congress—it is a speech made to the public, the Congress not being sitting. Undoubtedly, no speech of such a nature could be made by the President of the United States without drawing towards it the most serious attention. Nevertheless it does not possess the importance of an official message, forming a part of legislative proceedings.\(^3\)

Even though Lord Aberdeen would have preferred to treat the matter as though it had no real significance, he was not allowed to do so as the Parliament, including the opposition, officially went on record as declaring that England also had rights in Oregon and would be prepared to uphold those rights. That the situation was grave, there can be little doubt; party politics were forgotten for the moment as all factions joined together to present a united front to the United States.

Significantly, Lord Aberdeen felt the inaugural important enough to warrant the following assurance to the Queen on March 27: "The language of the new President is menacing, but he will have been made fully aware of the determination of Your Majesty's Government to uphold at all hazards the rights and honour of this country."\(^{39}\) The general consensus seemed to be that President Polk could bluster and talk if he felt such bombast was necessary, but if he actually tried to do what he talked of doing he would have to answer to John Bull.

In view of President Polk's attitude in regard to the Oregon dispute Lord Aberdeen decided that it would be more advisable for Great Britain not to make any new proposals until after the new administration had had an opportunity to present an offer of its own. He advised Pakenham in mid-April that in the event the United States should propose a settlement based on the 49° parallel it was doubtful that Great Britain would be able to accept such a proposal. This new policy on the part of Aberdeen reflects a marked change in the British attitude, for only thirteen months before he had informed Pakenham that such a proposal might very well be approved.

The impasse in the negotiations was broken on July 12, 1845, when President Polk, feeling that he was committed by the acts of his predecessors, authorized the new Secretary of State James Buchanan to propose once again the 49° parallel as a compromise boundary. In a note to Pakenham on July 12, Buchanan reviewed the American claims to

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\(^{39}\) Hunter Miller, Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America (Washington, 1937), V, 29. (Quoted from the Correspondence of George, Earl of Aberdeen, 1845, p. 102). (Hereafter cited as Miller, Treaties).
Oregon and concluded by offering the 49° parallel.

Minister Pakenham, acting only upon his own initiative, then proceeded to make one of the biggest miscalculations of his political career when, in his reply to Secretary Buchanan's note, he rejected the American offer without even referring it to Whitehall. On July 29, Secretary Buchanan received from Pakenham a well written argument in which Pakenham controverted all of Buchanan's previous arguments. This argumentative masterpiece created a great diplomatic blunder on the part of the British government. In closing his message, Pakenham expressed the hope "that the American plenipotentiary will be prepared to offer some further proposal for the settlement of the Oregon question more consistent with fairness and equity, and with reasonable expectations of the British Government." The only defense that might be offered for Pakenham's abrupt refusal of the new American offer is that Pakenham had been informed of the reaction in Great Britain to the President's inaugural and he also knew that Britain had three times previously rejected the same American proposal. There is little reason to doubt that the British Minister had taken a great deal upon himself in not forwarding the proposal to the British government for its consideration.

Pakenham's rejection of the American proposal produced a counter-reaction on August 30, 1845, when Buchanan delivered a note to Pakenham stating that the American offer was to be considered officially withdrawn.

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President Polk, who had become very angry when he learned of Pakenham's rejection of the American proposal, had personally supervised Buchanan's message withdrawing the American offer. In this message it was also intimated that the United States would once again assert its full rights in the Oregon territory. Polk also refused to make any new proposals for future negotiations; in other words, any future negotiations would originate with Great Britain or they simply would not be forthcoming. For his part Pakenham did not seem to be disturbed by this turn of events, he felt that the Americans had no real interest in securing a fair and equitable compromise in Oregon, and that they were content simply to try to force Britain into making humiliating concessions.

By late 1845, the Oregon negotiations had reached another impasse. President Polk was adamant in refusing to make any new proposals; as far as he was concerned any future moves would have to be made by Great Britain. In Great Britain, Aberdeen was trying his best to undo the damage that had been done when Pakenham rejected the American proposal. In an interview with the new American Minister, Louis McLane, Aberdeen condemned Pakenham's actions. A tragic mistake had been made, he believed, but he was not sure how the damage could be repaired. Even Prime Minister Peel felt that England had lost any advantage she might have had because Pakenham's rejection was "needlessly harsh and peremptory, and [he] predicted the United States would not relinquish the diplomatic advantage she had gained, but he opposed any further concession as a means of setting things right."  

42Jones, Lord Aberdeen, p. 61. (Quoted from the Aberdeen Papers, Peel to Aberdeen, Oct. 2, 1845).
The one person who was largely responsible for the breakdown of negotiations, Richard Pakenham, now found himself in a serious dilemma. He was not only in trouble with the American government, but with his own government as well. Instead of being congratulated for his negotiations, he was being condemned for them. Pakenham decided that the wise thing to do would be to rectify the situation if it were still possible, so on October 23, he visited Buchanan in his office. Several conferences followed during the next two days in which Pakenham expressed regret that the American offer had been withdrawn. He intimated that his government would be very glad to hear from the United States on the subject. He denied that he had rejected the former American proposal by saying, "What I said was that I did not feel at liberty to accept it." Secretary Buchanan felt that the negotiations should be reopened in view of his informal talks with Pakenham, but President Polk refused, for he was not willing to accept anything in the line of conciliation, whether it be an apology or a new British proposal, unless it were made officially by the British government.

This stalemate in negotiations continued on through the months of October and November with no apparent change in sight. On December 2, 1845, President Polk added to the tensions when he presented his first annual message to the 29th Congress. In reference to the Oregon dispute, Polk reviewed the three previous attempts of the United States to settle the dispute under Monroe and Adams, and then informed the Congress of his own proposal which had been so rudely rejected by Pakenham. He explained how he had withdrawn the American offer and had reasserted the

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American right to the entire territory because the British rejection freed him of the obligation to follow the compromise policies of his predecessors. The President recommended to Congress two courses of action: first, notice should be given to terminate the joint-occupancy made in 1827; and secondly, the Congress should determine what legislation could be adopted without violating this convention. He also suggested that the protection of American laws and jurisdiction immediately be extended over American citizens in Oregon. In closing his speech, the President said, if the Congress should give notice to terminate joint-occupation, then the United States would have reached a point when its national rights in Oregon would either have to be abandoned or firmly maintained, and such rights could not be abandoned without a sacrifice of both national honor and interest.

The last part of the President's speech proved to be particularly offensive to the British, who also had national rights and honor to maintain in Oregon. Once again the British public and Her Majesty's government became aroused over the Oregon question. The London Times, in an editorial on January 3, 1846, favored a very moderate approach to the problem when they suggested that the British government "should renew the offers sanctioned by the American President on the basis of the 49th parallel." The Times continued by saying that "President Polk's message implied the terms of war, or conclusive negotiation. War was too monstrous to be thought of, except after every effort at a compromise had been exhausted."[^45]

[^44]: McCormack, James K., Polk, p. 579.
On two separate occasions between the date of the President's inaugural address and January 18, 1846, Pakenham again requested that the United States accept arbitration as the solution to the problem. Both times Buchanan informed Pakenham that the United States would not submit any question to arbitration that involved their territorial rights. The only concession that President Polk appeared willing to make was that he would submit any reasonable British proposals to the Senate for its previous advise if he believed the proposal had some merit. This in itself was Polk's loophole to make it possible for the negotiations to continue. Polk personally would accept nothing less than the 54° 40' parallel as the basis for any settlement. However, in offering to refer any reasonable British proposal to the Senate for its advise he was leaving the door open for the British to propose the 49° parallel. If this proposal met with the approval of the Senate, that body could then recommend to the President that he accept the proposal; he would then be relieved of the responsibility of having been the one who wanted to accept the offer. Although Polk's diary indicates that he did not relish the thought of a war with Great Britain, there is no evidence to indicate that he feared such a war if it should come as a result of the Oregon dispute.

With the opening of the new year, Lord Aberdeen found himself in a predicament as far as Oregon was concerned. The British government, having lost the initiative in Oregon, was now on the defensive because of Pakenham's blunder. In order to understand the actions of Lord Aberdeen and the British government in carrying the Oregon negotiations on through to a successful conclusion one finds it necessary to become
familiar with the activities of the Opposition party and the instability
of the Peel government in 1845 and 1846. At times outside pressures
caused Lord Aberdeen to operate under unusual conditions where he could
not always do things as he might have preferred. Oregon was such a
case.
CHAPTER IV

THE OREGON QUESTION AND THE OPPOSITION—1845

It is the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate the precarious position of the Peel government in 1845, and to show how the government's policies in regard to Oregon were largely dictated by unfavorable conditions at home. After taking office in 1841, Sir Robert Peel was able to alleviate some of the immediate pressures upon his ministry, but he was unable to protect Lord Aberdeen from the attacks of the opposition parties in regard to the Oregon controversy. Even though the Oregon question was greatly overshadowed by domestic issues in England, it proved to be a lever through which the opposition could bring pressure to bear on the government. The result was that Lord Aberdeen was forced to evaluate carefully any policies he might wish to implement in regard to the Oregon controversy; not on the basis of whether such policies would be of benefit to England, but on the basis of whether such policies, if adopted, would place the already shaky Peel government in a position where it could be attacked by the opposition for having conceded too much to the United States. Criticism from the opposition parties forced Lord Aberdeen to conduct the Oregon negotiations in secret; he consistently refused to reveal any information in regard to the state of the negotiations to anyone except Prime Minister Peel.

Two separate and distinct factions were anxious to bring about the fall of Peel's Ministry. The Whigs, who had been out of office since 1841, were anxious to return to power under the leadership of Lord
John Russell. The second faction was the "Young England" group who believed that Peel had turned against his party and betrayed the landed gentry who had elected him to office. One of the key personalities in this latter group was Benjamin Disraeli, a man of great oratorical ability who at one time had been a strong supporter of Peel. But by 1844, Disraeli had left the ranks of the party and was doing his best to cause the fall of Her Majesty's government. These two factions, the Whigs and Disraeli's group, posed as the watch dogs of British honor and national interests. When the Peel government made a major mistake or a capitulation, these two groups attacked with a vengeance. Ironically, the Whigs, under Lord John Russell, supported the Peel government during its last six months in office; without this support Peel could not have succeeded in repealing the Corn Laws. Vigorous attacks were made on the government by the Whigs, however, because of Aberdeen's conciliatory policy in regard to Oregon. Although he did play an important part in the defeat of the government in 1846, there is no ascertainable evidence to indicate that Disraeli played a major role as far as the Oregon question was concerned.

Most members of the opposition groups in 1845 felt that Lord Aberdeen's Oregon policy was weak and spineless, that he had a tendency to concede too much in his dealings with the Americans. The view of one American historian was that, "Under any circumstances to concede to the United States what previous British governments had declined to yield for over a quarter of a century was a grave political risk; to concede it after the menace of the Polk inaugural was to expose the government to the charge of having abandoned national pride and honor.
This political fear was the chief barrier in 1845-1846 to an Oregon peace. President Polk in his inaugural speech had quickly changed the Oregon question from a dispute between two nations over an undefined land area to a dispute that involved the question of national prestige and honor. This made later negotiations much more complex and difficult than they had been prior to March of 1845.

One of the severest critics of Aberdeen's foreign policies was Viscount Palmerston, a Whig, who had previously been Melbourne's foreign minister. In 1842, for example, Palmerston had viciously attacked the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, contending that the treaty represented a capitulation of the worst kind, even though the treaty had been well received by the majority of the Parliament. The following year, in March, he again attacked the government's Oregon policy in the House of Commons:

If the Senate had passed a bill, for immediately taking forcible possession of the whole territory of Oregon; and if the senator who brought up the bill had expressed his conviction that the American claim would immediately be acquiesced in by Great Britain, if it was only urged, in what he pleased to call a proper manner, it is impossible, I conceive, that this bill should pass the other branches of the legislature; but if it were to pass, and to be acted upon, it would be a declaration of war.

Actually, the bill in question, Senator Lewis Linn's bill, had passed the Senate by a slim margin on February 6, but it later failed to pass in the House of Representatives and automatically died in committee when the House adjourned at the end of the year. Prime Minister Peel refused to discuss such hypothetical causes of war with Palmerston as he had the

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147 Bancroft, Northwest Coast, p. 394.
assurance of the American government that they wished the controversy to be settled in a peaceful manner. Nevertheless, frequent attacks by Palmerston succeeded in causing the Peel government to fear that any concessions they might make would be branded as capitulation. Many of the Whigs suspected that Palmerston's attacks on the government were made for partisan reasons; some believed that Palmerston was not only determined to belittle the Foreign Office, but also anxious to replace Lord John Russell as the Opposition leader. "Palmerston's determination to find fault with everything that is done in the Foreign Office, and the indiscriminate abuse which he heaps upon every part of our foreign policy," wrote Charles Greville, a privy council clerk, "deprives his opinion of the weight which it would be entitled to if he was only tolerably impartial."\(^{16}\) While there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the Conservatives did not take Palmerston's attacks too seriously, there is also a good deal of evidence to indicate that the felt they had to be extremely careful not to do anything that would give Palmerston an advantage that he might successfully use against the Conservative Party. During this period both Aberdeen and Peel continued their pacific policies, even though the American election campaign of 1844 and the Opposition attacks made such a program exceedingly difficult. The government realized that the "recurring distress and agitation among the working classes gave abundant warning . . . that so grave an economic disturbance as would be involved in a war with the United States

\(^{16}\) Frederick Merk, "British Party Politics and the Oregon Treaty," The American Historical Review, XXVII (1932) 66. (Hereafter cited as Merk, "British Politics").
was not to be risked so long as any way of escape were open." The British people who were faced with serious economic problems of high prices and low wages were not likely to appreciate any additional tax burdens imposed upon them by the government to support an unnecessary war.

While Polk was industriously campaigning on the platform, "all of Oregon or none" in the fall of 1844, Aberdeen was firmly committing himself to a compromise along the 49° parallel. As early as March of the same year he had advised Pakenham that Britain might possibly accept the 49° parallel. In September, he attempted to convince Peel that such a compromise would be fair to both countries:

The American claim extends to the 54th degree of latitude, he wrote to Peel on September 25, and I think considering the negotiations which have already taken place, that they will not be brought to concede to us more than to the 49th. This line if carried through to the ocean, and applied to Vancouver Island, would exclude us from the entrance of Puget's Sound, and all harbors within it, which are the really valuable part of the territory.

I believe that if the line of the 49th degree were extended only to the waters edge, and should leave us in possession of all Vancouver's Island, with the northern side of the entrance to Puget's Sound; and if all the harbors within the Sound, and to the Columbia, inclusive, were made free to both countries; and further, if the river Columbia from the point at which it became navigable to its mouth, were also made free to both, this would be in reality a most advantageous settlement.

It is apparent from the tone of this letter that Aberdeen had definitely committed himself to the 49° parallel with a few modifications.

But why, contemporaries wondered, if Aberdeen was ready to accept

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50Robert C. Clark, "Aberdeen and Peel on Oregon--1844," The Oregon Historical Quarterly, XXXIV (1933), 237. (Hereafter cited as Clark, "Aberdeen and Peel").
the 49° parallel as the final boundary settlement even before Polk had been elected president, was the question prolonged until June of 1846. Part of the answer to this question may be found in Peel's reply to Aberdeen's letter of the 25th:

I incline to arbitration rather than any important concession beyond former proposals; if I recollect right there are on record in the Foreign Office very strong opinions, but with reference to consideration of policy and justice, as to the impropriety of carrying concession beyond certain defined limits.

I would not be afraid of a good deal of preliminary bluster on the part of the Americans. The best answer to it would be to direct the Collingwood to make a friendly visit when she has leisure, to the mouth of the Columbia.51

Peel emphasized three main points in his letter: first, he preferred that the problem be settled by means of arbitration (Aberdeen later made such an offer to the United States on two occasions at the beginning of the new year with no success); second, he warned against any concession that might exceed any previous British offers as this might give the Opposition party the opportunity it wanted to charge the government with capitulation; and third, he suggested that a show of military strength would be most appropriate. Aberdeen was able to convince the Prime Minister that a show of naval strength in Oregon would only contribute to the already mounting tensions between the two countries.

On the day before President-elect Polk made his inaugural address --which as noted above shook the British from their complacency---Mr. Roebuck of the Opposition inquired in the House of Commons:

...Whether the right hon. Gentleman [Peel] had any objection on the part of Her Majesty's Government, to lay the negotiations, as far as it has proceeded, before the House.

The reason he asked, Roebuck continued, was because the

51 Ibid., p. 238.
world already knew . . . that a Bill had already passed the House of Representatives, with regard to . . . making Oregon what was called a territory . . . This country Britain was not accustomed to bluster, but it must be apparent to all that this was a proceeding not to be submitted to quietly.

The law for taking possession of the Territory had certainly passed one branch of Legislature; and if we took no steps to counteract what had been done, our national rights might be infringed; and the rights of individuals invaded. This country ought to have declared that the United States had no pretext for going westward of the Rocky Mountains.52

Roebuck concluded by asking if the Ministers were going to leave the Parliament completely in the dark on such an important matter. The Prime Minister answered in a manner that became typical of both himself and his Foreign Minister in later months, when they were asked to furnish the Parliament with information on the Oregon negotiations. Peel, who pointed out that the negotiations were being carried on with the executive branch of the United States government and not with the Legislature, preferred not to lay any correspondence before the Parliament as it might injure negotiations. The Prime Minister agreed with Mr. Roebuck that "nothing could be more unseemly than to bluster, but while he refrained from any expressions of the kind it was not to be supposed that the British Government was not duly sensible of the importance of the question."53 No further discussion took place at this time; the majority of the members of Parliament preferred to learn the content of the President's inaugural address before pushing the question further.

Parliament did not wait long to find out what Polk pronounced in his inaugural, for by early April the British papers carried the text of the President's address. Not since 1812 had relations between Great

52Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (London, 1845), LXXVIII, 235.
Britain and the United States become so strained. Indignation and anger were prevalent among the British people. Newspapers carried articles similar to the one that appeared in the London Times: "In spite of his [President Polk] marauders and what he terms his Constitutional rights, the territory of Oregon will never be wrested from the British Crown to which it belongs, but by war." Polk, without even trying, had succeeded in uniting the British people in opposition to any concessions in Oregon; thus he inadvertently made Aberdeen's task much more difficult.

On April 4, 1845, the Whig Opposition, in what apparently was a pre-planned attack on the government, introduced more inquiries about the state of the Oregon negotiations. Because of the seriousness of the debates, the question was handled in a very responsible manner by both parties. Even though the discussions produced what appeared outwardly to be a strong united front on the part of the entire Parliament, it is possible to detect the warning tone of the Whigs during the course of the debates. Lord John Russell, who introduced the question in the House of Commons, claimed that he did not wish to embarrass the government but that the tone of Polk's inaugural address made it necessary for him to speak. He briefly reviewed the early claims of both countries to the territory and then continued:

I am sure they will feel it impossible to allow the present undefined and unsettled state of relations between the two countries to continue, without incurring great danger that the people of the United States, acting upon the suggestion of the President may endeavor to disturb British subjects in

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Semis, Am. Secretaries of State, V, 247.
rights which they hold by virtue of Treaties, and may produce a state of things dangerous to the peace of the two countries.

Russell, disclaiming any pretension to advise the government on what it should do, felt that Her Majesty's Government should not

... make any proposal which shall be less than the proposal made by Mr. Canning, with any regard for our own interests, or our own honor.55

In conclusion, Lord Russell then discussed the supposed value of the territory in question and argued that even though the area might be as worthless as many claimed, Great Britain could not yield to the bluster of the United States. Once again the ghost of Canning's Oregon policy had returned to hamstring Aberdeen's pacific policy.

The Prime Minister rose and answered Russell's questions by once again evading the real issue. Peel admitted Russell's right to inquire into the state of the negotiations, but refused to present any pertinent information that the Commons would like to hear.

While negotiations are pending, Peel said, through the means of persons regularly constituted with a distinct authority for that purpose, unless there be plain reasons for the exercise of their right, it is politic to abstain from the exercise of free discussion in popular assemblies upon topics of this description. It is so easy to excite public feeling in such assemblies, that, unless there be grave cogent arguments for the contrary course, it is better to leave such matters to the discretion of those who are entrusted with the care of the honour and interests of the country.56

Peel promised that if the negotiations should fail he would then lay the Oregon correspondence before the House. The Prime Minister closed by saying that he hoped the members of Parliament would leave the matter in the hands of the government.

56Ibid., p. 193.
Viscount Palmerston was the only other member of the House to speak. His speech, though including an offer of support to the government on the question of British rights in Oregon, contained a clear warning to the Conservative government. Before discussing the Oregon situation, Palmerston took the occasion to defend his attacks upon the government three years before, e.g., after the Ashburton Treaty had been concluded:

I trust that on every occasion when it has been my duty to state my opinions to the House, I have always abstained as much as circumstances would permit from any personal attack upon any individual, but if individuals choose to accept great and important functions, they must expect that their public conduct and their public acts will be liable to such observations as any one may think it is his duty to make. And I only say, when observations are made by persons who, in my opinion have in the discharge of great important public trusts, from whatever motive it may have arisen—whether it be from natural incapacity, or from opinions—speculative opinions—inconsistent with the duties they have to perform, whenever such persons sacrifice the honour or the interest of this country, it will be a matter of entire indifference to me in what manner such individuals may speak of any strictures I feel it my duty to make upon them.57

Palmerston, while agreeing with the government in part, indicated that he would not hesitate to attack anyone that he felt was not performing his task properly. In fact, he deemed it his duty to expose such a person, or persons.

In the House of Lords, where Lord Clarendon introduced the question, discussion followed a pattern very similar to that in the Commons. He expressed the hope that Her Majesty's Ministers would not hesitate to adopt any course that might be necessary to protect the national honor and interests in Great Britain:

57 Ibid., pp. 199-201.
It is hardly possible to believe that any negotiations upon this subject are pending, or they have ever been commenced or even proposed, if we are to draw from the President's Speech the inference which it must naturally suggest; for not only does he not make the slightest allusion to them, but he formally announces that the right of the Americans to the Oregon Territory is clear and unquestionable; and it is consequently difficult to understand upon what ground he could justify to the citizens of the United States the right of their Government to negotiate at all upon a matter not doubtful; . . . in short, the whole question is treated by the President as one completely settled—as if all negotiations were concluded, or none had ever been contemplated; . . .

Clarendon seriously doubted that any negotiations could have been taking place if one were to judge the situation on the basis of Polk's inaugural. Concerned lest the government might surrender all British rights in Oregon to the United States, he then asked that the government furnish the House with copies of the negotiations and what had transpired in the past.

Lord Aberdeen's reply was very similar to that made by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. That Aberdeen and Peel had anticipated that the question would be raised by the Opposition and had previously agreed on the substance of their answers seems certain. The Foreign Minister did take this opportunity, however, to issue a warning to both the United States and the Opposition. He answered Lord Clarendon's question by saying that the time might come when it would be necessary to present the Lords with all the materials that pertained to the negotiations, however, he felt that such action would be impolitic and completely unsuitable at the present time as it might tend to injure the state of the negotiations. He contended that British rights in Oregon were the same as they had always been and that Polk's inaugural

58 Ibid., pp. 115-117.
address did not change them. The Foreign Minister then reiterated his own desire to seek a warning to both the United States and the Opposition:

My Lords, I consider war to be the greatest folly, if not the greatest crime, of which a country could be guilty, if lightly entered into, . . . It is the duty and I am sure it is the inclination of Her Majesty's Government to preserve peace; at the same time there are limits which must not be passed, and I say that, without attaching too much weight to questions of national honour—for I think, fortunately for this country, that we need not be very sensitive in these matters—it is not for us, God knows to "seek the bubble reputation at the cannon's mouth," . . . But our honour is a substantial property that we can certainly never neglect and we may owe it to ourselves and to posterity to adopt a course contrary to all our desires, to all our inclinations.

My Lords, from what I have said, your Lordships will perceive an earnest of the spirit of peace which shall pervade this matter, if I continue to conduct the negotiation; . . . Should it be otherwise, I can only say that we possess rights which, in our opinion, are clear and unquestionable; and by the blessings of God, and your support, those rights we are fully prepared to maintain.59

Even though Aberdeen refused to lay before the Lords any correspondence relating to Oregon, he had taken the opportunity to make it clear that he would not lightly begin war over a question of national honor, yet, he would fight if it became necessary. The Government's refusal to bring the papers relating to Oregon before the Parliament ended the discussion of the subject in that body for almost a year.

However, the Oregon question was not forgotten. The Foreign Office continued its attempts to reach a settlement with the United States, but with little success. As the time approached for President Polk to make his first annual address, Lord Aberdeen evidenced his apprehension in a letter to the Prime Minister on November 23, 1845.

Aberdeen referred to several newspapers which had published extracts from an American paper predicting that Polk would ask for an end to the joint occupation of Oregon. He commented that if this is really "the case and the paragraph in question gives us an accurate notion of the President's message, we must prepare for serious consequences." Some of the obvious doubt and concern of the Foreign Minister was allayed through correspondence with Edward Everett and his frequent discussions with the American Minister Louis McLane; the latter led him to believe that Polk would make a strong declaration in his annual message, but that it would not endanger the possibility of a peaceful settlement of the question. Evidence of such reassurances are found in a letter from Peel to Aberdeen in early December: "If Mr. Everett assures you that the Whig Party in the United States would agree to arbitration on the Oregon Question, I think considering the opinions expressed by Mr. Calhoun, even Polk dare not resort to extreme measures." Encouraged by the reassurance of the two Americans, Lord Aberdeen wrote Richard Pakenham on December 3, a very optimistic letter in which he summarized his views of the Oregon situation.

Notwithstanding the unpromising appearance of the present state of the negotiations, I feel satisfied that we are now nearer a settlement than ever. If we press arbitration, they must either accept it, or give us facilities for reopening the direct negotiations. If they do neither, they will be so manifestly in the wrong, that I greatly doubt their receiving the necessary support, even from the hostile portion of the American Publick. I expect a strong declaration from the President in his annual message and even a recommendation to terminate the Treaty. I shall not at all regret this; for as the crisis becomes more imminent, the chances of settlement improve.

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60 Jones, Lord Aberdeen, p. 77.  
61 Ibid., p. 78.  
Aberdeen anticipated that the Americans would now be forced to take proper steps to solve the problem in a fair and peaceful manner or to accept the responsibility for the failure of the negotiations in the eyes of the world. Unfortunately the members of the Cabinet did not possess Aberdeen's optimism. Sir Robert Peel, after reading the text of Polk's message, declared, "We shall not reciprocate blustering with Polk, but shall quietly make an increase in the Naval, Military and Ordnance Estimates." At the same time, however, the London Times came out strongly in favor of compromise; as the Times was considered to be the official mouthpiece for the government, it may be assumed that Peel was in actuality reciprocating bluster with Polk. In an attempt to restrain his colleagues and keep them from acting rashly, Lord Aberdeen wrote the following to Peel on December 25:

I am glad he has brought matters to an issue, and whether the Senate adopt his recommendation or not, I cannot doubt that we shall see a reasonable settlement. I have never been afraid of the Oregon question; and feel confident that in the course of the year we shall see it finally settled, either by arbitration, or by direct negotiation.

At this stage of the negotiations, when it appeared as though a new crisis was emerging between the two nations, Aberdeen seemed to be in complete control of the situation. He not only refused to let the situation become crucial in the Parliament, but he also initiated a program in the press to educate the British public to accept a compromise boundary line. At such a time when Lord Aberdeen seemed so confident that the Oregon question would be peacefully settled near

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64 Jones, Lord Aberdeen, p. 78.
catastrophe struck the Peel government because of internal problems, relating to the high protective tariffs on corn and the deplorable economic conditions in the country.

By late fall of 1845, the Peel government began to show signs of collapsing. Besides having serious international problems to contend with, the Prime Minister now found himself forced to adopt a free trade program inimical to the landed interests that had elected his party to office. The problem centered around the question of either repealing the Corn Laws, which were highly protective tariffs on all varieties of grain, or scaling down the tariffs, thus giving the classes access to an abundant and cheap supply of corn. Though fully aware of the risk that this program entailed for both himself and his party, Peel had no other choice but to back the measure.

Failure of the potato crop in Ireland caused Peel to secretly suggest to his Cabinet on October 31, that they had no other alternative than to repeal the Corn Laws. After a series of lengthy Cabinet meetings in which Peel failed to gain the support of Lord Stanley and the Duke of Buccleuch, he decided it would be better to leave office before factions were formed within his party. On December 5, the Prime Minister presented his resignation to the Queen, who then called upon Lord John Russell to form a government. However, Russell soon discovered that he could not form a government primarily because of the reluctance of Earl Grey to serve in a Cabinet in which Palmerston would hold the seals of the Foreign Office. 65 Under the circumstances Lord John was

65 Arthur Christopher, ed., The Letters of Queen Victoria A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence Between the Years 1837 and 1861 (London, 1908), II, 59. (Hereafter cited as Christopher, Victoria's Letters).
forced to inform the Queen on December 20, that he was unable to serve her. On the same day that Queen Victoria received Russell’s letter she asked Sir Robert Peel to withdraw his resignation. Peel agreed to do this immediately, even though he must have realized that by resuming office he would, in effect, be helping to destroy the party that he had so carefully helped to build.

The fall of Peel’s government was important to the Oregon question for several reasons. First, it convinced the United States that the pacific Peel government was very shaky and might be expected to fall at any moment. A new government in England would undoubtedly include Palmerston as Foreign Minister. Judging by Palmerston’s past record and his anti-American attitude, he would very likely be much more difficult to deal with than the conciliatory Aberdeen; therefore, the United States at the urging of the American Minister McLane in London, began to think in terms of reaching a settlement on the Oregon boundary question before Peel was again ousted from power. This helped to facilitate a speedier settlement of the question. Charles Greville believed that one of the reasons that Aberdeen was so anxious to support the repeal of the Corn Laws and help force their passage through the Parliament was because, “his most earnest desire is to get over the Oregon affair as well as he can, and he knows that nothing will have so great an effect in America, nothing tend so materially to prevalence of pacific counsels, as an announcement that the corn laws are going to be repealed.”

The fall of Peel’s government and his return to office convinced

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67 Ibid.
Russell that he must now take a personal hand in helping to formulate the foreign policy of the Opposition. He realized that Palmerston, because of his vicious attacks on the Foreign Office and Lord Aberdeen, had given people at home and abroad the impression that the Whigs were a war party. Because he had learned this and because he believed that he would soon have another chance to form a government, Russell tried to make amends, by speaking more favorably of the Oregon dispute, of President Polk and of the United States in general. The London Spectator was quick to notice this dramatic change of position by Lord Russell, when they commented editorially on a speech he made on January 17, 1846. In making the speech, Lord Russell constantly referred to the necessity of Great Britain's maintaining peace with all nations and emphasized the need for a successful conclusion of the Oregon question. The Spectator made the following remarks concerning the speech:

One point on which he bestowed some pains is remarkable. He proposed the toast or sentiment of 'Peace with all nations,' and made a little lecture at Ministers on the necessity of bringing the Oregon negotiations with the United States to a peaceful issue. Can the man, you ask, who speaks in this way, seriously have meant to intrust the Foreign Office to Lord Palmerston? Why do you not see that that appointment is the very cause of the lecture? Lord John is doing his best to keep the war-like tendencies of his friend's method of diplomacy out of sight.68

Such was the political situation in Great Britain at the beginning of the year in which the Oregon question was solved. Peel had returned to office the head of a broken party, a party bent on having revenge because it felt that it had been betrayed by its leader who no longer stood for protection. Lord Aberdeen, even though he was very anxious

to settle the Oregon question, was hindered in doing so because he believed, "that his government could not concede what previous British governments had again and again refused." The Opposition, even though Lord Russell showed some sign of easing the pressure on the Foreign Office, still posed as a threat. Palmerston still attacked the Tories with relentless abandon that seemed to be increasing rather than decreasing. Much can be said for the political abilities of Lord Aberdeen, for within the next few months he was able to convince not only the Opposition, but Parliament and the people of England that an Oregon settlement based on the $49^0$ parallel should be highly acceptable to Great Britain and would not in any way infringe upon Britain's honor or prestige.

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Lord Aberdeen, who was actively engaged in a program to educate the British public and Parliament early in the year of 1846, used the news media of England in an attempt to influence the public to adopt a more conciliatory attitude in regard to the Oregon dispute. "His specific task," according to Professor Graebner, "was to convince them that British claims to Oregon were imperfect, that Oregon was not worth a dispute with the United States, that the British fur trade was dying, that the Columbia offered little security for heavy commerce, and that the United States had reasonable claims to good harbors on the Pacific." In attempting to educate the masses with his propaganda, Aberdeen was subject to a good deal of pressure from many Englishmen who were consistently anti-American. Among this group was Viscount Palmerston, who greatly exaggerated everything that he felt might be considered concession. Another important group that hotly contested Aberdeen's claims that Oregon was worthless and not worth fighting for, was those who had a vested interest in the Hudson's Bay Company. Fortunately for Lord Aberdeen's pacific policies, Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1845 ordered that the headquarters of the Company be moved from

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Fort Vancouver to Fort Victoria because of the aggressive character of many of the American settlers in the Willamette Valley. This move, seemingly indicating that the Company no longer had vital interests in the area, made it easier for Aberdeen to convince Peel and the Cabinet that Great Britain could now give up the Columbia River. Fur reserves were nearly depleted in the Columbia Valley; therefore, the Company no longer needed the support of the British government to maintain its position in the territory. Even though the Hudson's Bay Company had supported the American provisional government in Oregon, and was beginning to feel the pressure of the American settlers, the Company was not forced out of the Columbia Valley by the Americans; rather it deemed it wise to withdraw before serious friction developed. As late as 1846, there were only eight American settlers north of the Columbia River, but it was anticipated that within a short time many more would be moving into the area.

Prior to the time when the Company moved its headquarters to Fort Victoria, the British had practically abandoned their claims to the land between the 42° parallel and the Columbia River. This meant that the only land area actually in dispute in 1846 was the quadrangle of land between the Columbia River and the 49° parallel, as the Polk administration had previously offered to accept the 49° parallel as the boundary line in July of 1845. According to Aberdeen's calculations in 1846 it was time to launch an all out campaign to secure a compromise

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settlement on the 40° parallel. Another important factor that had to be
taken into consideration by the Foreign Minister in his handling of
the negotiations was the fact that even though the Peel government had
returned to power on December 20, the government's tenure of office was
subject to the whims of the Opposition party. If Aberdeen were to suc­
cessfully conclude the Oregon negotiations, he would have to do so before
the Whigs withdrew their support; it was apparent that such support might
quickly be withdrawn as soon as the Parliament had passed the repeal of
the Corn Laws.

Time was of the essence, yet Aberdeen could not openly adopt the
position of compromise on the 40° parallel because of Palmerston and
others who refused to approve what they had previously branded as capi­
tulation. However, not all members of the Whig party were opposed to
concession; as early as April 26, 1845, Aberdeen discovered a strong
supporter of his policies in the ranks of the Opposition. On that date,
Nassau W. Senior, a high ranking Whig, who was considered to be a good
economist and free trader wrote a lengthy editorial in the London Exam­
iner. Senior contended that the Oregon Country was worthless, that
neither country had an ironclad claim to the territory, and that the
only fair thing to do would be to divide the territory along the 40°
parallel:

All balancing of positive advantages to be obtained by the one
nation or by the other on a partition is mere childishness.
The interruption of confidence for a single week costs more than
the whole country is worth. A mere armament... would cost
more than a thousand times its value. ... Whatever be Lord
Aberdeen's policy, the opposition will we trust, not add to its
difficulties.73

In later editorials Senior was often assisted by the previous American Minister in England, Edward Everett. Lord Aberdeen also gave behind-the-scenes directions and advice to Senior, but because of the unusual circumstances he could not openly play an active part in the proceedings. During the next six months Senior wrote many blistering articles deriding the Opposition party for its behavior, while at the same time he strongly supported Aberdeen's pacific program. While Lord Aberdeen was delighted with such support, the Opposition took the opposite view and quickly accused Senior of being disloyal to the interests of his party. They also accused him of having special economic interests in America, but Senior quickly denied this allegation and proved it to be untrue. That Senior was very unpopular with his own party was well known; the reasons were patently obvious in articles that he wrote during the summer and fall of 1845. On August 27, he wrote the following to the editor of the Edinburgh Review in defense of a previous article he had written.

I believe a war with America would produce a war with France, and that commercial ruin, national bankruptcy and revolution might be the consequences. I believe that a war with America would produce worse consequences than pestilence or famine. . . . The Whig party seemed to me to be ready to sacrifice peace to the wish to embarrass their opponents, and the whole country seemed so totally to misunderstand the case that I feared they would entertain prejudices and advance pretensions from which there would be no receding.\(^7\)

An Opposition . . . wrote Senior on October 30, which opposes indiscriminately is generally wrong. The Tories did this most wickedly. . . . I hope we shall behave better in future; but I own that my principal fears for the peace of the world arise from my fears of the misconduct of the French, American, and English Oppositions. The three governments will behave well if they are allowed.\(^8\)

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 49. \(^8\)Ibid., p. 43.
Small wonder that Senior endeared himself to Aberdeen. The only problem was that during the period when Senior did most of his writing he was like a voice in the darkness; for it was during this period that anti-American feeling was very high in Great Britain and few people were willing to accept the philosophy of compromise.

Realizing that Aberdeen feared attacks from the Opposition, Edward Everett wrote Lord John Russell on December 28, asking him to grant immunity to the Conservative government so they could make the necessary concessions to settle the Oregon dispute. Everett said the government would not be able to effect a settlement unless the Opposition supported them:

Whether your ministers will accept it is a question for themselves; but their course will no doubt in a great degree depend upon yours. If you choose to rally the public opinion of England against this basis of compromise, it will not be easy for Sir R. Peel and Lord Aberdeen to agree to it. . . . whether you will encourage and stimulate the government to plunge into a war, for the sake of adhering to the worst traditions of Lord Liverpool and Lord Castlereagh.76

Lord John was impressed by Everett's letter, probably because he realized that he was going to have to change his criticisms of the government in preparation for the day when he would again be called upon to form his own ministry. However, Viscount Palmerston was not impressed with such appeals, for he continued making anti-American and anti-French speeches as was his custom, using the Manchester Chronicle as his sounding board. Eventually though, Palmerston came to realize that he would never be considered as a suitable prospect to hold the seals of the Foreign Office again unless he did something to recreate a better image

of himself. By February of 1816 even Palmerston had ceased his attacks on the government's Oregon policy.

On January 3, 1816, Lord Aberdeen scored a great triumph when the London Times, England's most respected and widely read newspaper, completely reversed its previously uncompromising attitude and came out strongly for compromise and conciliation, a reversal which helped sway public opinion to Aberdeen's way of thinking. The Times proposed a settlement that was basically the same as the draft treaty that Aberdeen sent to the United States five months later:

That there are men in American who long for war with Great Britain is, we fear, no less true than that there are men in this country to whom war with the United States would be by no means unwelcome. But in both countries the real strength of public opinion is arrayed against a belligerent policy. The relations of commerce—the affections of kindred—identity of origin, of language, and laws—... and the common deference to the same principles of moral action—bind the two nations together by ties which it would be atrocious to sever by the sword. We are two people, but we are one family. We have fought, but we have reconciled.  

This editorial, which was well received by the public, represents a turning point in the British attitude on the Oregon question. From this time forward, Lord Aberdeen received a great deal less criticism and a good deal more support, not only from his own party but the Opposition as well. Many Americans, including McLane and Everett, correctly interpreted the editorial in the Times as being a reflection of the government's views and this tended to ease the tensions between the two countries.

When Parliament opened on January 23, 1816, it soon became apparent

that the Conservative party had not forgiven the Prime Minister for his support of the legislation to repeal the Corn Laws. The Protectionists refused to admit that the emergency in Ireland warranted even a temporary suspension of the Corn Laws, let alone their complete repeal. There was some question as to the length of time it would take for the government to fall, but there was no doubt that its days were numbered. Disraeli stated with clarity the situation when he commented upon Peel's return to office: "The field was lost," he said, "but at any rate there should be retribution, . . . ."78 During the opening speeches of the new session of Parliament it first appeared as though Peel would not be attacked; after the usual formalities were taken care of Lord George Bentinck and Disraeli commenced to attack the Prime Minister. The former stated that he kept "horses in three countries, and they [supporters of the Corn Law repeal] tell me I shall save £1,500 a year by free trade. I don't care for that; what I cannot bear is being sold."79 The inference was quite clear: Peel had sold out; he had betrayed his party; no matter what the cost might be, the Prime Minister must pay it. Even though Bentinck played an important part in the harassment of the government, the real leader of the rebellion was Benjamin Disraeli, a man who had openly rebelled against the Prime Minister for not having been included in the Cabinet of 1841.80 According to his most definitive biographer, "Disraeli no doubt realized that, with all its apparent

78Tilby, Lord John Russell, p. 63.


80Morwenny, Disraeli, II, 118-119. Based on letters between Peel and Disraeli on Sept. 5 and 7, 1841.
strength, the Peel Ministry was a house built upon sand. At all events, while it stood his path was barred, and he now determined to advance to the assault upon it alone, to strike openly and persistently, . . . and having determined to strike, he characteristically chose to strike at the highest, at the Prime Minister himself." The activities and attacks of Disraeli during the next six months were a very important factor in stirring up the Conservative party and causing them to help turn Peel out of office in June. Even though things looked rather dark and bleak for the Peel Ministry because of these attacks, there was one bright spot. Lord John Russell, in trying to improve the reputation of his party, stopped attacking the government's Oregon policy. Evidence of his change of attitude is found in the early debates on January 23, when he publicly rebuked Pakenham for rejecting the American offer of the previous July. "I confess," Lord John told the House, "I think that was a hasty proceeding upon the part of the Representative of Her Majesty." Such a statement by the leader of the Opposition could mean only one thing, he was publicly announcing that there may have been or might even be, a reasonable settlement made using the 49° parallel as the boundary line. This complete volte-face on the part of the Opposition leader proved very encouraging to Lord Aberdeen.

Surprisingly, the Oregon question was only mentioned twice during the first month that the Parliament was in session (though both Houses in the United States hotly debated the possibilities of ending joint occupation, which the President had asked be ended in his annual message

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81 Ibid., p. 305.
82 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (London, 1846), LXXXIII, 152.
the preceding December). On January 29, Lord Brougham asked Lord Aberdeen if he had heard of or seen any of the globes being made in England that had the Oregon boundary placed on them "according to the American doctrine?" Aberdeen replied in the negative, claiming that he had no knowledge of any such globes being made in the country. It was finally determined that a local globe maker, in filling an order for a globe for Edward Everett when he had been minister in London, out of courtesy placed the boundary along the 54° 40' parallel. When the question had been clarified, the House passed it off without a second thought and many of the members felt that the whole episode was quite humorous. It is doubtful that Lord Aberdeen, who was quite sensitive about questions relating to Oregon, appreciated the humor of the situation.

American congressional debates over Oregon during the month of January made it appear as though a solution to the problem would not be possible unless Great Britain was prepared to make large concessions to comply with the extreme American demands; therefore, Lord Aberdeen was pleased to learn from American Minister McLane late in February that while, "the President himself would accept nothing less than the whole of Oregon, he would, should Great Britain offer the forty-ninth parallel as a boundary, refer the proposition to the Senate for its advice." McLane had been authorized by Secretary of State James Buchanan to pass this information on to Aberdeen in an informal manner. Buchanan also wrote McLane that it was quite likely that the Congress would give notice to end the joint occupation; therefore, if the British had a

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83 Ibid., p. 341
84 McCormack, James K. Polk, p. 584.
proposition they wished to make, they should make it immediately. "They have not an hour to lose if they desire a peaceful termination of this controversy. It is manifest, that the British Government should at once present their ultimatum." Secretary Buchanan, wanting to be sure that there was no misunderstanding on the other side of the Atlantic, in regard to the President's new position, wrote McLane on February 26, and assured him that any British proposal offering the 49° parallel as a boundary would in all probability be acceptable as "Polk was ready to retreat by throwing the burden of the decision upon the Senate."86

Lord Aberdeen, in possession of this pertinent information, was able to view the Oregon dispute in a much more carefree manner than his colleagues in the Parliament were able to do. Aberdeen had the virtual assurance of the American government that a compromise on the 49° parallel would be perfectly acceptable. As if this were not enough, it is now known that early in February, Russell informed Aberdeen that he felt Britain could give up the Columbia River. While there are no records available of the exchange between the Opposition leader and the Foreign Minister on this subject, it is apparent from the contents of a letter written by Russell to Palmerston on February 3: "My opinion upon the whole is that we may well and with due regard to our own interests give up the Columbia river, and I have let Aberdeen know privately that he will have no opposition from me on that ground."87 Russell adopted a course which he felt would be most prudent for the Whigs to

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85 Reeves, American Diplomacy, p. 260.
86 Bemis, Am. Secretaries of State, V, 261.
follow; he undoubtedly hoped that Palmerston would also pursue the same
course. The desired results were obtained, for by early spring even
Palmerston had fallen into line publicly on Aberdeen's foreign policy.

In late February, Lord Aberdeen decided to adopt a sterner policy
in regard to Oregon, feeling as he did that as the crisis became more
critical the chances of a settlement became more imminent. He led Louis
McLane to believe that Great Britain was preparing her naval strength
for a possible war with the United States. It had become common know­
ledge in England that the navy was outfitting a large number of ships.
When the opportunity presented itself during an interview with Lord
Aberdeen, the American Minister inquired as to the purpose of the ex­
tensive military preparations. Aberdeen explained that as long as the
Oregon negotiations were deadlocked and the President continued to dis­
courage any new proposition on the basis of compromise he had not opposed
measures for the defense of Canada or for possible offensive operations.
When McLane reported this to his own government he said that he under­
stood from Lord Aberdeen that the measures would include, "the immediate
equipment of thirty sail of the line, besides steamers and other vessels
of war."88 The dispatch created quite a stir in Polk's Cabinet; it
made the United States recognize the possibility of soon fighting a war
with not only Mexico but also Great Britain.

An incident which occurred in February also made it easier for
Lord Aberdeen to offer the h9° parallel as a compromise line; this was
the return of Lt. William Peel, the younger brother of the Prime Minis­
ter, from the Oregon territory. Lt. Peel had been sent to Oregon by

88Pratt, U. S. Foreign Policy, p. 215.
the government to ascertain the true state of affairs in the territory. His report emphasized the growing influence of the Americans in political matters and stressed the feeling of helplessness on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company to prevent the Americans from making further advances in the territory. According to one writer, "With this knowledge in their possession, the British government was politically in a position to recede from the principles of Canning's boundary without loss of parliamentary or popular support." It was apparent that the United States was too firmly entrenched in the Oregon territory to relinquish any land south of the 49° parallel. Aberdeen now had the evidence he needed to prove to any skeptics who might still oppose concession that failure to concede would of necessity lead to war. That there were many who believed that the tense situation could easily lead to war is shown by the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1846. War appeared so likely in the territory that the Company sent an agent to San Francisco and the Sandwich Islands in March of 1846 to make arrangements for obtaining supplies for their posts in the event that the Americans seized their farm lands. It was only natural that the Company, because of its close proximity to the Americans in Oregon and not being aware of the secret assurances that each government was giving the other, should be most anxious to take precautionary measures to safeguard its interests.

Public indignation in England once more rose to great heights during the month of March because of the Oregon dispute. Members of

90 Bancroft, History of Oregon, XXIX, 573.
the Parliament found it impossible to accept Aberdeen's assurances that the negotiations were going well. This attitude is easily understandable, however, as the only source of information they had access to were American newspapers; such papers were not always too reliable as they tended to overemphasize the American claims and belittle the British claims. The Earl of Clarendon, a close personal friend of the Foreign Minister, though a member of the Opposition, had been asked by Aberdeen to inquire in the Lords as to the state of the negotiations; Aberdeen wanted the opportunity to speak on the Oregon situation and reassure the Parliament that all was going well.91 Thus, on March 17, Clarendon, speaking in the House of Lords, asked Aberdeen to place before the Parliament the correspondence relative to the Oregon question. In playing his part perfectly, he reminded Aberdeen that the subject of Oregon had only been discussed twice during the session. Clarendon felt that the Americans were misconstruing this apparent lack of discussion and bluster on the part of the Parliament. Such an impression should not be allowed to go unchallenged:

"We cannot disguise from ourselves that the two countries appear to be gradually, but involuntarily, drifting towards war, I think, therefore, that the time is come when my noble Friend may, without indiscretion, be asked to lay upon your Lordships' Table such correspondence, . . . as it may not be for the public interest to withhold."

Unfortunately, Lord Aberdeen was in no position to state publicly that President Polk, through his minister in London, had virtually assured him that a compromise based on the 49° parallel would be referred to


92Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (London, 1816), LXXXIV, 1112, 1113, 1114.
the Senate, where in all probability it would be approved. Polk was already subject to a great deal of criticism at home from the men who were becoming suspicious of his intentions; therefore, in order not to offend Polk and cause him to reverse his position the Foreign Minister answered Clarendon's question in the same manner that the House had heard so many times before. He felt that he must withhold a large portion of the correspondence between himself and Pakenham because making such correspondence public could have serious consequences and endanger the negotiations. If the Lords desired copies of American newspapers that discussed the issue, he would be glad to produce them, even though, in his opinion, they did not present a true picture of the present state of the negotiations. Lord Aberdeen concluded his part of the debate by presenting a rather optimistic summary of the situation and this, of course, was the reason he had asked Clarendon to open the discussion:

I cannot bring myself to believe that any reasonable doubt can remain of our being able to bring this matter to a satisfactory termination. I have no doubt of the sincere desire of both Governments to arrive at this result; and I trust that my noble Friend will not think me guilty of any uncourteous conduct if I decline to inform him of the steps, which, in the present juncture of affairs, Her Majesty's Government may think proper to take . . . no effort will be spared, consistently with national honour, to bring this question to an early and peaceful termination.93

No other discussion followed Aberdeen's speech, except for a short statement by Lord Ashburton who indicated that he concurred completely with the Foreign Minister. Once again, the Parliament, even though the situation looked very bad to many of the members, was willing to take

93Ibid., pp. 1117-1118.
Aberdeen's word for it that everything was under control and that a solution to the problem would soon be forthcoming.

On the same day that Aberdeen was asked to present information in the Lords, Peel was bitterly attacked in the Commons by Disraeli for changing his position on protectionism. During the last few months of Peel's tenure of office, Disraeli seldom failed to attack the Prime Minister when the opportunity presented itself; he did not want Parliament to forget what Peel had done and this day was no exception. Disraeli first reviewed Peel's great career as a protectionist, exemplified him as the great leader and speaker of his party, a leader who had now changed his position and in so doing had betrayed his party. He claimed that Peel had forgotten his obligations when he began to work for the repeal of the Corn Laws. "... For myself, I care not what may be the result. Dissolve, if you please, the Parliament you have betrayed, and appeal to the people, who, I believe, mistrust you. For me there remains this at least—the opportunity of expressing thus publicly my belief that a Conservative Government is an Organised Hypocrisy."9

Disraeli's comment about dissolving the Parliament was made because it was common knowledge that many of Peel's supporters were urging him to let the people decide. The Prime Minister steadfastly refused to take his case to the people even though he must have known that he had a good chance of succeeding if he were to do this.

Three days later Mr. Borthwick asked the Prime Minister to present the correspondence relative to the Oregon question before the Commons. Borthwick believed that the absence of bluster and bravado in Great

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9Ibid., LXXXIII, 1022.
Britain was being interpreted in the United States as being an indication of timidity and fear in regard to Oregon. He felt that England should publicly express the feeling that she would go to war if necessary to protect her interests in North America. Sir Robert answered Borthwick by once again explaining to the members that the negotiations were progressing in a satisfactory manner and that he did not believe that any misconstruction had been placed on British comments by the Americans. "I do not think," he claimed, "that there would be any public advantage, in the present state of the differences existing between this country and the United States as to the Oregon territory, in making any communication to this House; and it is not the intention of Her Majesty's Government to make any such communication." Lord John Russell, in keeping with his new policy, offered support to the cause:

I wish to state, so far as I am concerned, I have no wish to ask for any Papers until the right hon. Gentleman can state that the negotiations have reached such a point, . . ., as to induce him to think that the time is arrived when the Papers relating to those negotiations should be laid before the House. If the right hon. Gentleman withholds these Papers, I can only say that I shall not press nor ask for them until the whole negotiations shall have been completed and until then I shall give no opinion on the subject. The inability of Lord John Russell to form a government in December of 1845, cannot be overemphasized for he not only abstained from criticizing the government's foreign policy in Oregon but also saw to it that none of his followers, including Palmerston, did either. Whenever the discussion in Parliament concerned foreign policy Palmerston sat as though he were a mute. The change was so obvious that the London Times

95 Ibid., LXXXIV, 1278.
96 Ibid., p. 1279.
commented upon it shortly after the Peel government had resigned:

"... The lesson of last December was not lost upon so acute a statesman as Lord Palmerston. He perceived as quickly as his opponents, that a Minister whose accession to power is viewed with consternation, distrust, and hostility by every Cabinet in the world, was ipso-facto disqualified from maintaining those amicable relations with other States which he must desire to cultivate, and from exercising that influence which he ought to possess..."

The very instability of the Peel government made Lord Aberdeen’s task easier in Oregon, as both Russell and Palmerston were looking forward to the time when they could withdraw their support from the Conservative government and calmly take over the reins of the government themselves.

As the American Congress continued to debate the termination of joint-occupation during the month of March, British politicians lost interest in the Oregon question and became concerned with two acts of legislation that the Tory government was trying to push through the Parliament: the famous Corn Law repeal and the Irish Coercion Bill. The latter bill had been presented by the Peel government in an attempt to curb agrarian crime in Ireland. The Irish, who deeply resented the British absentee landlord system and the poverty that they were forced to accept and live with, had resorted to a savage code of reprisals against the landowners in their country. Theft, looting, intimidation and even murder were used by the peasants to protect their interests. The British government could not tolerate such a wave of crime, so the Prime Minister asked that a Coercion Act be passed to empower the Irish government to appoint additional police magistrates at local expense.

When the Coercion Act was first introduced the government did not

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anticipate a great deal of opposition except from O'Connell and his Irish supporters, who would naturally oppose such legislation. In early March the Coercion Act passed through the Lords by a healthy margin, where it had received support from both Whigs and Protectionists. The bill had its first reading in the House of Commons on March 30, where it soon became apparent that the government might have a great deal more difficulty in securing its passage. Disraeli regarded the Coercion Act as a weapon to turn the government out of office. He knew that the Irish would naturally oppose the bill with every means available to them; he also knew that many of the legislators would be adverse to supporting any type of repressive measures and even though the Whigs had supported the bill in the Lords, he believed that they might be persuaded to reverse their position and renounce their support to help overthrow the government. Obstructionist tactics succeeded so well that the bill did not have its second reading until June 25. Charles Greville wrote a prophetic observation in his diary on March 29, when he accurately summarized the position of the government.

At present, ... Peel holds the office for the sole purpose of carrying the [repeal of the Corn] Bill. The Whigs are guarding him, while he is doing this work, ready to turn against him the moment he has done it, and then, this great contest over, the Protectionists will either join the Whigs in their first onset, or leave him to his fate. They do not care what happens so long as they can break up this Government; ... Revenge is their sole object.

Meanwhile, as the Parliament became more enmeshed in the delaying tactics of the Irish faction, the United States Congress came closer to reaching an agreement on the end of joint occupation. British Minister

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Pakenham wrote Lord Aberdeen, on the same day that the Coercion Act was introduced in the Commons, that during the course of the Congressional debates one thing had become apparent:

... It seems to have become a received opinion among even the most moderate members of the Senate, that the claims of the United States extend fully to the parallel of 49°, which they consider ought to be insisted on as the basis of any arrangement.

So certain is this, that the advocates of a peaceful settlement of the question are now universally designated as 49° men, in contradistinction of those who go for the whole of Oregon even at the risk of war, and are called 54° 40' men.\(^{99}\)

Pakenham's observations were quite sound. Early in April it had become increasingly clear that the Senate would approve a compromise based upon the 49° parallel: the majority wanted nothing more and would accept nothing less. A poem that appeared early in the month in the New York Herald aptly expressed what it felt was the general feeling of the Senate in regard to Oregon:

\begin{verbatim}
This is the line that we define,
The line for Oregon;
And if this basis you decline,
We go the "whole or none,"
We go the "whole or none," Lord John,
Up to the Russian line.
Then if your wise, you'll "compromise"
On number forty nine.\(^{100}\)
\end{verbatim}

For all practical purposes the governments were very close to being in agreement on the Oregon question from February on. Outwardly the situation looked very bad to the public and to the members of the legislative branches of both countries, but Aberdeen had had constant reassurances from McLane that a British proposal based on the 49°

\(^{99}\)Williams, American Diplomacy, p. 199.

\(^{100}\)Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 136.
parallel would be accepted by the Senate, and the American Minister also reassured his own government that the British would soon make such an offer. On April 3, McLane wrote Buchanan and informed him that he felt the British government's desire to gain time stemmed in part "from a desire to prepare the public in various ways for a basis of partition which the Ministers have made up their minds to offer. . . ."101 The major problem in both countries now seemed to be the task of tearing down the artificial fences of national prestige and honor that each country had built up early in the negotiations.

The joint resolution passed both houses of the United States Congress on April 23 proclaiming that the President was authorized at his discretion to give notice to Great Britain that the Convention of 1827 (joint occupation) would end one year from the date he notified the British government of its termination. Included in the preamble of the announcement was a phrase stating the hope that "... the attention of the governments of the two countries may be more earnestly directed to the adoption of all proper measures for a speedy and amicable adjustment of the differences and disputes in regard to the said territory."102 Polk personally objected to the preamble, which he felt had been watered down too much, but this did not halt the inevitable. On April 27, Buchanan forwarded the resolution to Louis McLane, who was to notify the British government. McLane was instructed to emphasize that the resolution did not mean an end of the negotiations, as the United States

102George Minot, Statutes at Large and Treaties of the United States of America (Boston, 1851), ix, 109.
would consider any suitable proposal Great Britain might wish to make. When Lord Aberdeen was officially notified through the American Minister that the treaty had been abrogated, he immediately drew up a draft, in treaty form to send to the United States. He had refrained from making such an offer at an earlier date as he wanted to wait until the Congress had finished their debates so he would know exactly how the question stood. On May 18, the Foreign Minister sent the draft treaty to Richard Pakenham, who was informed that the wording of the articles might be altered but the substance must be preserved. "Without calling this convention an ultimatum," wrote Aberdeen, "it will, in fact, be so far as you are concerned; although you will, of course, send home for consideration any proposition which may be made at variance with these conditions." 103

On the same day that Lord Aberdeen sent his instructions to Pakenham, the American Minister in London wrote Secretary of State James Buchanan and informed him that Pakenham would soon receive new instructions from Lord Aberdeen to propose the 49° parallel as the compromise line and that he believed the Peel Ministry would resign before the end of June. If the latter were true and the British proposal were not accepted promptly, the new government might not so readily agree to such favorable terms. 104 This letter was of the utmost importance because it definitely influenced the members of Polk's Cabinet and caused them

103 Miller, Treaties, p. 79.

to advise the President to send the treaty to the Senate. The vision of Palmerston returning to the Foreign Office did not appeal to those in America who seriously desired a peaceful settlement of the Oregon question.

The members of Parliament, as was Aberdeen's custom, were not informed by their government that notice had been given by the United States to end the joint occupation. On May 29, Mr. Hume inquired of the Prime Minister in the Commons, if it were true, as the Americans claimed, that the President had been authorized to abrogate the convention? Peel replied in the affirmative, stating that the notice had been given "... with the view of leading to an amicable adjustment of the differences and disputes in respect to this territory." Peel failed to mention, however, that Lord Aberdeen had already sent a proposed draft treaty to the United States offering the 49° parallel as a compromise boundary line. Once again, the Parliament was left in the dark as to the true state of affairs in Oregon.

On June 3, McLane's letter outlining the new British proposal was presented to the President by Secretary Buchanan. Polk felt certain that the draft was unsatisfactory and must certainly be rejected; he was particularly opposed to the clause that guaranteed free navigation of the Columbia River to the Hudson's Bay Company. Polk's thoughts about the treaty are clearly recorded in his diary, on the same night he wrote, "If I reject it absolutely and make no other proposition the probable result will be war. If I submit it to the Senate and they should advise its acceptance I shall be bound by their advice yet I should do so

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105 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (London, 1846), LXXXVI, 1424.
reluctantly." 106 After a series of lengthy Cabinet discussions President Polk, on June 10, acting upon the advice of his Cabinet, forwarded the treaty draft to the Senate with the following terse comment:

My opinion and my action on the Oregon question were fully made known to Congress in my annual message of the 2d of December last and the opinions therein expressed remain unchanged.

Should the Senate, by the constitutional majority required for the ratification of treaties, advise the acceptance of this proposition, or advise it with such modifications as they may upon full deliberation deem proper, I shall conform my action to their advice. Should the Senate, however, decline by such constitutional majority to give such advice or to express an opinion on the subject, I shall consider it my duty to reject the offer. 107

Polk refused to take a definite stand, either for or against the draft; he simply passed it on to the Senate.

The Senate wasted little time in debating the merits of Aberdeen's draft treaty. On the second day after Polk had sent the treaty to the Senate they "voted to accept the British proposal by a vote of 38-12, two more than the two-thirds vote which Polk had required in his message." 108 In voicing their approval of the treaty the Senate relieved Polk of the responsibility of making the decision:

The treaty was clearly not a party measure. It was in accordance neither with the Democratic platform of 1844 nor with the president's inaugural nor his annual message. The president had declined all responsibility for it. It was the Senate's treaty. Because Polk refused to assume the responsibility of war with Great Britain, for the disruption of his party and for the failure of his administration—and these apparently would have been the results of rejecting the British offer. 109

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107 James D. Richardson, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents (New York, 1897), VI, 2300.
108 Blair and Rives, Appendix to the Congressional Globe, p. 1168.
The Senate vote also reflected the outside factors that entered into the situation. The United States had been involved in a war with Mexico for over a month; it had also become evident that Peel's Ministry might fall at any time, thus making peaceful settlement much more difficult. On June 15, the treaty was formally signed by the representatives of both governments, three days later the Senate officially approved the treaty by a vote of 41-14. On August 5, 1846 the treaty was officially proclaimed by both countries.

As the Oregon dispute was rapidly being solved in the United States during the spring of 1846, the Peel Ministry was just as rapidly losing strength in Great Britain. When the government returned to office after the failure of Russell to form a government in December of the preceding year, the Prime Minister had undertaken as his major task the repeal of the Corn Laws. He had anticipated a great deal of difficulty even though he would have the support of the Opposition; however, it was not the Corn Law repeal, but the Irish Coercion Act that finally caused the government to fall. On June 8, Disraeli succeeded in convincing Lord George Bentinck that the only chance they had to turn the government out was to oppose the Coercion Bill. Bentinck remained undecided even as the first speeches were made; he feared that if they tried to put the government out and failed it would place them in a very awkward position. However, a short time later Bentinck, having made his decision, secured the floor and made his speech which was to set the stage for the fall of the government. He reminded Peel that he was now what he had always declared he would never consent to be:

\[110\text{Blair and Rives, Appendix to The Congressional Globe, p. 1169.}\]
"A minister on Sufferance, supported by none but his forty paid janissaries and some seventy other renegades, one half of whom, while supporting him, expressed their shame of doing so." Bentinck claimed that the government had shown that the bill was not urgently needed when they allowed it to drag along for months and had not quickly pushed it through. The result was that the Protectionists would no longer support the bill.

Though he was urged to dissolve the Parliament Peel refused, even though he obviously expected to be defeated because of the Coercion Bill. In a memorandum to the Duke of Wellington on June 21, he explained the position of his government: "Depend upon it, he wrote, that we shall not pass the Irish Bill into law. If we have a small majority on the first division, it will give us no assurance, and, in my opinion, no hope of success. We shall be defeated by concerted delay, if we cannot be defeated by numbers."

On the night of June 25, the Corn Laws were repealed in the House of Lords. On the same night the government was defeated in the Commons when a division was held on the Coercion Bill. Originally the bill had only received major opposition from the Radicals, or Irish, but on the division over seventy Protectionists voted with the Opposition to defeat the government by a margin of seventy-three votes. Peel, though urged to dissolve the Parliament rather than resign, refused and indicated his

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111 Morpenny, Disraeli, I, 793.
displeasure with the party system. "There must be an end," he told
Richard Cobden, "to the juggle of parties, the mere representatives of
traditions, and some man must of necessity rule the state through its
governing class. The Reform Bill decreed it; the passing of the Corn
Bill has realized it." 114

Four days after the defeat of his government, Sir Robert Peel
officially announced his resignation before the House of Commons. He
had turned against the rank and file of his party, as well as the leis­
ured class. His last speech revealed some of the bitterness that he
must have felt:

To have your own way, and to be for five years the Minister
of this country in the House of Commons is quite enough for
any man's strength... and at the same time to be the tool
of a party, that is to say, to adopt the opinions of men who
have not access to your knowledge, and could not profit by it
if they had, who spend their time in eating and drinking,
hunting and shooting, gambling, horse racing, and so forth--
would be an odious servitude, to which I never will submit. 115

Peel left office a bitter and broken man, a man who never forgave what
his party had done to him.

The only bright spot of the day occurred in the House of Lords
when Lord Brougham asked Lord Aberdeen if the reports in the American
papers were true that the Oregon dispute had been settled. Confirming
the American newspaper account, Lord Aberdeen very happily read the
Lords a letter, received only that morning from Pakenham which announced
that the United States government had ratified the treaty. 116 The
Oregon question was now history.

114Monypenny, Disraeli, I, 800.
116Ibid., p. 1037.
CHAPTER VI

THE OREGON CONTROVERSY IN PERSPECTIVE

The eventual settlement of the long standing Oregon controversy proved to be mutually acceptable and advantageous to Great Britain and the United States. Both nations were obviously quite relieved when the dispute was settled in a satisfactory manner, for each government was engrossed in far more serious matters. The United States had become involved in a rather unpopular war with Mexico, while Great Britain was faced with the fall of a government because of the Coercion Act.

Many historians tend to simplify and isolate the more obvious factors that contributed to the eventual settlement of the Oregon dispute. More often than not American historians attribute the settlement to the war with Mexico and the remote possibility that Great Britain might support the Mexican government. While these factors no doubt influenced many Americans, it is unlikely that they represent the only or even principal reason that the Senate so quickly approved Lord Aberdeen's draft treaty without changing a single word. The very fact that the majority of the Oregon supporters settled for the 49° parallel was no doubt a reflection that they felt that this was the greatest concession Great Britain would be able or willing to make. To demand more from the shaky Peel government would have been foolhardy, for it might have led to war. Such a war would have completely disrupted Anglo-American

117 Such authorities as Philip Klein and Harry Allen cite the Mexican War as the main reason for settlement of the Oregon question. Numerous others like Wilbur Jones consider the Mexican War to be but one of several major factors that influenced the settlement.
trade. Considerable emphasis has been placed on the fact that Great Britain exported more of her finished products to the United States than to any other country; in the event of a major war the United States would not only have lost her greatest consumer of raw materials, but would undoubtedly have once again had a major portion of her merchant fleet rotting in port because of a British blockade. American commercial interests were not anxious to have such a situation develop, as they well remembered the plight of American shipping during the earlier Anglo-American wars. This, then, was a major factor in influencing American acceptance of the treaty.

A second factor of equal importance was the impending fall of the Peel government. By the time it had become apparent in the spring of 1846 that the duration of the government was limited to a matter of days, the Oregon negotiations had reached the point where a satisfactory settlement had to be made, or the state of the negotiations would have reverted back to the same unsatisfactory status they were in when Lord Aberdeen had become Foreign Minister. The United States had no desire to enter into negotiations with a man of Palmerston's reputation. Lord Aberdeen himself believed that this was the reason his draft was accepted so quickly:

I entertain no doubt that it was not the apprehension of any embarrassment in consequence of the Mexican War which led to this decision; but that it was entirely owing to the impending change of the administration in this country, and a desire to settle the whole affair with us before our departure.\footnote{Miller, Treaties, p. 81. Quoted from a letter from Aberdeen to Pakenham on June 30, 1846.}
many Americans to peacefully settle the issue before the Peel government fell from power appear to constitute the main American reasons for settling when they did.

The British government was also influenced by several important considerations. The most important single factor to influence the thinking of the government was the desire of both Peel and Aberdeen to restore amicable relations between the United States and Great Britain. It might truly be said that this government was dedicated to peaceful pursuits and would not allow itself to be swayed from these goals even though President Polk and the 54° 40' men had often made such a pacific course very difficult to follow. There is no doubt that Peel's Ministry was also influenced by other immediate problems; among these were the acute food shortages in Ireland and the need for American grain to help make the newly adopted free trade policies work. Another factor of importance was the vulnerable position of Canada in the event of a rupture with the United States over Oregon. "War with the United States would endanger not only Oregon, but Canada, which would inevitably become the main object of attack, and the stakes were not worth such a major risk."119 The withdrawal of the Hudson's Bay Company from the Columbia Valley in 1845, an incident that undoubtedly reflected government policy, reflects the British desire to maintain peaceful relations with the United States. While the other considerations were important, they were still ends to a goal, and that goal was peace with the United States.

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Serious study of the Oregon dispute leads one to believe that the entire problem stemmed from a question of national prestige and honor. Both countries were willing to compromise on a settlement, but each government found itself in such a position that the acceptance of the 49° parallel as boundary was made very difficult because it would be labeled "capitulation" or "compromise" by those in opposition. Lord Aberdeen was restrained in his negotiations not only by Palmerston and the Opposition, but by the basic policy that Canning had established, which was a policy to refuse to accept anything less than all of the land north of the Columbia River. It required a great deal of education and manipulation on his part before Aberdeen was able to sell his countrymen on the idea that the Canning boundary was no longer practical. The large influx of Americans into the Oregon territory made it necessary for the British to modify their claims. Even though Aberdeen realized this, it was difficult for him to convince others that compromise would not represent a capitulation of the national honor of Great Britain and in all probability would prevent a war.

The American President, Polk, was faced with a similar situation because of national honor. The Democratic Party had won the election on the basis of its promises to reannex Texas and re-occupy the whole of Oregon. It could not have been easy for Polk to risk the displeasure of his party and much of the nation when he secretly offered the 49° parallel as a compromise boundary in July of 1845, even though the same offer had been made three times previously by past American governments. ¹²⁰

¹²⁰Previous American governments had offered to compromise on the 49° parallel in 1818, 1824, and in 1826.
While neither government considered the Oregon territory to be of particular value, each had contributed to a situation wherein a retreat from its previous position would inevitably be considered a loss of face or a sacrifice of national honor. This was most unfortunate as it in no way influenced the final decision and nearly brought the two countries to the brink of war.

The Oregon Treaty of 1846 was unique in one respect; both governments were reasonably well satisfied with the treaty. The treaty was well received in Great Britain. Even the new Foreign Minister Palmerston had only kind words: "In every quarter it will be learned with entire satisfaction that the unfortunate differences between this country and the United States have been brought to a termination which, as far as we can at present judge, seems equally favourable to both parties." Queen Victoria took occasion to pay Sir Robert Peel one last compliment, when she informed him that, "the settlement of the Oregon question has given us the greatest satisfaction."

Americans were less satisfied with the treaty. While most Americans considered the solution within the national interest, some did not: The radical Expansionists who continued to cry "Woo" were less than satisfied with the final settlement. This group represented only a small minority of the population and in no way reflected a majority opinion; however, the Expansionists attempted to crucify Polk politically because they felt that he had unnecessarily conceded American lands to Great Britain.

121Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (London, 1846), LXXXVII, 1057.
122Christoper, Victoria's Letters, II, 100.
The Oregon settlers who lived within musket shot of the Hudson's Bay Company accepted the treaty, but they did so with grave reservations. This group did not object so much to the 49° parallel as the division line, as it did to the Hudson's Bay Company being allowed to claim ownership to the land it already possessed south of the 49° parallel. The Oregon Spectator made an interesting comment on the treaty on April 15, 1847, when it was learned in Oregon that the settlement had been made:

England could have expected nothing more. We can say nothing for and much against the document. It can never be popular with the great body of Americans in Oregon. We shall wait anxiously to see how this singular circumstance can be accounted for at home, and how this surprising and unconditional surrender of right will be justified.123

All groups could not be satisfied with the treaty, but those familiar with the territory felt that the United States had gained the advantage because she had received more of the agricultural land, which had the best climate and the greatest potential for future development.

Other nations were impressed with the way that the Americans and British solved their boundary disputes short of war. The French Minister Alphonse Pageat was so impressed with the way the Americans had dealt with the British that he commented on what he considered to be the American luck by reporting the following to his government: "Just to see, Mr. Minister, how events unroll in this country one would say that there is something providential in the success that crowns the enterprises of the young republic, for it seems to act more by instinct of its destiny than by serious reflection of its power."124 Others must

123 Bancroft, History of Oregon, XXIX, 592.
124 George Vern Blue, "France and the Oregon Question," The Oregon Historical Quarterly (1933), XXXIV, 162. Quoted from Pageat's letter to Guizot on June 12, 1846.
also have believed that the United States had made the better bargain, but it should be remembered that even though Great Britain did not receive as much of the good agricultural land, she did receive what she was most interested in and that was what she considered to be the best harbors in the area.

The final settlement of the Oregon dispute represented a great moral and financial victory for the pacific policies of Sir Robert Peel's government. Largely, through the efforts of Lord Aberdeen, a possible Anglo-American war was avoided and relations between the United States and Great Britain once more assumed a more amicable spirit. The ratification of the Oregon Treaty removed the last major boundary obstacle that might seriously endanger the relations of these two nations in future years. The precedent had been firmly established of settling all major disputes between the two powers, not by force, but by negotiation.
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PERIODICALS


