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JOEL R. POINSETT'S SECRET MEXICAN DISPATCH TWENTY

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In the chaotic months after Mexico proclaimed her independence in 1821, President James Monroe sought an accurate evaluation regarding the short and long term stability of that emerging nation, and whether, as well, *de facto* and *de jure* recognition should be accorded the former Spanish colony. Threatened not only by internal discord, but also from invasion by European conservative powers, Mexico maintained a precarious grasp on independence. Reluctant to recognize Mexican sovereignty for fear of alienating Spain, Monroe and his highly skilled Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, watched the ebb and flow of events in the Mexican empire. Adams found the ferment in all the Spanish colonies in America to be more powerful a factor for history than the downfall of the Roman empire.

In 1822, after months of indecision, the United States finally recognized the Mexican government, and also the republics of Peru, Chile, Columbia and Buenos Aires. Aware, as Adams wrote, that the recognition of South American independence was not palatable to European government tastes, the State Department began implementing the new relationships, with special hesitancy in the case of Mexico. Joel R. Poinsett was sent to Mexico as Monroe's special agent in the autumn of 1822 to report on conditions there. His written report predicted the downfall of Emperor Augustín de Iturbide, and described his own apprehensions as to whether the United States ought to recognize as legitimate a Mexican government founded and supported by oppression and violence.

In 1823, Iturbide was deposed and a republic declared, with Guadalupe Victoria as president beginning in 1824. With good reason, Monroe's government continued to be uncertain about the stability of the Mexican nation, and especially the serious threat posed by European nations against her continued independence. The anxiety increased during 1824, and grew to frightening intensity in 1825 as a result of the secret diplomatic correspondence written by Poinsett four months after he was installed as the first American minister to Mexico. On September 24, 1825, Poinsett, from the American legation in Mexico City, sent

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another urgent message in code to Henry Clay, Secretary of State. The plain text read as follows:

yesterday the secretary of state communicated to me the information contained in my dispatch number twenty the circumstances were slightly varied only however as to the date and channel thro which this government had received the intelligence he made on the same day a similar communication to the charge d affaires of his britannic majesti [sic] not being aware that the president had previously shown to that gentleman the letter of their agent in Paris.¹

Poinsett's coded Dispatch Number Twenty, available only in coded form in State Department Mexican Dispatch files for 146 years² revealed a frightening design for subjugating the Mexican republic.

Poinsett, 46 years old at the time of his appointment in March 1825 as the first American Envoy Extraordinary Minister Plenipotentiary to enter Mexico, and midway in a distinguished career of public service, possessed excellent diplomatic credentials for the \$9,000 a year post.³ Born in Charleston, South Carolina, plagued by ill health (his two sisters and brother died of consumption), he searched for a profession in the classics, medicine, military science, and law in the United States, England, and Scotland. Almost one-half of his first 25 years was spent in Europe, Western Asia and South America. Sent by President James Madison as a special agent to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos

¹ "Dispatches from the United States Ministers to Mexico, 1823-1906," National Archives, Microcopy 97, Roll 2, Record Group 59. Hereafter cited as DNA, M97, R2, RG 59. The decoding above by the author agrees substantially with one made by a State Department clerk which is filed near the codetext but not identified. The author gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the Committee on Research, Marquette University; the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society; also, the assistance of Mr. and Mrs. Irving Brant, Mr. Howard Cline, Mr. Mark Eckhoff, Mr. Oliver W. Holmes, Mr. Albert Leisinger Jr., and Mr. John McDonough during the three year search for the diplomatic code used by Poinsett. This code together with others located by the author and employed by the United States between 1776 and 1861 will be published as a reference book next year by G. K. Hall & Co.

² Cf. Ralph E. Weber, "Your Obedient Servant, Joel R. Poinsett." *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, Winter 1970, pp. 185-188.

³ Even the Resolution of the Legislature of the State of Mexico, introduced on July 29, 1829, which called for his return to the United States spoke of his "highly polished and agreeable manners," and "his acquirements and the liveliness of his mind, the suavity of his character and the republicanism which he displays" qualities which made individuals "estimable, in a diplomatic agent" and increased his influence in society. "Resolution of the State of Mexico," copy in DNA, M97, R5, RG 59.

Aires in 1810, he reported over the next four years on the status of the emerging republics in South America. Learning that American merchants were imprisoned in the port of Talcahuano, he even accepted a commission in the Chilean army in 1813 and led the troops which freed the Americans. After service in the South Carolina legislature⁴ and election to the United States Congress in 1821, President James Monroe sent him to Mexico as noted above to determine the strength and stability of the newly recognized empire. Poinsett's book, *Notes on Mexico made in the Autumn of 1822; Accompanied by an Historical Sketch of the Revolution*, published in Philadelphia in 1824 and London, 1825, became a classic account of social and political conditions in Mexico.⁵

His opposition to American recognition of Iturbide's government and his interest in Spanish America continued. Several months before Monroe's famous Message to Congress in 1823, Poinsett reflecting southern anxiety about Cuba's future, offered to enter Havana, "the sickliest and the filthiest place in Christendom" as a secret agent in order to prevent the British from securing possession of Cuba.⁶

One year later, John C. Calhoun told Poinsett of Monroe's willingness to send him as minister to Mexico. In reply, Poinsett wrote Monroe that he would prefer delaying the appointment to December, 1824 if at all possible because of his desire to end the political strife within South Carolina.⁷ However in December, he wrote to his friend, Joseph Hopkinson of Philadelphia, that although the mission to Mexico was the

⁴ On April 25, 1817, President James Monroe asked him to return to South America but Poinsett declined by saying he had not expected to be employed by the federal government in time of peace. However, if the United States would acknowledge the independence of the colonies, he would serve in the field and redeem the pledge given him by Mr. Madison in 1810. Poinsett to James Monroe, Charleston, May 7, 1817. Monroe Papers, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as MP, LC.

⁵ The best sketch of Poinsett's early career was by his friend, Dr. Joseph Johnson of Charleston, South Carolina. The manuscript, which includes some Poinsett letters, is in the Poinsett Collection in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Hereafter cited as PC, PHI.

⁶ Poinsett to Monroe, Charleston, April 6, 1823, MP, LC. He added, "The fate of that Island is so deeply interesting to us of the South, that there is nothing I would not do to prevent the British getting possession of it." Cf. also Poinsett to Monroe, Washington, January [n.d.] 1823, Copy, PC, PHI.

⁷ Poinsett to Monroe, Charleston, July 19, 1824, MP, LC. Establishing an American legation in Mexico proved to be a frustrating experience for Monroe as several rejected the post including Andrew Jackson who declined in March 1823, and Senator Ninian Edwards of Illinois, appointed Envoy, resigned in June 1824 before leaving for Mexico due to a political battle with William Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury.

most important one in the "gift of government" he could not accept the mission for reasons of "feeling and delicacy."⁸ Part of the reason probably was related to William Crawford's interest in the post.

Although Poinsett backed Andrew Jackson instead of John Quincy Adams for the presidency in 1824, he was offered the appointment as Envoy to Mexico by President Adams on March 5, 1825, and with the encouragement of Jackson, accepted it, and won Senate approval on March 8. He preferred a mission to Naples but along with Adams doubted that the Senate and House would approve the mission. Elated over the appointment, he wrote to his friend in Charleston, Dr. Joseph Johnson:

It is so essential, that I should be on the spot as early as possible, that I shall not return to Charleston. I will in a day or two write to you what I wish packed up for my use. All the wine at your house in the first place—Claret & all in boxes, not exceeding much 200 pounds weight—some books of which I will send a list . . .⁹

Secrecy and intrigue surrounded Poinsett soon after his reception as Envoy Extraordinary on June 1, 1825 in Mexico City, and he reported for the first time in code that the British had already won over President Guadalupe Victoria, the Secretaries of State, Don Luis Alaman; Treasury, Don Jose Ignacio Esteva; and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Don Pablo de la Llave. However, he continued, a vast majority of the people and a respectable party in both houses of Congress favored the "strictest union" with the United States and regarded the British with disgust.¹⁰

Several years later, recalling his first days as minister in Mexico, Poinsett wrote with bitterness that the Mexican people could not be compared with the free and civilized nations of nineteenth century America and Europe. In fact, he believed, they began from a point closer to the Age of Charles the fifth and it was a "matter of some doubt whether this Nation had advanced one step in knowledge and civilization from the time of the conquest to the moment of declaring themselves independent." Due to the jealous care of Spain, the Mexican nobility and gentry lived in substantial buildings destitute of convenience and

⁸ Poinsett to Hopkinson, Washington, December 28, 1825 [should be 1824], PC, PHI.

⁹ Poinsett to Johnson, n.d., n.p., PC, PHI.

¹⁰ Poinsett to Clay, Mexico City, June 4, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, GR 59. While Poinsett respected Clay, he did not particularly admire him. A year earlier, Poinsett said that Clay "would have been a great man if his mind had been disciplined and he had not lived among one eyed men, blind men I mean, when a one eyed man is King." Poinsett to Hopkinson [?], February 18, 1824, Washington, PC, PHI.

comfort: their style of living, un hospitable and ostentatious, included unceasing jealousy of each other which prevented social intercourse among the upper classes, the chief charm of life in other countries.

Here every man of distinction considers it beneath his dignity to visit his friends or neighbors, and remained in his own house, where in a large gloomy apartment dimly lighted and miserably furnished he received a few visitors of inferior rank who formed his tertulia [social gathering] of every night. It is not to be wondered at therefore that the Sons of these men equally uneducated with themselves, fled from the gloomy mansions of their fathers to the Theatre, the coffee houses or the gambling table; and this circumstance united to the absence of all excitement to industry, from the preference given by the Council of the Indies to Europeans for all appointments rendered the aristocracy of Mexico an ignorant and immoral race. The same State of Society existed among the higher orders of the clergy and marked their character in the same unfavorable manner. The regular clergy formed from the very dregs of the people, was then and is now disgustingly debauched and ignorant.¹¹

Continuing the long analysis, Poinsett lamented the absence of a free and virtuous peasantry, an absolute necessity for every strong republic; the ignorance of the patient, hardworking, and grossly superstitious Indians;¹² and the waste of money on gambling and ceremonies in the Catholic churches. This dwarfed society, for centuries out of touch with other countries because of Spain's jealous protection, even lagged behind Spain, a country notoriously inferior in moral improvement. But liberal ideas and the enlightenment would speed Mexico's growth to greatness, concluded Poinsett.

Another European country also threatened Mexico, according to the American minister. Loans by British bankers together with costly investments by British mining companies gave Mexico the appearance of prosperity and abundance in 1825 as trade increased, war ships were

¹¹ Poinsett to the Honorable Secretary of State, Mexico City, March 10, 1829, DNA, M97, R5, RG 59. One week earlier, he had addressed his dispatch to Clay: apparently he did not know Martin Van Buren had become Secretary of State. This March 10th letter is Poinsett's *apologia* for his diplomatic activities during the previous four years.

¹² Poinsett believed primary schooling had been severely neglected by the Mexican government; more than in any other part of Spanish America. In Jeffersonian fashion, Poinsett believed education to be not only vital for representative government but also necessary to "inspire them with a decent pride and to induce them to more constant labour and to employ their earnings in rendering their habitations comfortable and in purchasing clothing for themselves and families." *Ibid.*

purchased, troops clothed and pensions promptly paid. The British minister had been officially received the day before Poinsett by President Victoria, and foreign minister George Canning encouraged Victoria's growing hostility towards the United States, wrote Poinsett.¹³

Stepping into this whirlpool of diplomacy, Poinsett posed the question: should he permit ambitious England "the most unfriendly to our prosperity to acquire unbounded influence in a neighboring Republic" or should he oppose views hostile to American interests? He chose the latter course.

With growing regularity, his dispatches in code to Henry Clay revealed his apprehensions as he sought support among the Creoles and Democrats to counter the aristocratic, monarchical and European party. As he actively cautioned the former against revolution, he justified his actions by writing that diplomatic history was "full of instances of the interference of foreign ministers to sustain or to save the Institutions of the Country to which they are accredited"¹⁴ and urged the establishment of a free press to enlighten public opinion and bring about greater participation in elections.

Although the American minister would write in 1829 to Secretary of State, Martin Van Buren, "all intrigue is as foreign from my character, as it is from the generous policy of the Government I represent"¹⁵ and would tell the Mexican people in a pamphlet that the guile and intrigue and concealment which characterized diplomacy in former times "is no longer practiced by civilized Nations,"¹⁶ he employed secret diplomacy and felt compelled to use the code provided by the State Department for reports on his diplomatic and military maneuvers. During the summer of 1825 he reported in code: the possible annexation of Cuba by Mexico;¹⁷ that the United States should work for time since American settlers were moving into lands below the Treaty of 1819 boundary and Mexico might want to relinquish these lands to the United States

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* So much bitterness would develop against Poinsett that his Mexican enemies claimed the cabinet in Washington caused the death of their minister to the United States, Pablo Obregón, and publicly called for the assassination of Poinsett. Obregón committed suicide in the United States in September 1828.

¹⁵ Poinsett to Van Buren, Mexico City, August 7, 1829, DNA, M97, R5, GR 59.

¹⁶ "Answer of the American Minister to the Preamble and Resolution of the Legislature of the State of Mexico of the 26 of August 1829," DNA, M97, R5, RG 59. Cost for printing six hundred copies of the pamphlet was \$20, paid by the State Department. Fifth Auditor Account No. 2480, DNA, Records of the General Accounting Office, RG217.

¹⁷ Poinsett to Clay, Mexico City, June 15, August 21, September 13, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

if these people proved difficult to govern;¹⁸ that the Secretary of State, Alaman, as a director of an English mining company was paid two thousand pounds sterling per year, and the Secretary of the Treasury, Esteva, borrowed money regularly from the English;¹⁹ that Alaman believed Mexico had everything to fear from the ambition of the United States and nothing to hope;²⁰ information about Bolivar's urgent call for a Congress at Panama;²¹ and the details about a commercial treaty between Mexico and the United States.²²

The highly secret code employed by Poinsett had been constructed by American government officials by 1805 and was used increasingly but not exclusively after that year. After the War of 1812, the State Department issued this carefully conceived code to its ministers and continued to utilize it until the 1870's. In fact, this particular code, sometimes referred to as "Mr. Monroe's Cypher," outlived every other official State Department code between 1789 and 1940. While other American codes were used for a period ranging from a few years to approximately 20 years, this one had an official lifetime of more than 60 years.

Similar to those codes used by the American ministers in the XYZ Affair, this code consisted of 1,600 numbers which represented words, syllables and letters of the alphabet. For example, the code number "1385" represented "the." However, the word "the" could also be encoded as "1361" for "t," "1242" for "h," and "501" for "e." With exceptions, the ministers and code clerks used one number for the complete word whenever possible: Poinsett usually followed this practice also.

As noted above, Poinsett's Dispatch Number 20 had been available in State Department files only as follows:

No. 20

Legation of the U. States
Mexico Sept^r 22^d 1825.

The Honble:

Henry Clay
Secretary of State
Washington.

Sir,

I have just received information which I deem important you should be made acquainted with, as early as possible.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 27, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, August 5, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, August 10, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, August 21, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

²² *Ibid.*, September 13, 1825, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

| | | | | | | |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|------|--------|------|
| A | secret | agent | of | this | govern | ment |
| 1501 | 1078 | 1525 | 1576 | 1399 | 1229 | 637 |
| wrote | to | the | secret | ta | ry | etc. |
| 861 | 569 | 1385 | 1078 | 1362 | 949 | |

The plain text reads as follows:

a secret agent of this government wrote to the secretary of state [Alaman] the [design] of France on this country revealed to him as he declares by mr de villele ²³ [sic] they are to prevail upon the king of Spain to renounce his right to Mexico in favor of francisco de paula ²⁴ the youngest of the Spanish miserbons ²⁵ [bourbons]; to send that prince to havanna where a large force is to be collected; to land him at the head of this force on some part of this coast; to endeavour to negotiate with england by first stating that france feels every disposition to follow the example of Great Britain by recognising the independance [sic] of the spanish colonies but that the form of government those states have thought proper to adopt presented a serious obstacle to her taking such a measure; but which might be removed by the establishant ²⁶ [sic] in those countries of limited monarchies the circumstances which induce me to give some degree of credit to this communication arc [sic] that this agent is an old spaniard and wrote to alaman who was known during his residence in europe to have been of to [sic] bourbon faction in this country: the proposal made formerly by france that this prince might be permitted to travel in italy and france in order to visit his relations there which at the time was refused by the king of spain: he was the prince disingnated [sic] by the spaniards who in the plan of iguala ²⁷ : the existence of a faction in this country in favor of the bourbons and because this plan will enable france to operate against the American republics secretly, money alone being required to carry such a

²³ Jean Baptiste Séraphim Joseph, Comte de Villèle, 1773-1854; French premier, 1822-28.

²⁴ Francisco de Paula Antonio de Bourbon, 1794-1865, born in Madrid and brother of Ferdinand VII, became an artist, and member of the Academy of San Fernando at the age of twenty.

²⁵ The legation secretary wrote "135" instead of "1350."

²⁶ The secretary wrote "673" instead of "637."

²⁷ The Plan of Iguala proclaimed by Augustín de Iturbide with the agreement of guerrilla leader Vincente Guerrero on February 24, 1821 provided for: absolute independence for Mexico from Spain with a constitutional monarchy headed by a member of the reigning Spanish family; Roman Catholicism as the only religion; and the right of anyone to hold public office regardless of race. When Iturbide became emperor in 1822, the Plan was ignored.

scheme into execution. From obvious reasons Great Britain will be opposed to a bourbon being place [sic] on the throne of Mexico.

Alaman laid this communication dated seventeen june before the president on the fifteen instant who the next day submitted it the [sic] british charge des Affaires. Nothing has been said to me on the subject by the president or minister although I see the latter dayly [sic]. I was aware of the existence of this communication for some days past but could not discover the natur [sic] of it until this morning.

I have the honor to be, Sir, with great respect Yr. obd. Servt.

J.R. Poinsett ²⁸

The secret arrangement so painstakingly transmitted by Poinsett in code had been discussed by the Comte de Villèle on December 10, 1822 when he made known his offer to bring the Infant and troops to Mexico or Peru or any part of Spanish America if the Spanish government requested such assistance. The *Journal des Débats* on December 13, 1822 even discussed the merits of Villèle's measure. As early as 1820, the British foreign secretary, Robert Castlereagh believed France intended to cooperate secretly with Spain and place a Spanish Bourbon on the Argentine throne by peaceful means. Spanish reluctance and firm resistance by Castlereagh's successor, George Canning, brought forth a pledge from Jules Armand Polignac, French ambassador to England, in October 1823 that France would not act against the Spanish colonies by force. However, Polignac's promise transmitted in the form of a memorandum did not terminate the threat of intervention.²⁹ Villèle still maintained hopes that his favorite project might be inaugurated in 1824 or 1825. In 1825, five weeks before Poinsett's code-text was written, Canning

²⁸ Poinsett probably heard about the secret report from Henry Ward, British chargé d' affaires, who in the beginning had offered kind though condescending protection to Poinsett. Cf. Poinsett to The Honorable Secretary of State, Mexico City, March 10, 1829, DNA, M97, R5, RG 59. Harmony between Ward and Poinsett lessened in late September or early October 1825 when Poinsett assisted in the formation of a grand lodge of Ancient York Masons and Ward believed false reports of toasts supposedly offered by the American legation's secretary, John Mason, against England. Poinsett to Rufus King, Mexico City, October 14, 1825, Copy, DNA, M97, R2, RG 59.

²⁹ Many textbooks on the history of American foreign relations incorrectly maintain that the Polignac Memorandum eliminated the most serious threat of European interference in Spanish America. For example, cf. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, New York, 1969, pp. 186-187; and Alexander DeConde, *A History of American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1971, pp. 138-139.

revealed that Polignac was again hinting at the possibility of the French occupation of Havana. With consummate skill, the British foreign secretary wrote in a confidential letter to the American minister, Rufus King, that there is

such an insensibility to the real state of things in the Colonial World, and such a looseness and precipitancy, such a promptitude to act upon impulse, without weighing possibilities and combining results, that I protest I never feel quite assured that I may not, on rising up in the morning find that a French force has landed at the Havannah, in consequence of some order hastily given, for contingencies ill defined; or of some discretion indiscreetly reposed in the judgment of a local commander. . . . France is swayed so much by the humour of the day, and proceeds in a course of policy so devious and vacillating, that she is really capable of *blundering* into a maritime war, without having seen its danger, much less calculated its consequences.⁸⁰

In the United States, anxiety about French intentions in Spanish America continued through the remainder of 1825 as the American minister to France, James Brown, raised the question, and Rufus King sought a joint remonstrance with Canning who replied that he had said enough: to say more would weaken his position. On February 10, 1826, the French government sent instructions to its minister in St. Petersburg which stated that France would not lend money, arms or ships to Spain to reconquer her provinces, and this dispatch marked the end of any serious French designs for recovering Spanish America.

Thus, the threatened invasion revealed by Poinsett's Dispatch Number Twenty never occurred. However, Poinsett's canny ability for uncovering and reporting European designs on the Mexican republic made him an invaluable minister. Probably no other American envoy sent as many coded dispatches during this era as did Poinsett; 32 pages during the four and one-half years of his mission: his successor, Anthony Butler, sent only five pages during a similar length of time. Dispatch Number Twenty remains a masterful and significant document for revealing the danger of foreign intervention threatening the emerging Mexican nation in 1825, two years after the Polignac Memorandum.

⁸⁰ F. O. American 115/45, George Canning to Rufus King, 7 August 1825, Confidential, as quoted in Harold Temperley, "French Designs on Spanish America in 1820-5." *English Historical Review* XL (January 1925), 49.