

*President Polk's Message to the Senate on the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty, 1846*

*To the Senate of the United States:*

I transmit to the Senate, for their advice with regard to its ratification, "a general treaty of peace, amity, navigation, and commerce between the United States of America and the Republic of New Granada," concluded at Bogota on the 12th December last by Benjamin A. Bidlack, charge d'affaires of the United States, on their part, and by Manuel Maria Mallarino, secretary of state and foreign relations, on the part of that Republic.

It will be perceived by the thirty-fifth article of this treaty that New Granada proposes to guarantee to the Government and citizens of the United States the right of passage across the Isthmus of Panama over the natural roads and over any canal or railroad which may be constructed to unite the two seas, on condition that the United States shall make a similar guaranty to New Granada of the neutrality of this portion of her territory and her sovereignty over the same.

The reasons which caused the insertion of this important stipulation in the treaty will be fully made known to the Senate by the accompanying documents. From these it will appear that our charge d'affaires acted in this particular upon his own responsibility and without instructions. Under such circumstances it became my duty to decide whether I would submit the treaty to the Senate, and after mature consideration I have determined to adopt this course.

The importance of this concession to the commercial and political interests of the United States can not easily be overrated. The route by the Isthmus of Panama is the shortest between the two oceans, and from the information herewith communicated it would seem to be the most practicable for a railroad or canal.

The vast advantages to our commerce which would result from such a communication, not only with the west coast of America, but with Asia and the islands of the Pacific, are too obvious to require any detail. Such a passage would relieve us from a long and dangerous navigation of more than 9,000 miles around Cape Horn and render our communication with our possessions on the northwest coast of America comparatively easy and speedy.

The communication across the Isthmus has attracted the attention of the Government of the United States ever since the independence of the South American Republics. On the 3d of March, 1835, a resolution passed the Senate in the following words:

*Resolved* , That the President of the United States be respectfully requested to consider the expediency of opening negotiations with the governments of other nations, and

particularly with the Governments of Central America and New Granada, for the purpose of effectually protecting, by suitable treaty stipulations with them, such individuals or companies as may undertake to open a communication between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by the construction of a ship canal across the isthmus which connects North and South America, and of securing forever by such stipulations the free and equal right of navigating such canal to all nations on the payment of such reasonable tolls as may be established to compensate the capitalists who may engage in such undertaking and complete the work.

No person can be more deeply sensible than myself of the danger of entangling alliances with any foreign nation. That we should avoid such alliances has become a maxim of our policy consecrated by the most venerated names which adorn our history and sanctioned by the unanimous voice of the American people. Our own experience has taught us the wisdom of this maxim in the only instance, that of the guaranty to France of her American possessions, in which we have ever entered into such an alliance. If, therefore, the very peculiar circumstances of the present case do not greatly impair, if not altogether destroy the force of this objection, then we ought not to enter into the stipulation, whatever may be its advantages. The general considerations which have induced me to transmit the treaty to the Senate for their advice may be summed up in the following particulars:

1. The treaty does not propose to guarantee a territory to a foreign nation in which the United States will have no common interest with that nation. On the contrary, we are more deeply and directly interested in the subject of this guaranty than New Granada herself or any other country.
2. The guaranty does not extend to the territories of New Granada generally, but is confined to the single Province of the Isthmus of Panama, where we shall acquire by the treaty a common and coextensive right of passage with herself.
3. It will constitute no alliance for any political object, but for a purely commercial purpose, in which all the navigating nations of the world have a common interest.
4. In entering into the mutual guaranties proposed by the thirty-fifth article of the treaty neither the Government of New Granada nor that of the United States has any narrow or exclusive views. The ultimate object, as presented by the Senate of the United States in their resolution to which I have already referred, is to secure to all nations the free and equal right of passage over the Isthmus. If the United States, as the chief of the American nations, should first become a party to this guaranty, it can not be doubted--indeed, it is confidently expected by the Government of New Granada--that similar guaranties will be given to that Republic by Great Britain and France. Should the proposition thus tendered be rejected we may deprive the United States of the just influence which its acceptance might secure to them and confer the glory and benefits of being the first among the nations in concluding such an arrangement upon the Government either of Great Britain or France. That either of these Governments would embrace the offer can not be doubted, because there does not appear to be any other effectual means of securing to all nations

the advantages of this important passage but the guaranty of great commercial powers that the Isthmus shall be neutral territory. The interests of the world at stake are so important that the security of this passage between the two oceans can not be suffered to depend upon the wars and revolutions which may arise among different nations.

Besides, such a guaranty is almost indispensable to the construction of a railroad or canal across the territory. Neither sovereign states nor individuals would expend their capital in the construction of these expensive works without some such security for their investments.

The guaranty of the sovereignty of New Granada over the Isthmus is a natural consequence of the guaranty of its neutrality, and there does not seem to be any other practicable mode of securing the neutrality of this territory. New Granada would not consent to yield up this Province in order that it might become a neutral state, and if she should it is not sufficiently populous or wealthy to establish and maintain an independent sovereignty. But a civil government must exist there in order to protect the works which shall be constructed. New Granada is a power which will not excite the jealousy of any nation. If Great Britain, France, or the United States held the sovereignty over the Isthmus, other nations might apprehend that in case of war the Government would close up the passage against the enemy, but no such fears can ever be entertained in regard to New Granada.

This treaty removes the heavy discriminating duties against us in the ports of New Granada, which have nearly destroyed our commerce and navigation with that Republic, and which we have been in vain endeavoring to abolish for the last twenty years.

It may be proper also to call the attention of the Senate to the twenty-fifth article of the treaty, which prohibits privateering in case of war between the two Republics, and also to the additional article, which nationalizes all vessels of the parties which "shall be provided by the respective Governments with a patent issued according to its laws," and in this particular goes further than any of our former treaties.

JAMES K. POLK.

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