Jose Maria Jesus Carvajal, United States Foreign Policy and the Filibustering Spirit in Texas, 1846-1853

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James K. Polk, an austere and methodical president, was seldom eloquent in his public addresses. Even his last message to Congress discussing the chief accomplishment of his administration – doubling the size of the nation at the cost to Mexico of one-half of hers – was typically uninspiring. “The acquisition of California and New Mexico, the settlement of the Oregon boundary, and the annexation of Texas, extending to the Rio Grande, are results which combined, are of greater consequence, and will add more to the strength and wealth of the nation than any which have preceded them since the adoption of the Constitution.” Though colorless in presentation, Polk’s utterance accurately reflected majority public opinion regarding the nation’s recent acquisitions from Mexico. Rabid exponents of Manifest Destiny wanted more, but Polk was content with what he had gained. The problem now, the president said, was to establish legitimate governments in the new territories.

Unfortunately there were few individuals – Mexican or Anglo-Americans – willing to develop these regions peacefully. Mexico never had governed effectively the vast Borderlands (Alta California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas prior to 1835), and after the Mexican War was unable to maintain order in the provinces immediately south of the Rio Grande – the states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon. Even before the war Mexican separatists from the region had conspired with Anglo-Texans from across the river to establish an independent northern republic forged out of these states. One of the most determined and genuine of these norteno revolutionaries was Don Jose Maria Jesus Carvajal, who together with his Anglo-Texan allies, kept the lower Rio Grande in a constant state of insurrection between 1851-1853. Carvajal’s movement also caused a serious strain in United States-Mexican relations which took several years to pacify.

A tejano from Victoria and son-in-law of empresario Martin De Leon, Carvajal first appeared on the Texas political scene in 1835 when he was elected to the legislature of Coahuila-Texas. Prior to his election he had been enjoying the life of an hacendado, managing an estate of over 4,000 acres near the coast in southeast Texas between the Lavaca and Guadalupe rivers. Carvajal spoke English fluently, a skill he had acquired during his adolescence thanks to the efforts of Stephen Austin who had befriended the young tejano and arranged for him to attend an academy in Bethany,
Virginia, operated by the evangelical Disciples of Christ. Carvajal remained at the school for four years, and by the time of his return to Texas in 1828, his English was "nearly perfect in every form of verbal expression."

Tensions already were high between Anglo-Texans and the Mexican government by the time Carvajal joined the provincial assembly. He and other delegates further antagonized Mexico City by passing a law authorizing the government to sell 400 leagues of land to recent Anglo emigres. The legislature's action was a blatant violation of Mexican law, which since the early 1830s forbade the sale of further Texas land to any individuals, Mexican or Anglo. Carvajal and the other members of the legislature were accused of conspiracy against the Mexican government and were ordered arrested. Mexican authorities believed Carvajal and his cohorts were merely using the decree to further strain relations between Mexico City and Coahuila-Texas, hoping to provoke Texans to armed rebellion. Upon hearing of the order for his arrest, Carvajal quickly fled across the Sabine into Louisiana, eventually making his way to New Orleans. There he and other Texan refugees helped procure supplies for the Texas forces.

The Texas Revolution officially began in September 1835, and three months later, on December 20, at Goliad, Texans announced their independence from Mexico. In November, while attempting to bring arms into Texas for rebel forces, Carvajal was captured by Mexican authorities and imprisoned at Matamoros. However, while being transported to Vera Cruz for confinement, Carvajal escaped his guard, eventually making his way back to Texas in time to sign the declaration of independence. He then joined various rebel contingents, seeing limited action in skirmishes with Mexican troops chasing Texan armies all around southeast Texas. Carvajal was elected a delegate to the convention at Washington-on-the Brazos where the Republic of Texas was declared on March 2, 1836. Carvajal never made it to the convention, and soon after the Texan victory at San Jacinto, he disappeared for the next three years.

The reasons for Carvajal's disappearance after San Jacinto can only be surmised. Perhaps like other tejanos, Carvajal realized that the new Republic of Texas was to be for Anglos only, and that he and eventually all Mexican-Texans would soon be deprived of their pre-revolutionary status. Even before the rebellion Anglo-Americans made their contempt for the Hispanic community well known. Disdain for tejanos became especially acute by the late 1830s with the influx of aggressive Lower South Anglos into Texas to exploit the region's rich bottomlands for cotton cultivation. These newcomers openly violated all Mexican laws, refusing even the most modest compliance, considering the native Mexicans to be the intruders. As the movement for an independent Texas gathered momentum
during the early 1830s, its leadership reflected this Lower South influence. Although many tejanos such as Carvajal opposed the increased authoritarianism of Mexico City, joining with their Anglo counterparts in protest, and eventually fighting and dying for an independent Texas, they soon discovered that Anglo-Texans were determined to strip them of their wealth and influence and relegate them to second-class citizens in their own country. Perhaps Carvajal sensed that this would be his fate, and instead of remaining in Texas, he retreated into Mexico, waiting there until conditions were conducive for a return home.

Carvajal never returned to Texas, at least legally. Tejano influence in the aftermath of independence declined rapidly. By the time of Texas annexation in 1845, many had been removed from political positions, and their land was confiscated and sold to Anglo planters or yeoman. As a result, a once proud and affluent people found themselves driven, over the next three decades, into poverty and oppression. Watching his people's degradation, and not wanting to suffer the same humiliation, Carvajal decided after 1836 to stay in Mexico. Though abandoning his birthplace, Carvajal maintained his ethnic identity, eventually transforming his tejanoism into a devotion to norteno separatism (patria Chica), which he expressed over the next several years by engaging in rebellion against the centralist autocracy of Mexico City.

While contemplating his future in Mexico, Carvajal befriended General Antonio Canales, who for several years had engaged in conspiracies against the centralist regime in Mexico City. Canales wanted to organize the northern Mexican states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon into an independent republic, and actively sought a coalition with Texas for his scheme. Carvajal was one of several hundred volunteers, both Anglo and tejano, who joined Canales' movement in 1839. At a battle near Mier, Carvajal was badly wounded, eventually losing the use of his left arm. Though routed by the centralists in every engagement and forced to retreat across the Rio Grande into Texas, Canales proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of the Rio Grande, appointing Carvajal secretary of the governing council. Chronically short of supplies and not really welcomed in Texas, by 1840 Canales had no choice but to surrender to the centralist forces. He dismissed his Texas auxiliaries, merging what was left of his Mexican soldiers with those of the centralists commanded by General Mariano Arista. Carvajal, however, remained true to the separatist cause, and now was considered the undisputed leader of the struggle for northern Mexican independence. Soon after his break with Canales, Carvajal returned to his ranch in Tamaulipas.

Canales saw an opportunity to revive his scheme for establishing an independent northern Mexican republic when in June 1845, American forces commanded by General Zachary Taylor appeared on the south bank
of the Nueces River. Taylor had been ordered to his position by President James K. Polk, who believed a Mexican invasion of Texas was imminent because of the republic's recent annexation by the United States. Since Texas independence in 1836, Mexico City threatened the United States with war if Texas was ever made part of the Union. No sooner was Taylor encamped along the river than Canales sent an emissary to the general's base. That agent was none other than Carvajal, who had emerged from his self-imposed exile at Tamaulipas a year earlier. Apparently Carvajal no longer felt any animosity toward his former compadre, for soon after his reappearance, he and Canales reunited. Much to Carvajal's delight, Canales had rejoined the Federalist cause.

Carvajal was to seek American help to destroy the Mexican army, "long the scourge of the nation," and to form a separate republic with "a constitution based on the rights of man" – a colloquialism for a Federalist republic. Carvajal was to negotiate with Taylor for arms for 3,000 men, which Carvajal promised would be turned against the "usurper," Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga, who recently had overthrown the government of Jose de Herrera. In return, the Carvajal-Canales junta pledged to do all in its power to support American claims to Texas, as well as the repaying of loans by customs arrangements or by boundary adjustments.

Carvajal's offer appealed to the Polk Administration, for one of the president's plans to prevent war with Mexico was to support the secession movement of the northern states. Taylor submitted Carvajal's plan to Secretary of War William Marcy, who, like Polk, believed the Canales-Carvajal plan had possibilities. Marcy, however, refused to provide the rebels with arms or money, not completely trusting that they would be used against the Paredes government. The deal was off.

When war with the United States began late in the spring of 1846, Carvajal commanded a 425-man cavalry contingent but was so reluctant to fight the American armies advancing through Mexico that the commander of the northern Mexican forces, General Francisco Mejia, suspected him of secret collaboration with the enemy and only grudgingly supplied him with material. Carvajal's engagement of American forces was so sporadic and half-hearted that many of his own men suspected his motives. Some even believed el jefe was fighting with the Mexicans merely to keep the United States out of northern Mexico so that he could establish a "little republic" independent of Mexico City. Carvajal's purpose was exactly that – to create the Republic of the Rio Grande. Thus, he was not at all interested in helping the centralists in Mexico City.

In the fall of 1846, the Canales-Carvajal junta tried again to persuade the Polk Administration to help them detach the northern Mexican states. Secretary of State James Buchanan was visited "by a person named Aclaria de Masa, M.D., who represented himself to be a Mexican citizen residing
in Tamaulipas. The letter of this person represented that the inhabitants of the Northern Provinces of Mexico were ready to revolt & establish an independent Republic, & would do so if they could have a guaranty [sic] from the U.S., 1st, that they would not be annexed to the U.S., and 2nd, that we would protect & defend them in their contemplated revolution as long as war lasted with the U.S.” Though attracted to the de Masa proposal, Polk was reluctant to commit immediately to it, fearing “it might seriously embarrass the U.S. when we came to make peace with Mexico.”

Although personally desiring the taking of more territory from Mexico than just the Borderlands, Polk was dissuaded from such a move by the secretary of state, who “expressed his opinion strongly against acquiring any more Southern territory, & said he thought if we did it would be the means of dissolving the Union.” Buchanan’s warning reflected the division and political dissension the war already had caused within the nation. From the conflict’s beginning the majority of Whigs opposed the war in principle, arguing (correctly) that the United States had no valid claims to the area south of the Nueces River. Though voting for military appropriations while the war was being fought, Whig congressmen nevertheless criticized the president for starting it. More ominous was the charge of antislavery northerners from both parties that the war’s real purpose was to spread slavery, thus increasing the “slaveocracy’s” political power. While battles were being fought in Mexico, Congress debated the Wilmot Proviso to prohibit slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. Foremost on Buchanan’s mind was the issue of slavery expansion. He believed the majority of northerners would consider any move by the administration to annex even portions of Mexico as a Southern “conspiracy” to acquire more slave territory. The secretary thus told Polk that “if it was believed by the people [northerners] that our object was to make a conquest of Tamaulipas & New Leon & annex them to the U.S. the war would be utterly odious.”

After further consultation with his cabinet, Polk, “upon full reflection,” decided not to provide arms or money to Mexicans resisting Paredes, or any other regime that might come to power during the course of the war. Much to Carvajal’s and Canales’ disappointment, Polk also refused to guarantee the recognition of the northern Mexican states’ independence after the war. It seems Polk had little confidence or trust in the will of the Mexican people to strike for freedom and form a stable government.

After the war the disorderly conditions along the Rio Grande worsened, creating the perfect environment for filibustering. Banditti marauding occurred more frequently, and smuggling, always a problem, reached a point of serious contention between the United States and Mexico. The administration responded by instructing Robert Hughes,
United States district attorney for Texas, to conduct an extensive investigation. Hughes, in turn, asked Ovid F. Johnson, a Brownsville newspaper editor and merchant, to lead the inquest. In a detailed letter to Hughes, Johnson dismissed the Mexican charges as “alleged aggression and insults, when carefully considered are very trivial border broils.” Although admitting that “after the war with Mexico, a refuse population on both sides of the Rio Grande,” was “ready for any enterprize, lawful or unlawful that presents itself,” Johnson believed the trouble was largely the fault of Mexican officials whose “enforcement of the revenue system is most uncertain and inefficient.” Then, in a display of Anglo-Saxon righteousness, Johnson accused both local Mexican authorities and citizens of “not having very conscientious scruples of duty in favour of its collection of duties] rigid execution. Evasions are practiced and winked at by many of these officers and citizens, which seem to our view extraordinary. The government of Mexico cannot be ignorant of these facts, nor can it doubt that the only remedy against the evil, must be furnished by its own vigilance, and not by the agency of the United States.”

Unfortunately for the Fillmore administration, Johnson’s assessment could not have been more inaccurate. The smuggling was hardly “the acts of a few persons influenced by motives of a private nature,” nor was American complicity in these activities simply “a few individuals availing themselves of opportunities to evade the revenue laws.” Johnson was either completely ignorant of the real situation or was lying, perhaps to cover up his own involvement in illicit trade. Johnson was in fact part of an Anglo smuggling ring operating out of Brownsville. Whatever the reasons, Johnson’s report led the Fillmore Administration to believe that conditions along the Rio Grande no longer required the president’s serious consideration.

In the summer of 1851 Robert Hughes resigned as United States district attorney for Texas, and within weeks of his departure, the “trivial border broils” escalated into a potentially explosive international crisis. As long as the situation remained leaderless, the government believed it had little to worry about. Endemic lawlessness was simply part of frontier life, particularly along the lower Rio Grande valley. The government was shaken with the reemergence of “Don” Carvajal. In a matter of weeks Carvajal and his band turned the supposedly minor border problems into a general uprising. For three years – beginning in 1848 – Carvajal had been planning an insurrection of the northern provinces of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, wanting to form a new state called the Republic of the Sierra Madre. Offering the promise of land and loot, Carvajal rallied to his cause many Anglo-Texan “border dwellers.” Of great concern for the United States was the ability of revolutionists such as Carvajal to raise recruits...
from ex-officers and ex-soldiers of the United States army. For a variety of reasons, Anglo-Texans, especially ex-Texas Rangers, found filibustering a particularly appealing new career. Thus from the beginning of his exploits Carvajal had the support of many ex-Texas lawmen. For quite some time regular law enforcement agencies considered the Rangers "men of unsettled habits," who, since their disbandment by the state legislature in August 1851, were "left without occupation or means of subsistence," and were now "ready for anything that offered to supply their necessities." 15

Perhaps the most famous Texas Ranger joining Carvajal was Captain John Salmon Ford, who almost single-handedly made the Colt revolver the most popular and effective frontier weapon. During his career as a Ranger, Ford received the nickname "Rip" for his habit of turning in lists of the men he killed - "in the line of duty of course" - with "R.I.P." next to their names, which was the abbreviated version for "rest in peace." Incredibly tough, ruthless, profane, in general "a downright ornery fellow," Ford personified the type of Anglo-Texan that Carvajal's promise of money and plunder appealed. 16

In September 1851, Carvajal formally "pronounced" against the Mexican government in his Plan de la Loba. Carvajal's decree called for the removal of the Mexican army from the northern provinces and a drastic reduction in duties and fines for contraband, as well as a promise to allow American goods to flow across the river duty free for five years. Soon after announcing his plan Carvajal was forced to flee to Brownsville where he immediately negotiated with local Anglo merchants to supply him with the guns and other goods he needed to separate the northern states. In return, Carvajal promised merchants that under his new regime the Rio Grande would become a free-trade zone. 17

It was at this juncture that the Fillmore Administration began worrying about "the trivial border broils." Secretary of State Daniel Webster ordered federal officials in Texas to conduct investigations along the Rio Grade. New United States district attorney for Texas, William Pitt Ballinger, was placed in charge of the investigation. Ballinger was instructed by Webster to keep the Department of State informed "of all those who may be found within your district engaged in expeditions against the possessions of a friendly power. You are to report directly to this Department all movements along the Rio Grande that may be considered by the Government of Mexico as a violation of our Neutrality Laws with them, as well as any other unlawful acts committed by U.S. citizens in the area." 18

Webster's directive took Ballinger by surprise, for he, too, was under the impression based on his predecessor's reports, that all was relatively calm along the Rio Grande. Ballinger had just taken over from Hughes when he received Webster's letter, and consequently only had time to "conduct a very hasty & cursory investigation." Ballinger nevertheless
reassured Webster that "the officers of the government in Texas may be relied on as ready and determined to do everything in their power to prevent any such movement from this state against Mexico." After conducting his canvass, Ballinger, like Hughes, concluded "that a revolt is contemplated in the northern provinces of Mexico, and that Mexican officers, civil & military, are engaged in it and endeavoring to obtain assistance from this side of the Rio Grande, are all rumors circulated by local newspapers."^9

While federal officers were busy with their fact-finding, Carvajal began his revolution. In late September 1851, Carvajal, with an army of 100 Mexicans and seventy Americans, easily captured the village of Camargo, remaining there until early October. The surrounding towns of Mier and Guerrero also fell to the insurgents. Federal authorities in Texas did not hear of Carvajal's taking of Camargo until October 3, 1851, about three weeks after the town was occupied. Ballinger quickly sent a message to Webster, but it was obviously too late for the Fillmore Administration to take "preventive action."^10

Fillmore was reluctant to denounce American participation in Carvajal's insurrection. His hesitancy reflected a last-ditch Whig effort to avoid defeat in the 1852 election by championing "Manifest Destiny," even though aggressive territorial aggrandizement was contrary to traditional Whig foreign policy. Unfortunately, too many Americans still believed in the rhetoric of the "regenerative" effects of Anglo-Saxon values upon nations bluntly called "backwards." Fillmore's policies were perceived by many as attempts to undermine the Republic's "redemptive" mission. Fillmore hoped to salvage his popularity and administration by demonstrating at least tacit support for filibustering in Mexico. Such approval would appeal to those still believing Mexico was "destined" to become United States territory. Interestingly, James K. Polk probably would have annexed a large part of northern Mexico in 1848 except for Whig obstruction led by Senator Millard Fillmore.21

Realizing Camargo was of little strategic importance to his cause, Carvajal evacuated the town on October 9, proceeding with his reinforced army of 400 men to Matamoros. Carvajal's original 170 man contingent was augmented by the arrival of Rip Ford's ex-Rangers, as well as other Anglo-Texan adventurers lured by el jefe's promise of land and loot.22

The participation of Anglo-American mercenaries in Carvajal's insurrection was not the Fillmore Administration's only concern. Equally worrisome was Carvajal's appeal among local Anglo merchants, who saw in his rebellion the potential for immense profit. Carvajal would need unlimited supplies for his army, and the safest, most convenient place to procure them would be on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. The United States Neutrality Acts of 1818 naturally forbade American citizens from
providing aid to anyone engaged in the overthrow of the government of "a neutral or friendly power." According to Ballinger, as early as June 1851, Carvajal came to Texas as "the agent of several Mexicans claiming or pretending title to large grants of land between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers. In particular, title to what is known as the Carasillas grant, containing 106 leagues, or about 466,000 acres." Carvajal's objective was "to exchange the grant for merchandise to introduce into Mexico, free of the duty at the Custom House." Carvajal wanted Anglo merchants in Brownsville "to send the goods into Mexico, paying to Carvajal 35-40% of the amount, a considerably lower amount than the Mexican tariff." In other words, Carvajal wanted Anglo merchants to accept as credit or security portions of the Carasillas grant in exchange for provisions. He also hoped to raise money by getting a "kick-back" from his Anglo suppliers whose goods he assured would enter Mexico duty-free. By the time of his invasion of Mexico in September, he had "introduced goods valued at $500,000." He also had raised an additional $500,000 by selling sizeable tracts of land from the Carasillas grant. Ballinger was convinced that "the amount raised on the goods & the sale of the land was the mode resorted to obtain the means for carrying his movement against the government into effect."21

In early September 1851, Mexican customs officials - at least those still loyal to Mexico City - became suspicious of the type and volume of goods flowing across the river from Brownsville paying little or no tariff. When they discovered that Carvajal's duty-free policy never had official approval, they began seizing thousands of dollars of contraband. Although the Mexican government flatly denied the complicity of its local authorities in Carvajal's smuggling operation, American officials in Texas believed otherwise. Ballinger maintained that Carvajal not only had the tacit if not direct support of local officials, but the president of Mexico as well! According to Ballinger, "Cardenas, the Governor, Canales, the Lt. Governor of Tamaulipas, were both interested in the speculation, and they were friends of long-standing with General Arista, President of Mexico, who it is believed by the best informed persons with whom I have conversed, must have been aware of the order given for the introduction of the goods & favorable to it if it could have been consummated without involving him." Although Anglo traders stopped outfitting Carvajal directly, they nevertheless provided his Anglo mercenaries, such as Captain Edward Hurd, Carvajal's chief purchasing agent, with all the stores they needed.24

Soon after the taking of Camargo, Carvajal's insurrection entered its second phase. From the beginning Carvajal had the clandestine support of "Cardenas, Canales, and Macedonio Capistran, the commander of the national guard at Matamoros, and other persons of influence were
doubtless pledged to the movement." American officials also believed that had Cardenas and the others continued supporting Carvajal the rebellion would have succeeded. As Ballinger observed, Carvajal was "a rather popular leader of the Mexican people living in the northern provinces. He would have been able to greatly enhance his political credibility among the people with the presence of Cardenas & his associates." The original plan of action was for Carvajal "to commence the outbreak in the towns on the Rio Grande, where he had the most influence, and after his success, the state authorities were to unite with him and Canales was to have chief command." No sooner did Rip Ford and his men arrive than the arrangement fell apart. The ex-Rangers "were unwilling to be commanded by Canales on account of his treachery to Texas in 1840, and Carvajal elated by his success, refused to yield the leadership to Canales." Apparently the ex-Rangers wanted to be commanded by an individual whom they respected, liked, and knew was committed to the separatist cause. Canales, on the other hand, already had turned against the Federalist movement and might do so again. As Ballinger noted, when Carvajal and his Anglo followers refused to accept Canales' command, the governor then "turned his arms in favor of the government."25

Rip Ford's ex-Rangers were not the only Anglo-Americans enlisting in Carvajal's crusade. Soon after the capture of Camargo, Carvajal was joined by "a company of Americans who had assembled at Mustang Island near Corpus Christi, under the command of Captain Howell Norton." Also aiding Carvajal were several "small companies raised at the Rio Grande by Captain Trimble which joined Carvajal at Camargo." The Mexican leader even had a contingent of "runaway negroes under Warren Adams, with the professed design of returning to Texas to help free other slaves after they had been sufficiently armed by Carvajal."26

It was believed by American officials that the Anglos joining Carvajal were motivated by more than the lure of plunder. Although the appeal of loot excited "many of the rank and file, a good number of whom have been recruited from border ruffians and other dissipated individuals from our side of the river," such was not true for the Anglo rebel leaders. The majority of the Anglo leaders were experienced, committed, professional filibusters who "cared not for the pecuniary rewards their profession might bring, but rather, to see established an independent northern republic, doubtless in which they had been promised positions of high standing." Ballinger was certain Carvajal's "American auxiliaries look to the establishment of the Sierra Madre Republic as the inevitable result of his movement if successful."27

After twelve days of deliberation, Carvajal attacked Matamoros on October 30, 1851. The rebel army, whose ranks had swelled to 400 men, won a quick victory on the first day, taking an earthwork on the town's
perimeter. General Francisco Avalos, commander of Mexican frontier forces, had prepared for Carvajal's assault by evacuating women and children and establishing barricades all around the city. Though in possession of three six-pound cannon, Carvajal realized his guns were not sufficient to dislodge the Centralist forces. Thus, the only way Matamoros could be taken was by an all-out charge which would result in hand-to-hand fighting from building to building. Carvajal was about to launch an assault on the plaza on the morning of November 3 when he received news that a United States vessel was headed up the Rio Grande with supplies for General Avalos.

Carvajal was outraged by this blatant act of United States support "for the forces of a ruthless and tyrannical regime." In a letter to J.W. Phelps, commander at Ft. Brown, which was eventually published in several Texas newspapers, Carvajal defended both his leadership and the legitimacy of his revolution. "When the people assembled to consider in what manner their rights and liberties could best be preserved, by common consent, without any agency of my own, I was chosen to lead this patriotic enterprise. I accepted the appointment with pleasure, having seen and felt the iniquitous exactions to which my countrymen were daily subjected, and the despotic outrages practiced upon them by minions of power, in the name of freedom I raised the standard of liberation, and hundreds of my aggrieved countrymen have rushed to its support. Oppressed and borne down upon by the organized military despotism of the Central government." In the same impassioned rhetoric, Carvajal explained that with "the consent of my fellow citizens," he invited some Americans to aid him in his "righteous and just pursuit of freedom and liberty for my own people." Carvajal then described those Americans hearing "the people of Mexico crying out for liberation" as individuals "who will not shame either their country or their name - they are fighting in a cause as just and righteous as that which has inscribed on the same roll with Washington, those other names, noble as his allies, Lafayette, Kosciusko, and Pulaski. I hope regenerated Mexico will be grateful in her present hour of need as the people of the United States have been to those gallant foreigners, who, in the dark hour of their tribulation, came to their rescue." One of the Texas papers that published Carvajal's message was the Austin, Texas, State Gazette, which declared the rebel leader's manifesto would "awaken an enthusiastic response in every American bosom not dead to every impulse of patriotism."

As Carvajal's uprising continued, Ballinger interestingly became more sympathetic toward the insurrection and its leader. As he related to Webster, Carvajal's claim of being a national liberator was proving "to be of greater truth than was first assumed. There were many causes of disaffection on the frontier, real grievances under which the people
labor. General Avalos, the military commandant at Matamoros, was universally odious; Cardenas, Canales, and Capistran, and other Mexican officials whose corruption and treachery were well-known, were equally despised by the people." Though more inclined to accept Carvajal as a legitimate revolutionary, Ballinger still had "grave reservations regarding the true motives & desires" of el jefe's Anglo-American accomplices. To the attorney, most of these men were "brigands out for plunder."12

Failing to take the plaza at Matamoros despite repeated charges, Carvajal finally decided to withdraw from the city on November 8. Chased by government troops, he retreated to Camargo, reaching the pueblo on November 16. While recuperating at Camargo, Carvajal sent Rip Ford on a recruiting mission into Texas. Then, in an "outburst or rage at being defeated at Matamoros," Carvajal attacked Cerralvo without waiting for Ford to return with reinforcements. Cerralvo was defended by 200 Mexican troops, about the same number Carvajal had left after the siege of Matamoros. Carvajal's other purpose in attacking Cerralvo was to capture the town's artillery pieces, which he desperately needed to continue his revolution. The Mexican commander at Cerralvo, General Jauregui, knowing that his town was Carvajal's next target, prepared for the rebels by placing his cannon in strategic locations to defend the city better from the insurgents' charges. After two days of fierce fighting in which the rebel army failed to take even one artillery piece, Carvajal retreated. Hastening his departure was the news that government reinforcements were fast approaching. This time Carvajal withdrew across the Rio Grande, deep into United States territory. It was reported to Webster that Carvajal "crossed to this side of the river with his whole force, 50, or 60 miles, where he has remained in the vicinity of Salt Lake [Texas]. His followers are scattered and broken into various parties & encamped at different places." Webster also was informed "that upon his return into the territory of the United States, his army ceased its organization. He and his officers nominally resigned, but they could rejoin him when he again entered Mexico." Carvajal's disbanding of his forces on the Texas side of the Rio Grande was a clever move. By doing so he avoided violating the Neutrality Acts and thus jeopardizing his connections with his Anglo supporters.

At this juncture the Mexican government wanted to make it clear to the Fillmore Administration that Carvajal was not a revolutionary leader of the Mexican people and that there was little support for his cause in the northern states. In a letter to Webster, Luis de la Rosa told the secretary that his understanding of the frontier disturbances was inaccurate. Despite American reports to the contrary, Webster insisted that Carvajal's actions "are treated here as a formal rebellion against the Government of Mexico." De la Rosa warned Webster that Mexico would expect "due and adequate indemnification as a consequence of these invasions." Of greater concern
to the Mexican government than the smuggling issue was the participation of sundry Anglo-Texans in Carvajal's raids, whom de la Rosa believed were largely responsible for keeping Carvajal's movement alive. The Mexican minister feared that "the emigration of adventurers from the United States will become so numerous that the government of this republic will find it difficult to check."34

Carvajal remained in Texas until February 1852, recruiting and reorganizing what was left of his army. By this time, though, few Anglo-Texans were willing to rally to his grito. Perhaps Texans were tired of fighting for what appeared to be a losing cause or following an individual who had yet to deliver the booty he had promised. Frustrated by the lack of response to his latest grito, and tired of waiting in an increasingly dangerous and unfriendly Texas, Carvajal precipitously launched his second invasion of Mexico on February 20, 1852. Camargo was again his objective. This time government troops under his former compadre Antonio Canales were waiting for him, and in a brief fight, Canales routed the filibusters, who scurried back across the Rio Grande into Texas. No sooner was Carvajal across the border and supposedly safe than a detachment of United States dragoons surprised the rebel leader at his camp, arresting Carvajal and eleven of his followers on March 1, 1852. Three days later his Anglo cohorts, Robert Wheat, E.R. Hurd, Howell Norton, Peter Dowd, Robert Hurd, J.R. Everett, R.R. Stansberry, and A.J. Mason were indicted by a grant jury "for their repeated violations of United States neutrality laws."35

The initial excitement over the indictment quickly turned to disappointment. Ballinger confessed to Webster he was having "great difficulty in gathering enough evidence of guilt to bring Carvajal to trial, which has been our principal objective since their indictment. I must now report to you that such evidence that is necessary is insurmountable to obtain because we will have to largely rely on Mexicans who do not understand our language, as well as many who are sympathisers with Carvajal."36 Border courts, however, always have used translators in courtrooms because most witnesses and even jures were comprised largely of only Spanish-speaking Mexicans or tejanos. Evidently Carvajal still had significant Anglo support on the border - more than most United States officials were willing to concede.

United States officials also could not charge Carvajal's Anglo conspirators for their violations of United States laws. According to Ballinger's assessment, Wheat, Norton, Hurd, and the others had "evaded but not violated the neutrality laws of the U.S. These men evaded the law because they did not organize into companies, electing officers &c. until they had crossed into Mexico. Had they done otherwise - organizing their forces on our side of the river for the purpose of invading Mexico, then we
could charge them with the violation of the Neutrality Acts of 1818. However, since that is not the case, I regret to inform you that I will not be able to pursue them legally any further than what I have already accomplished." On March 8, 1852, Carvajal and his Anglo associates were released on bail of $5,000 and $3,000 each, respectively.

Over a year later, Carvajal and his band were active. This "negligence" on behalf of the United States government prompted the new Mexican minister to the United States, Manuel Larrazázar, to lament that the "salutary, prompt, and energetic action" of United States authorities after Carvajal's arrest "would begin to produce some good effects, and that the matter would not be neglected or slighted until the claim of Mexico had been satisfied; but this has not been the case." More disturbing to Larrazázar and his government was "the demonstration of public sympathy" displayed by Anglo-Texans for Carvajal and his men after they were released on bail. According to Larrazázar, such popular approval only emboldened the filibusters "to show themselves everywhere and boast of their actions, and the evils they have occasioned. Instead of his acts exciting public and general indignation, he was embraced with the outpourings of support."

Larrazázar then told new Secretary of State William Marcy of the Franklin Pierce Administration that because of Carvajal's popularity in Texas, he and his followers "continue to laugh at justice," and defy "the proclamations of the most Excellent President" forbidding Anglo-American participation in any new expeditions against Mexico. Since the filibusters' release, "these acts of violation have been repeated. The inhabitants of the frontier have twice again seen the territory of Mexico invaded, their property plundered, their lives placed in jeopardy, their peaceful existence paralyzed by war and danger, the blood of their fellow citizens again spilled, and the soil on which they before lived, without anxiety and fear, sullied with crimes." Soon after his release, Carvajal hit the south Texas "speaking circuit," trying to rouse Anglo support for another invasion of northern Mexico. He was often the main attraction at local fairs, and as a result of rallies given in his honor, he raised over $40,000 for his next campaign. The donations given to Carvajal's cause at these expositions was due largely to the efforts of such prominent Texans as Ashbel Smith, south Texas land baron and commercial entrepreneur Henry L. Kinney (Kinney later organized a filibustering enterprise to establish a colony on the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua), and Hugh MacLeod, ex-commander of the Lamar Administration's ill-fated expedition to Santa Fe in 1841. All three men accompanied Carvajal on his speaking junkets through south Texas, touting the rebel leader as "the Savior of Mexico and the Liberator of his People."
Although Carvajal had the patronage of these conspicuous Texans, he had little success in raising sufficient money and men to lead an effective rebellion in Mexico's northern provinces. Nevertheless, on March 26, 1853, Carvajal sent another force across the Rio Grande. This latest action, however, was not a full-scale invasion, but what turned out to be an insignificant raid of about eighty men commanded by one of Carvajal's more loyal Anglo lieutenants, A. Howell Norton, upon the already beleaguered town of Reynosa. As the Brownsville American Flag reported in a scathingly sarcastic tone, Norton and his marauders easily captured the town because "the guard was composed of five men, who they valiantly charged upon and captured." The bandits then seized the alcalde, Garcia y Trevino, and another municipal official, a Senor Flores, whom they held for a ransom of $30,000. As the American Flag noted, "The enlightened and humane leader of this pack of freebooters proved how worthy he was of the name American, by flogging and threatening to kill his prisoners if they did not 'put up' to a large amount in cash, which it appears is necessary to sustain their sinking fortunes." The inhabitants raised only $2,000, which Norton accepted, and then "retired, like a snow-ball rolling down hill, gathering as he went horses, mules, saddles, bridles, guns - in fact nothing appears to have been 'too hot or too heavy' for him to take provided it fell into his way and was capable of being removed."41

After sacking Reynosa, Norton's band retreated to Rio Grande City on the Texas side of the border, and there "enjoyed the fruits of their expedition in security, under the protecting folds of the 'Star-Spangled Banner' - whose dignity and honor is now being constantly trampled under foot by the foreign refugee, Carvajal, supported and sustained as he is by renegades unfortunately among us - some of whom can boast of being American!"42

Carvajal's stay within "the protecting folds of the Star-Spangled Banner" was brief. Five days after the looting of Reynosa, a United States infantry company commanded by Major Gabriel R. Paul from nearby Ringgold Barracks, arrested Carvajal in a surprise raid on his headquarters at Roma, Texas. The real culprit, Norton, managed to escape. Over the next three days however, all of Carvajal's Anglo followers, including Norton, were apprehended and sent to Fort Brown to await arraignment before the United States commissioner at Brownsville, Frederick Cummings. The filibusters were held in custody for six weeks at Fort Brown before appearing in court. Once again they were released on bail ($10,000 for Carvajal and $5,000 each for his Anglo co-conspirators) because of a "legal technicality:" affidavits were not filed properly against them! Cummings had no choice but to free them immediately.43

Needless to say, the filibusters were elated, and as the American Flag reported, "Norton and his followers walk the streets with the air of men
whose gallant conduct was the theme of universal approbation.” Their jubilation was short lived. In late April 1853, only a few weeks after their previous arraignment, Carvajal and all eleven of his Anglo comrades were again arrested upon a complaint lodged by the Mexican consul at Brownsville that Carvajal was planning another raid into northern Mexico. No sooner were the conspirators “examined before U.S. Commissioner, F. Cummings,” than once again they “were admitted to bail for their appearance before the Federal Court for this district, to be held in Brownsville some time in June.” Even though the bail set by Cummings was $15,000 for Carvajal and $7,000 each for his Anglo associates, they all managed to raise the money as they had in the past, with little difficulty. After this latest attempt at trying to indict Carvajal for violation of the Neutrality Acts failed, federal officials in Texas surely were convinced that Carvajal was either the luckiest desperado they had ever come across, or that el jefe was indeed “destined” to be a free man in order to bring about his revolution.

After their release, Carvajal and his followers seemed to disappear. Many of el jefe’s Anglo comrades gave up the filibustering business and returned to their home states to pursue more legitimate occupations. Others, like Roberdeau Wheat and Howell Norton, were professional filibusters who cared nothing for the sedentary, tedious life of a yeoman farmer or shopkeeper. Filibustering was their trade and both men were devoted to their “calling.” Indeed, both Wheat and Norton remained committed to filibustering, participating in many other enterprises throughout the 1850s.

Carvajal typically returned to his ranch in Tamaulipas. He occasionally was seen in south Texas “walking the streets of Brownsville, telling everyone who he is and filling their heads with his past exploits.” But few Mexican officials believed Carvajal had retired from his former occupation. Rumors abounded that he was merely biding his time, playing the rueful ex-revolutionary while secretly organizing Anglo mercenaries for another expedition across the river. El jefe was simply waiting for that moment when conditions along the Rio Grande and in northern Mexico were conducive for another Pronunciamiento against the current regime in Mexico City. Carvajal’s onlyincursions into Mexico late in the 1850s were insignificant forays reminiscent of Howell Norton’s raid on Reynosa. By the eve of the American Civil War, the alleged “scourge of the Rio Grande” ceased being a disturbance in United States-Mexican relations. By 1860 Carvajal had crossed back into Mexico, there to stay until his death in 1874. Once in Mexico he joined various rebel forces opposing the authoritarianism of Mexico City, and when the French invaded in 1862, Carvajal joined with the Juaristas to drive the intruders out of his country. From the moment he first took up arms against the centralists in 1839 until his death over three decades later, Carvajal remained committed, heart and
soul, to his idea of an independent northern Mexican federal republic. Like most nortenos today, he neither cared for nor understood the politics of central Mexico. He knew and loved the North and wanted to create his federalist dream there.

In retrospect, it is easy to recognize that the filibustering activities of Carvajal’s Anglo comrades marked the climax in Texas of an aggressive, aggrandizing foreign policy which began early in the 1840s. Concealed behind the grandiose label of “Manifest Destiny,” filibustering was associated with a militant program of territorial acquisition, and with what now seems a naive, parochial, and self-righteous belief in the “redemptive” effect of Anglo-Saxon values upon “backward” societies. Unquestionably many of Carvajal’s Anglo cohorts possessed such sentiments and were more than likely hoping to use Carvajal as a means of eventually taking more Mexican territory, either by annexing it to the United States or establishing their own independent republic a-la-William Walker. Whatever their ultimate designs, a good number of Carvajal’s Anglo-American allies had much more in mind than simply helping a Mexican liberate his people.

On the other hand, it is also possible Carvajal may have been using the Anglo filibusters and merchants rather than vice versa. If this interpretation is allowed, then Carvajal’s Anglo allies were not necessarily the “guiding force” behind his movement. In short, Carvajal was a man who led, not one who was being led. Though ultimately defeated by poor generalship, nevertheless for over two years he held together rambunctious Anglo filibusters; convinced merchants and wealthy Anglo ranchers and entrepreneurs to loan him thousands of dollars in either goods or cash; out-talked politicians; swayed judges; and out-foxed both the national governments of Mexico and the United States. His defeat was not the result of a diligent, concerted effort on behalf of the United States government. Rather, Carvajal was defeated by factors within his movement – poor leadership, factionalism, lack of arms and money, and myriad other internal conflicts.

Had Carvajal been successful in separating the northern Mexican states, he no doubt, for awhile, would have been able to sustain his republic by sheer force of personality and will. However, given the nature of the Anglos who rode with him, and given the fanaticism of the Southern-Texan filibustering spirit, it would have been difficult for Carvajal to prevent his Anglo comrades from imposing their brand of “manifest destiny” upon his country eventually. Since most of these men had a larger purpose in mind when they joined Carvajal, it is unlikely they would have been content to settle in northern Mexico and live peacefully under Mexican, albeit, federalist, rule. Carvajal likely would have been overthrown by his former Anglo chieftains, and he and his countrymen
would have found themselves a conquered rather than liberated people. Luckily for the hemisphere, the United States found something more profound to occupy itself in 1861.

NOTES


3 Andras V. Reichstein, Rise of the Lone Star: The Making of Texas (College Station, 1989), pp. 124, 133; Oates, Rip Ford’s Texas, pp. 196-197; J. Lee and Lillian Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley, p. 98; Shearer, “Carvajal Disturbances,” pp. 202, 203. It also should be noted that much Texas land was being sold to members of the government in Mexico City, including the Vice-President, cabinet members, and even the British ambassador. Anglos naturally bought in on the deal, but they were not the only ones involved in land speculation.


14 Johnson to Hughes, November 5, 1849. Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the
United States, Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860.


Daniel Webster to William Pitt Ballinger, August 25, 1851, Ballinger Papers (Barker Texas History Center, Austin, Texas). Hereafter cited as Ballinger Papers (BTHC).

Ballinger to Webster, October 3, 1851, National Archives, M179, R127, frame 453.


Webster to Ballinger, October 29, 1851, Ballinger Papers (BTHC).

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852. National Archives, M179, R130, frames 18-19.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, frame 20.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, frame 20.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, frame 21.


Carvajal to Phelps, October 25, 1851, published in Austin Texas State Gazette, November 22, 1851.

Texas State Gazette, November 22, 1851.

Texas State Gazette, November 22, 1851.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, National Archives, M179, R130, frame 21.

Shearer, "Carvajal Disturbances," pp. 217-220; Oates, Rip Ford's Texas, pp. 201-203; Dufour, Gentle Tiger, p. 67; Bancroft, History of Mexico, V, pp. 603-604, 162; J. Fred Rippy, The United States and Mexico (New York, 1926), pp. 89-91; Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence, IX, p. 96; New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 6, 1851; Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, National Archives, M179, R130, frame 21; New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 26, 1851; Brownsville American Flag, December 10, 1851.

Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence, IX, pp. 426-432.

Shearer, "Carvajal Disturbances," pp. 222-223; Oates, Rip Ford's Texas, pp. 203-204; Dufour, Gentle Tiger, p. 68; Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852, National Archives, M179, R130, frame 21.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852.

Ballinger to Webster, March 3, 1852.

Manuel Larraínzar to William Marcy, April 21, 1853, in Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence, IX, p. 557.

Larraínzar to Marcy, April 21, 1853, Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, IX, p. 558.

Oates, Rip Ford's Texas, p. 204; Shearer, "Carvajal Disturbances," pp. 223-224; Clarksville
Western Texan, June 3, 1852.

"Brownsville American Flag, April 30, 1853.

"Brownsville American Flag, April 30, 1853.

"Shearer, "Carvajal Disturbances," pp. 226-227; New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 20, 1853; Ballinger to Webster, March 21, 1853, National Archives, M179, R132, frame 45.

"Brownsville American Flag, April 30, 1853; Ballinger to Webster, May 3, 1853, National Archives, M179, R132, frame 75; New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 20, May 13, May 26, June 24, 1853; Shearer, "Carvajal Disturbances," pp. 227-228; Alfred Conkling to William March, May 3, 1853, Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence, IX, p. 566.

"Brownsville American Flag, March 26, 1854.