

Reasons for Joel R. Poinsett's Refusal of A Second Mission to South America

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HISTORIANS have often asked why Joel Poinsett refused to undertake a second mission to South America when President Monroe asked him to serve in 1817 as a "special commissioner." Poinsett's polite but definite refusal, it is suggested, proceeded from thoughts of military service or else diplomatic employment of a higher order than that which had been his experience during the years 1810-1815.¹ But even his excuses of lengthy absence from home and friends, and recent election to the South Carolina legislature sound peculiarly hollow in the light of his well-known republicanism.

During his five years in South America, Poinsett's opinion of leading revolutionaries was exceedingly unfavorable. The abilities of Don Manuel Belgrano were "overrated," and he "disappointed the expectations of the people."² Juan Martín de Pueyrredón was a man who had "conducted a successful course of intrigue." The spirit of unrest which these men and others engendered was undermining the cause of true revolution in South America; and the United States could not afford to rush to the support of such instability.

Poinsett's reply to the Department of State outlined his essential position, and warned of the personal ambition of many leaders.³ There is almost no later official correspondence touching this problem until the celebrated Poinsett Memorandum of 4 November 1818 to Secretary Adams. Researchers have deplored the lack of documen-

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¹ Fred Rippey, *Joel Poinsett: Versatile American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1935), p. 66.

²Folio, "The Revolution in Buenos Ayres," Volume 1, Poinsett Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

³ The letter was addressed to Richard Rush, Acting Secretary of State, and dated 23 May 1817. W. R. Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States Concerning the Independence of the Latin-American Nations* (New York: 1925), I, p. 39. Also see Mss. Journal of Joel Poinsett in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

tary materials from May, 1817, to November, 1818, which could shed light on Poinsett's views of the leaders in the Río de la Plata as well as give some indication of the direction of his thinking in refusing the mission. In one piece of evidence—an unpublished source—Poinsett did make some rather startling summations of his views of South American loyalties and politics as he had observed them from 1810 to 1815. This is a letter of 31 October 1817 to an unknown recipient but a close personal friend, probably in Washington, D. C.⁴ The letter gives definite reasons for his refusal of a second mission: owing to the imprecise nature of the proposed journey and his rapidly declining confidence in the personalities involved, the "leader of firmness and talents" to head the "powerful" American party in Chile would not be Joel Poinsett.

Charleston Oct 31.
1817

My dear Sir

I have this moment received your letter dated the 23^d. and feel much gratified by your communications with regard to S.A. affairs. It is a question of such vital importance to this country that I am rejoiced to see it brought forward in every point of view and that such able writers are engaged as its advocates. With respect to my own opinion, it remains unshaken, it has been given to the government on several occasions and if you have leisure to peruse the documents I presented to the Secretary of state upon my return you will there see it fully expressed. I do not understand the nature of the expedition which was proposed to me—If it is simply pour tater le terrain, that has been done thoroughly, and I may safely say that I am better acquainted with the resources of that country and with the character of the People than with those of my own state. Gov^t knows from me the disposition of every leader of the revolution—If it is merely to furnish such a report as might induce Congress to declare openly in favor of the Emancipation of the Colonies—my former views of that subject are I suspect more favorable than they would be at present, I mean with regard to the resources of the country & the union of Parties—If it is again to defeat the Influence of G^t. Britain there, I think it an easy task, and the Gov^t can find many men equal to it, and to whom such an appointment may be useful. I never will again leave America in a subaltern Capacity, or as an unauthorized agent of the Government; but if the U.S. resolve to espouse the cause of our Brethren of the South, and I should be thought worthy to contribute towards so glorious an end, there is no

⁴ Original manuscript in possession of the writer. Acquired from Carnegie Book Shop, New York City, in 1961.

sacrifice I think too great. I am ready to promote the cause of Freedom by every exertion in my powers. When it was proposed to me by my friends & especially by M^r. Gallatin to go to Russia,⁵ it occurred to me, that I might avail myself of my influence at that court to induce the Emperor to espouse the cause of the Spanish Colonies, for it is obviously his interest to do so—⁶ Gov^t—did not think proper to give me the appointment which was solicited for me, and as my opinion has always been, that in a republic a man is amply repaid for having served his country with zeal, by the consciousness of having promoted its interests to the best of his ability, I felt that I had acquired no claim and was not mortified by the refusal—But when the offer was made me to go on this expedition I could not be ignorant that my standing at home enabled me to be more useful here, than if I should undertake to execute a commission of such a vague and indefinite character, and which might materially affect my future usefulness. So much for self—With regard to the Publications you were good enough to send me, they will certainly be useful in awakening the attention of the Government and people to this important subject, but I advise you by all means to abstain from Personalities. If you call P. & B. & H. British agents you will make them so, if they are denounced here as leaders of a british faction, they will consider themselves as deserted by the Mexicans and will cling to the party from which it is our interest to separate them—Ohiggins [*sic*] is not an Englishman in his politics and is easily led and most firmly attached to republican principles, more so than our friend C— [Carrera] The latter possesses more intellect & more vigour of Character and I think is the only man I knew there capable of carrying the revolution to a successful termination, but his Republicanism was due to my ascendant over him & I found on that subject he was difficult to govern—Ohiggins is a well disposed man, & a skillful agent can render him subservient to all his views—he must be managed [*sic*] dealt gently with in these discussions—Belgrano is a firm American & was my intimate friend—Pueyrredon is no friend to the English, I should rather suspect him of being attached to the Portuguese—I know that he was strongly so to the French, both he & Terrada [Interior Sec-

⁵ John Quincy Adams defeated Poinsett's application to the post at St. Petersburg in 1817 even though Peter Poletica, Russian Minister to the United States at Washington, was in favor of Poinsett's going to Russia. *Vide* Rippy, pp. 32, 33.

⁶ Cf. the view that it was to Russia's best interest "that the Spanish colonies were not freed, since, if they should be, the country about Buenos Aires would undoubtedly take away Russia's trade in hides and tallow." Philip C. Brooks, *Diplomacy and the Borderlands: The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), p. 76.

retary of the Plate Republic]—I feel as you know a great friendship for C—a, but when the cause of a nation is to be supported it must be done without regard to personal feelings—the only support of the british party in B. & A. [Brazil and Argentina] & in Chile is the british Commerce in the former—they could not subsist their armies 2 months with the funds arising from duties on English importations

The American party is still powerful there & only wants a leader of firmness and talents—

When I first arrived in Buenos Ayres we had no party, and we were not known at all—at that period, the greatest of british Influence, Lord Strangford swayed the councils of those countries, He did so from the Brazil perhaps better than if he had been present for he could excite no jealousies—I understand that Gov^t intend to send Mr. Graham to that court. I have a high opinion of his talents & beleive [*sic*] that he might easily play the game as L.^d Strangford—Whenever he goes I can establish a correspondence for him with those countries—and I will renew my letters to whoever is sent in the Congress so that he may find acquaintances, if not friends there—

I beg that you will send me Mr. Breckinridge's [*sic*] Pamphlet and everything that is written on the subject, and tell me if I can in any way contribute to the good cause—Especially if you receive any information respecting the state of those countries—does the Ontario touch in the river of Plate? Let me know when you expect the Congress to sail—

truly & Affectionately

Yours

J. R. Poinsett

Scrawl for Servants

⁷ Undoubtedly a slip of the pen, Poinsett refers here not to James or John Breckinridge but to Henry Marie Brackenridge (1786-1871), son of Hugh Henry Brackenridge. The pamphlet was Brackenridge's *South America* (1817), a writing which stressed the American position later adopted to a large extent in the Monroe Doctrine.