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# William G.D. Worthington: United States Special Agent 1817-1819

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WILLIAM G. D. WORTHINGTON:  
UNITED STATES SPECIAL AGENT, 1817-1819

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The Latin American Wars of Independence, 1810 to 1824, were of great and immediate consequence to the government of the United States. The disruption of the Spanish empire and the creation of new sovereign nations caused the United States to examine its Latin American foreign policy. During the wars for independence the United States chose to maintain a policy of neutrality concerning the belligerents and a policy of nonrecognition toward the patriot governments. This cautious policy was based to a large extent upon reports from State Department special agents in South America.

Presidents James Madison and James Monroe sent quasi-diplomatic officials known as special agents for four reasons: (1) to obtain pertinent data relative to the revolution, (2) to explain the policy of neutrality and nonrecognition, (3) to encourage commerce and trade, and (4) to propagate democratic and republican ideals.<sup>1</sup> Altogether thirteen special agents were dispatched on such missions. Their voluminous reports assisted the government to create and maintain a Spanish American policy.

The special agents varied widely in the performance of their missions. They differed in following diplomatic protocol and in many instances completely ignored the meaning of the word. Some special agents became self-styled diplomats and ignored the formal instructions altogether. All of them, however, tackled their missions with enthusiasm. Their politics was Jeffersonian; their philosophy was humanitarian. They viewed the patriot cause as a continuation of the American Revolution—as the cause of liberty versus tyranny, as new world freedom versus old world despotism.

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<sup>1</sup>James Monroe to Alexander Scott, May 14, 1812, State Department, "Special Agents," MSS. IV; Monroe to \_\_\_\_\_, May 19, 1817, "Monroe Papers," MSS. Library of Congress. XXIV.

ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

One of the most representative and at the same time one of the most spectacular special agents was William G. D. Worthington. His enthusiasm, his audacity, his attitudes, and his schemes were typical of other special agents. He was on the whole well-educated and cosmopolitan in interest. Like other special agents he was not a professional diplomat and had no training for foreign missions. Interested in many aspects of humanity, Worthington above all believed in the democratic tradition and the inviolability of republican institutions. The assignment to South America he hoped would be an opportunity to propagate his beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

President Monroe appointed Worthington as special agent in 1817. Patriot victories in 1816 had encouraged the President to dispatch a special agent to the United Provinces of Río de la Plata, Chile, and Peru. To say the least Worthington's instructions were general and vague. He was to promote liberal and stable regulations in the field of commerce and to explain the mutual advantages of commerce between the United States and the South American provinces. In addition he was to report on matters of political and economic interest. He was instructed to divide his time between the three provinces as the interest of the United States might require. Finally he was requested to report frequently.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps these instructions were clear to the State Department but to an amateur diplomat like Worthington they were less than thin sign posts in a blizzard.

Shortly after landing at Buenos Aires, the capital of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, Special Agent Worthington presented his credentials to Supreme Director Juan de Pueyrredon and to Secretary of State Gregorio Tagle. At this meeting

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<sup>2</sup>Eugenio Pereira Salas, La Misión Worthington en Chile (1818-1819), (Santiago: Imprenta Universitaria, 1936), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Henry M. Wriston, Executive Agents in American Foreign Relations, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1929), 415; Worthington to Miguel Zañartú, March 13, 1818, Worthington to John Quincy Adams, Dec. 31, 1817, July 4, 1818, State Department, "Dispatches from United States Ministers to Argentina," MSS. I.

WILLIAM G. D. WORTHINGTON

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Worthington stated the purposes of his mission. He told the government officials that it was the character of the United States to be without mystery and assured them that he would act in a plain and open manner. Worthington wrote:

I am convinced that the open candid mode of proceeding allowed me to take a part in affairs of which a more cunning policy might have deprived me.<sup>4</sup>

Candor was never lacking in Worthington. He freely discussed the disavowal of previous agents, the neutral position of the United States, the status of commercial relations, and his own limited authority to deal with the question of recognition.

The question of formal recognition of the United Provinces was somewhat embarrassing. It was particularly a sore point with the officials of Buenos Aires. In July 1816, a year prior to Worthington's arrival, the patriot government had officially declared its independence. They had expected immediate recognition by the great Northern Republic. Members of the Buenos Aires government were therefore disappointed that Worthington was not a full-fledged minister. Worthington realized that expectations ran high so he assiduously avoided the impression that he was an accredited minister. He wrote the State Department that the disappointment of the people was very great. It would be in the best interest of the United States to announce recognition before the good will began to ebb. Furthermore, immediate recognition, he thought, would guarantee the United States treatment as the most favored nation.<sup>5</sup>

Why did the United States refuse to grant recognition, officials in Buenos Aires inquired? Worthington explained that recognition had been withheld in favor of a policy of neutrality. There were advantages in neutrality for both parties: If the United States were to throw her resources to the insurgents, Spain might retaliate by enlisting the

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<sup>4</sup>Worthington to Adams, July 4, 1818, State Department, "Dispatches from United States Ministers to Argentina," I.

<sup>5</sup>Gregorio Tagle to Worthington, Oct. 3, 1817, Worthington to Adams, Oct. 4, 1817, *ibid.*, I.

ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

aid of the European powers. A policy of neutrality, Worthington explained, would interpret the struggle as a civil war. This in turn would allow all combatants access to the ports of the United States. Worthington was emphatic that neutrality was not injurious to the patriot cause.<sup>6</sup>

An item of major concern to both parties was the status of commercial relations. Worthington had expressed a desire that the New World should constitute a system different from that of Europe. By this he meant an economic system as well as a political system. To this end the Special Agent, apparently oblivious to his instructions, proposed a commercial treaty. His personal desire to excel and a wish to assist the patriot cause led him into this major diplomatic blunder.

In December of 1817, Worthington submitted to the government of the United Provinces "Forty-five Articals on the Subject of Commerce and Seamen."<sup>7</sup> The project was designed to place the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata and the United States on a perfect reciprocity. Anxious to cooperate, the Buenos Aires government appointed an agent to confer with Worthington. The two agents agreed on twenty-four articles of commerce and the proposed treaty was submitted to the respective governments.

Worthington's justification for participation in the proposed commercial negotiation was one rationalization after another. He presumed that if his government had known the political and economic state of affairs in Buenos Aires he would have been vested with different and more definite powers. The political stability of the patriot government and the predominance of the English commerce were factors which Worthington felt changed the whole situation. He was aware of his limitations to negotiate such a treaty but he felt circumstances justified his actions. He trusted that no ill would result.<sup>8</sup> As matters stood, the proposed commercial treaty was not formally exchanged, as an exchange would have been tantamount to recogni-

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<sup>6</sup>Worthington to Tagle, Oct. 6, 1817, Worthington to Adams, Oct. 1, 1817, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>7</sup>Worthington to Tagle, Dec. 17, 1817, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>8</sup>Worthington to Tagle, Dec. 17, 1817, Worthington to Adams, Jan. 1, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

WILLIAM G. D. WORTHINGTON

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tion and a direct violation of the United States policy of neutrality.

As a special agent per se, Worthington had a variety of tasks to perform. Civil war and revolution often result in violation of legal rights. In many instances Worthington interceded for United States citizens whose rights were violated. It was usually seamen, ship captains, and businessmen and in one instance it was an United States consul to whom Worthington's efforts were directed.

Much time was spent in gathering pertinent data. His reports from Buenos Aires included data on: (1) the progress of the revolution, (2) the threat of Brazilian expansion, (3) the influence and power of Great Britain in South America, and (4) the future role of the United States in the Western Hemisphere.

Leaving the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata for Chile in January 1818, Worthington jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Chile was wild with revolutionary fervor. Spanish forces had been defeated and independence had been proclaimed by the Supreme Director Bernardo O'Higgins. While in Chile Worthington proved himself to be an energetic supporter of American interests and an apostle of American liberty. If he had been diplomatically indiscreet in Buenos Aires, he was downright indecorous in his relations with the Chilean government. He often disregarded his instructions and fell into one blunder after another.

After being officially received by the Chilean government, Worthington began to ply his diplomatic wares. He kept himself occupied much as he had done in Buenos Aires. He appointed consuls, intervened for seamen, explained the neutrality policy of the United States, introduced commercial negotiations, and presented a plan of government to the Chilean assembly.

First on his agenda was the famed project for commerce and seamen. The draft he submitted to the Chilean authorities was almost identical to that submitted to the government in Buenos Aires. Supreme Director O'Higgins showed considerable interest and had the commercial project forwarded to the assembly. Months passed; no action was taken. Worthington frequently inquired of government officials concerning his commercial project. The Chilean government, though seemingly interested,



ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

failed to inaugurate negotiations.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly the unsettled revolutionary conditions and the preparations for another attack on Spanish forces were responsible. Worthington was disappointed. Nevertheless he pressed on to other endeavors.

Despite the demands of war, Worthington believed that there existed a rising spirit of liberty among the Chilean people--a spirit that would not be satisfied until a constitutional form of government had been adopted. Since no such constitutional movement was apparent, Worthington jumped into the breach. For humanity and for the people of Chile he submitted to the government his outline for a constitution. He titled the document "The Free Constitution for the State of Chile."<sup>10</sup> He explained his actions to the Supreme Director on the ground that the "venerable institution" had preserved the liberties of Great Britain for many years. When the institution had been adopted by the United States they had modified it and had given to the world a more perfect system of civil polity than had previously existed. The constitutional system, he assured O'Higgins, had withstood the intrigues of peace, the shocks of war, and had afforded protection and happiness to the citizens of North America. He said:

A well-organized form of Government will assure [Chile] Peace and Security at home, and respect abroad; it will tend to harmonize the discord and bind up the wounds.<sup>11</sup>

The constitution of the United States was a prototype for Worthington's constitution. It was modified, however, to meet conditions in Chile. As usual Worthington rationalized concerning his actions. In his report to the State Department he wrote, ". . . no ill could come of it" and that the "purity" of his intentions had justified the measure.<sup>12</sup> As might be expected, Worthington's

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<sup>9</sup>Worthington to Zañartú, March 2, 12, 1818, Worthington to Adams, Nov. 4, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>10</sup>Worthington to Bernardo O'Higgins, May 5, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>11</sup>Worthington to O'Higgins, May 5, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>12</sup>Worthington to O'Higgins, May 5, 1818, Worthington to Adams, Nov. 4, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

WILLIAM G. D. WORTHINGTON

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constitution for the state of Chile was given little credence by the Chilean authorities.

Fortunately for Worthington the whole constitutional affair was not a detriment to his obtaining information from governmental officials while he was in Chile. However the fiasco will loom as one of the most amazing diplomatic faux pas ever performed by a special agent of the United States. His actions were compromising to say the least. Chile had not requested such a document, and it could have been construed as an unfriendly gesture. If the constitution had been endorsed, it would have been interpreted as a tacit promise of recognition.

Barring his diplomatic blunders, Worthington capably reported on the state of affairs in Chile. He contacted leading government officials, military figures, commercial merchants, and outstanding civilians. He described both the domestic and foreign affairs of Chile. He pointed to the apparent stability of the O'Higgins government despite its military character. Much time was spent in obtaining statistics on the military and naval campaigns against the Spanish. He wrote on the Chilean attitude toward foreign nations and especially the United States.

Worthington reported that the North American republic was held in high esteem. The People of Chile he noted:

. . . appear to have a natural and instinctive partiality for the Citizens of the United States--Even the most uninformed of them seem to be gratefully aware that we have aided them in their struggle for Independence.<sup>13</sup>

He thought that when Chile became a republic and enlightened, they would see the "Good effects of free government." Then the result would be the establishment of a civil government similar to that of the United States. For this reason, as well as commercial, political, and moral reasons, the United States, he wrote, ought to recognize the government of Chile.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Worthington to Adams, July 4, 1818, ibid., I.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.



ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

After almost a year in Chile, Worthington returned to Buenos Aires and then to the United States terminating his mission. He considered his venture to have been a "political pilgrimage" for the "great cause" of the South American people.<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell Worthington summed up his individualistic conception of the mission. "I never was and never will dwindle down into a mere diplomatic machine-- a mere knight or rook upon the great political chessboard of this life."<sup>16</sup>

For a great part of Worthington's tenure in South America his superiors in Washington were chafing at the bit. When Secretary of State Adams told President Monroe of Worthington's commercial negotiations, the President retorted, "Dismiss him instantly! Recall him! Dismiss him!"<sup>17</sup> A remark in Adams' diary reveals his attitude. This representative ". . . has been swelling upon his agency until he has broken out into a self-accredited plenipotentiary."<sup>18</sup> Worthington was recalled and summarily dismissed by the government in February 1819.<sup>19</sup>

The achievements and the failures of Worthington were similar to those of other special agents. Most of the agents had been selected on the basis of their political prestige: Few of them had any diplomatic training or experience. Further factors like inadequate instructions and difficulty in communications added to the confusion. Pro-patriot sympathies colored their reports and directed their actions. They were successful in obtaining pertinent data relative to the revolution, explaining the policy of neutrality and nonrecognition, encouraging commerce and trade, and propagating democratic and republican ideals.

The mission of Special Agent Worthington proved

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<sup>15</sup>Worthington to Adams, July 9, 1818, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>16</sup>Worthington to Adams, March 7, 1819, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>17</sup>John Quincy Adams, Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795-1848, edited by Charles Francis Adams, (12 vols., Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874-1877), IV, 70.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, IV, 158-159.

<sup>19</sup>Adams to Worthington, Feb. 7, 25, 1819, State Department, "Dispatches to Consuls," II.

WILLIAM G. D. WORTHINGTON

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valuable to the Monroe administration. The United States policy of neutrality and nonrecognition was partly based upon an accumulation of many reports sent by agents such as Worthington. His relations with patriot officials and his promotion of commerce were in the best interests of the United States. Oddly enough many aspects of future commercial relations were premised upon Worthington's ill-famed commercial project. As a missionary of democracy, Worthington appeared unredoubtable. His diplomatic decorum was not that of an impartial agent, but his heart was sympathetic for the cause of the patriots.

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