

“I Consider Oregon Worth a War”



Letter of
Charles Jared Ingersoll

on the
Oregon Question
March 3, 1846



With an Introduction by Glenn Mason

In the 1840s the United States was gripped by an expansionist fever that would abate only when its possessions reached cross the continent to the Pacific. The Democrats, in an 1844 campaign plank, heightened the fever by calling for “reoccupation of Oregon and reannexation of Texas,” while President James K. Polk, in his inaugural address March 4, 1845, echoed his party’s slogan, “54-40 or fight,” by asserting “clear and unquestionable” title to all the Oregon country. This meant everything west of the Rocky Mountains north of latitude 42° and south of 54°40’.

The Convention of 1818 which settled the northern boundary of the Louisiana Purchase recognized the nebulous claims to this region and had provided that for a period of ten years both British and American nationals could trade or settle there. In 1827 the provision was renewed, to continue until one party gave notice of termination. There was, of course, intermittent discussion of the issue on a diplomatic level, and a regular avoidance of direct confrontation. In 1845, however, reflecting the mood of the country, Polk recommended to Congress that notice be given Great Britain terminating the arrangement.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1845-1846 the debate continued at home and abroad over the claim of the United States to Oregon. Francois Guizot and other Europeans saw expansionism in terms of alignments of power, and agreed that foreign intervention in the crisis would occur only if the settlement affected the balance of power in Europe.

Moderates in the United States, meanwhile, argued that American occupation and exploration had been concentrated south of the 49th parallel, that this had been the boundary previously offered by the United States as a compromise, and that an agreement should be reached on 49° so that full attention could be focused on the acquisition of Texas and California.

The expansionists, on the other hand, insisted that the United States should assert its claim to all of the region in dispute. It was our Manifest Destiny. The Pacific Coast would become the shipping and commercial center for all the Far East trade. That Great Britain would go to war over the matter was regarded as unlikely, or, if likely, then not unwelcome.

An important spokesman for the expansionists was Charles Jared Ingersoll (1782-1862)—Philadelphia lawyer, anglophobe author of a history the War of 1812, a Jacksonian Democrat, member of Congress, chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, and a moving spirit in the joint resolution for the annexation of Texas. In a letter of March 3, 1846, from Washington, Ingersoll presented the argument for all of Oregon.

The letter, now in the University of Oregon Library, and here published in facsimile, is a product worthy of its author—reasoned, urbane, succinct, bellicose. In seven paragraphs he argues a case that had been stated, often less clearly, in millions of words. His text: “I consider Oregon worth a war.” All else is exegesis.

Ingersoll’s letter is addressed to “Dear Sir.” Internal evidence indicates that his correspondent was Russell Jarvis (1791-1853), a Bostonian, graduate of Dartmouth, first editor of the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*. He had left the editorship in 1839, but was in 1846 a contributing editor, living in New York, as Ingersoll evidently knew. Jarvis’s politics paralleled those of Ingersoll, and he had written to request an official or personal statement on the Oregon question. On March 11 a *Public Ledger* editorial reflected this exchange of correspondence, referring to Oregon as the “New England on the Pacific,” and echoing other Ingersoll phrases.

The belligerence of the expansionists was tempered by events. A threat of war over the Texas boundary, and the favorable report on the Puget Sound area south of 49° emanating from the Wilkes Expedition, led commercial-minded expansionists, who dreamed of trade with the Far East, to concede that compromise was better than conflict, that one war at a time was enough. Great Britain offered to settle for 49°, and the treaty of June 15, 1846 accepted this arrangement.

As Oregon celebrates its 116th anniversary of statehood on February 14, 1975 and the University of Oregon approaches its Centennial, it is worth recalling that not so long ago Oregon was “worth a war.”

Glenn Mason, Director
Lane County Pioneer Museum

Washington
Mch. 3. '46

Dear Sir

I feel no restraint about answering as desired your letter received today without date as to when or where written—

Instead of views at large I can state my individual notions about Oregon, England, &c on which you dilate, briefly thus

1. I consider Oregon worth a war. The *commercial* worth of Oregon is inappreciable & England knows it, while we have almost limited our views to its *territorial* merits. The northern part, above 49, is by far the most valuable: it is New England on the Pacific.

2. But 49 has been so often offered and so long taken as a proper demarcation that if now proposed by England I think we would accept. A majority of Congress, both houses, think we should—A year hence, if not soon closed on that parallel the people will think otherwise

3. For England has no title at all from 42 to near 53 and not much from about 53 to 54.40; while our title is great for all the Columbia Valley and tolerable for the degree and a half on the Fraser River.

4. There is a large party in the U. S. *for* war, anyhow: The English press, travellers, encroachments, wrongs and follies ever since the peace of 1783, have gradually fomented that feeling. There is no party in England for war. But considerate persons in this country should and I trust will take care that it is not plunged into war, for no war can be right that is not indispensable—the last resort. On the other side the eminent of Great Britain will not submit to *ignominious* terms. I deem war extremely improbable and entirely agree with you that on no account, in no way must we be aggressors

4. At the same time I reckon the cost & trouble of war to us vastly exaggerated. I rather think it would be beneficial—certainly a hundred fold more injurious to England than the US. I read when they were published your bold and striking arguments in the Ledger, which I instantly recognised, as to the operations and expences of

wars to all of which I subscribe, and if I had time for expatiation w^d explain how I go even beyond you. The ideas are broached in my Historical Sketch of the War of 1812, under the head of the Halifax campaign for which New England is now ripe tho her magnats stupidly rejected it then. New England may have the trident of the ocean taken from Old England whenever New England chooses

5. By the same means the manufactures of all the U.S. w^d be immensely developed—and those of Great Britain *after* the war left in France, Germany &c

6. The Mexican is a complicated question, but soon to be resolved somehow. And now it is certain that 1. France will not interfere, nor, 2. England, except by stealth—

I account the speeches of Guizot, Berryer, Thiers &c in the Metropolis of *Europe* as equivalent for us to any honorable treaty that could be signed there after a glorious war

As I believe your letter is postmarked NYork, tho' even the postmark is nearly rubbed out, I shall address my answer to you there, remaining

Very respy
Yr humble servant
C J Ingersoll

*Third in a series of
historical vignettes
Friends of the Library
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon
1975*

Washington

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