

Chapter 178 – The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty Avoids A U.S.- U.K. Confrontation In Central America



Dates:
April 19, 1850

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• Two International Powers Vie For Influence In Central America

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While Congress is debating statehood for California, individual and corporate entrepreneurs are eager to find a fast and affordable route to reaching the riches of its gold fields.

One path lies in a sea voyage from the East coast around the tip of South America at Cape Horn to San Francisco which can be completed in 25-30 days -- but the typical \$400 fare is prohibitive for most adventurers.

An option that has proven intriguing lies in connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by constructing a continuous waterway across either Nicaragua or Panama. In both locations the oceans are separated by land masses that extend only 50-150 miles, with rivers and lakes facilitating linkage, were canals to be constructed.

Such an undertaking is first explored in 1825 by commercial and military interests seeking a short-cut to the Pacific. At that time, surveyors map out a potential route for a canal in Nicaragua, but it is subsequently set aside given the costs and complexities.

But the California gold rush resurrects interest in 1849 which extends beyond the United States to nations in Europe, most notably Great Britain, which continues to have land claims along the eastern coast of Honduras and Nicaragua, and to the west, at San Juan, a likely end point for a canal.

In order to avoid any future tensions between America and Britain over such a canal, Secretary of State John Clayton and British minister Sir Henry Bulwer negotiate a treaty guaranteeing that:



Neither country will seek territorial dominion over Nicaragua or any other country in Central America; and any canal or other path across the isthmus will be open for equal use by both nations.

Map Showing Possible Sites For A Canal In Nicaragua

The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty is ratified by a 42-11 vote in the Senate on April 19, 1850. As such it becomes the one foreign policy achievement during Zachary Taylor's presidency.

Over time, however, it also generates criticism among hard-liners who argue that it weakens the total "hands-off" warning codified in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

(Note: plans for a Nicaragua Canal to rival the 1914 Panama Canal continue to the present day.)