DRAGOONS ON THE SANTA Fé TRAIL IN THE AUTUMN OF 1843

By Otis E Young*

Few names loom greater in the history of the early Southwest than does that of Philip St. George Cooke, author, trail-blazer, and cavalryman extraordinary. Born in Virginia in 1809, Cooke graduated from West Point at the age of eighteen, and as a lieutenant of the 6th Infantry served in Black Hawk's War and Major Bennet Riley's epochal Santa Fé trail expedition of 1829.1 Distinguishing himself in these affairs, Cooke was transferred to the newly-organized Regiment of Dragoons2 in 1833, wherein he participated in the ill-fated Dodge-Leavenworth Expedition of 1834, and betimes came to the notice of its commander, Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, as a promising leader and tactician. Consequently, when the services of the (now) 1st Dragoons were required along the Santa Fé trail in 1843, Kearny logically selected Captain Cooke to be the field commander on what promised to be, and was, hazardous and important duty.

The 1st Dragoons had in the intervening years come to be recognized as the only force capable of policing white and Indian alike in the uneasy border regions, now Kansas and Oklahoma, through which the Santa Fé trail ran. Here the Indians, newly-independent Texans, Americans, and Mexicans met, traded, and frequently fought. As guardians of the peace, the Dragoons had sufficient to do. This was particularly so in 1843, for the flourishing Santa Fé trade had fallen largely into the hands of Mexicans3

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1 Otis E Young, *The First Military Escort on the Santa Fe Trail*, 1829 (Glendale, 1952).

2 Later the 1st Dragoons, and 1st Cavalry Regiment.

whom the belligerent Texans regarded as fair game. Early in the year, a sometime Nacogdoches store clerk named Jacob Snively received permission from the Texas government to organize a force of volunteers to prey upon the Mexican traders on a fifty-fifty share of the loot basis. Rendezvousing near present-day Preston, Texas, about the middle of April, Snively’s “Texas Invincibles” marched northeast to the Arkansas River to lie in wait for the summer Santa Fé-bound trains. It was impossible to keep news of this sort secret on the frontier; through diplomatic channels the Mexicans pressed the United States for military protection of the trains from Missouri to the Arkansas River (the international boundary), and prepared to provide an escort of their own from the Arkansas to Santa Fé. Colonel Kearny had already sensed trouble within his baliwick, and had patrols out to meet it, but upon receipt of War Department orders to make up the desired escort, detached Cooke and four dragoon companies to accompany the traders.

The subsequent events were initiated by Snively, whose Invincibles shot up a small Mexican advance guard, thereby so badly frightening the New Mexican governor, Manuel Armijo, that he and his four hundred-man escort fled incontinently back to Santa Fé despite the fact that Armijo was himself the owner of one complete train. Cooke’s dragoon force, now near the crossings of the Arkansas, was alerted, and on the morning of June 30 discovered the raiders camped on the south bank of the river. Despite

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6 [United States], “Correspondence with the Texan Authorities in relation to the Disarming of Texas forces under Command of Major Snively, by United States Troops,” Senate Documents, 28 Cong., 2 sess., No. 1. (Hereafter cited as “Snively Diplomatic Correspondence.”) See also Josiah Gregg, The Commerce of the Prairies (2 vols., New York, 1844), II, 170.
7 Annual Report of Alterations and Casualties, 1st Dragoons, 1843 (WRD). This was the fourth of at least six military escorts on the Santa Fé trail by American troops: the first was that of Major Riley and four companies of the 6th Infantry in 1829; the second, that of Captain Matthew Duncan’s company, United States Mounted Rangers, in 1833; the third, that of Captain Clifton Wharton and Co. “A”, the Regiment of Dragoons, in 1834; with the fourth and fifth, by Captain Cooke, this article deals; and the sixth, that of Colonel S. W. Kearny and the bulk of the 1st Dragoons, was a little-known aspect of Kearny’s South Pass Expedition of 1845.
8 Crump, “The Snively Expedition”; Cooke, Journal of His Late Expedition on the Santa Fé Road, p. 58; Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, II, 171.
9 Blanche C. Grant, ed., Kit Carson’s Own Story of His Life, by Col. and Mrs. D. C. Peters (Taos, 1926), p. 53.
10 Near the present site of Fort Dodge, Kansas.
the fact that their camp might be in Mexican territory (west of the
100th meridian) where Cooke had no right to intervene, the decisive
captain did not hesitate in forcing Snively’s men to surrender.
The protesting Texans were brought in, disarmed, and the bulk
of them then allowed to return home. This “Snively Affair” gave
rise to extended diplomatic protests from the Texans\textsuperscript{11} and even
inspired a court of inquiry on Cooke’s action, by which he was
eventually discharged with a clean bill of health.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, the
military authorities publicly applauded Cooke’s hair-trigger ac-
tion,\textsuperscript{13} and even before the court had convened sent him back to his
mission of guarding the trail when the need of an autumn escort
seemed indicated.

The sources of this autumn expedition of the dragoons come
chiefly from the work of Cooke himself, who always kept a metic-
culous record of his daily activities. The original journals disap-
appeared at the time of Cooke’s death in Detroit in 1895, thereby
depriving historians of an enormously valuable collection of ma-
terial on the Southwest.\textsuperscript{14} Abstracts survive, however, as military
reports and as compilations made for his two narratives. \textit{Scenes
and Adventures in the Army} (Philadelphia, 1857), and \textit{The Con-
quest of New Mexico and California} (New York, 1878). Since
Cooke had certain literary ambitions,\textsuperscript{15} it followed that his books
did not contain exactly the same material as his reports, even
though both were taken from the same source. Therefore, fairly
complete accounts may occasionally be synthesized from a compari-
on of the two accounts. In the case of this autumn expedition, we
are fortunate in that Cooke used his journal to prepare not only
a formal report, but a sequence in \textit{Scenes and Adventures in the Army}.

The expedition was well-omened; prior to his departure, the
captain received a letter from his commanding general, Edmund
P. Gaines, of the 3rd Military Department, who said:\textsuperscript{16}

If in the discharge of this duty you should find rough and perilous work,
the meritorious services of your officers, and your men, and yourself, shall
be affectionately remembered by every true-hearted soldier and statesman
of our country; and more especially of those great and growing States of the
Valley of the Mississippi and more especially by your General and friend

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] Cf. “Snively Diplomatic Correspondence”. Snively claimed that his raiders
were arrested in Mexican territory, but this was later proved not to be the case.
\item[12] General Orders 19, Washington, D. C., April 24, 1844 (WRD).
\item[13] \textit{Niles' Register} (Baltimore, Md.), August 5 and 19, 1843.
\item[14] With interruptions, dating from 1827 to 1866, the period of Cooke’s western
career.
\item[15] The former especially is described by Bernard DeVoto, \textit{The Year of Decision}
(Boston, 1943), pp. 233-34, as, “Full of gothic moonlight, sentiments that Frémont
would have found noble, and a literary pathos hard to associate with as hard-bitten
an officer as the army had.”
\end{footnotes}
For at the time, Texans were considered by conservative Americans to be more of a nuisance than the Mexicans. To gain complete freedom of action, Cooke's orders instructed him, if need be, to spend the entire winter either on the Arkansas River, at Bent's (Old) Fort,\(^{17}\) or even in Santa Fé itself.\(^{18}\) It was hoped that Mexican cooperation with the venture would be assured, for President Santa Anna himself was struck with the results of the Snively Affair, calling it "the first act of good faith ever shown by the United States to Mexico."\(^{19}\) In fact, the only persons not in accord with the project were the Texans, who laid the deaths of some of the Snively raiders at Cooke's door, and threatened reprisals.\(^{20}\)

For troops, Cooke was given the veteran Fort Leavenworth companies "C," "F," and "K" of the 1st Dragoons, and was promised additional reinforcements of companies "A," "E," and "H," then on detached service at Forts Scott and Gibson, both down near the Missouri-Arkansas boundary.\(^{21}\) This was an imposing number of men to be placed under the completely independent command of a rather junior captain, but undaunted by responsibility, Cooke marched from Fort Leavenworth on August 24, prepared to spend the next ten months, if necessary, wintering in the shadows of the Rockies or the Sangre de Christos. His squadron required a week to travel the one hundred miles to Council Grove (Kansas), the customary rendezvous point for the Santa Fé trains and the troops which guarded them. In his report, Cooke noted merely the bald fact of arrival and meeting there a platoon of "A" Company under the command of 2nd-Lt. R. S. Ewell,\(^{22}\) but in his journal, the captain had a great deal more to add.\(^{23}\)

Sept. 1—A fine rapid clear stream this! Six miles from Council Grove—famous as Council Bluffs. It is a tributary of Grand River, more prettily and distinctly called by its Indian name Neosho (water-white or clear; the Indians, like the French, give you the adjective last) . . . . .

Today we arrived at Council Grove and were received with "presented arms" by a company of dragoons—\(^{24}\) which makes a fourth. What a collection of wagons! there are hundreds, and nearly all have Mexican owners; look at their men! they show ivories as white as negroes; they are Indians, but New Mexicans as well, and speak Spanish. There are herds of mules

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\(^{17}\) Near the present site of La Junta, Colorado.


\(^{20}\) \textit{Ibid.}; feeling against Cooke for "abandoning" the raiders was still so strong in 1853 that he was obliged to ask for transfer from Fort Mason, Texas. \textit{Cf.} P. St. G. Cooke to Asst. Adj. Gen. S. Thomas, March 17, 1853 (WRD).

\(^{21}\) Cooke, Report, pp. 9-10.

\(^{22}\) \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 2-3; this officer was "Dick" Ewell, of Civil War fame.


\(^{24}\) Ewell's detachment.
In every valley, on every hill, and hundreds of oxen too. It is unhealthy here; many who have stayed a week are sick; the dragoon company has been waiting here three days, and they are already suffering.

Council Grove is a luxuriant, heavily timbered bottom of the Neosho, of about one hundred and sixty acres; and there are several rather smaller in the vicinity. It is a charming grove, though sombre; for we love the contrast to the vast plain, hot and shadeless.

The miasmas of Council Grove filled Cooke with impatience to be quickly gone; the fall weather was unusually rainy, and the wet not only promoted sickness but would make the trail hub-deep in mud. The captain served notice to this effect on a committee of Mexican merchants, and despite their complaints and procrastination, marched westward on the following day with about one hundred forty wagons in his wake. Yet the rains continued to descend on the muddy prairie, slowing the overloaded and ill-managed train so that it marched but eighty-seven miles in the next twelve days.

The escort and the merchants crossed the Cottonwood Fork of the Neosho on September 6, where a fog was encountered as well as the Comanchero (Indian trader) Robidoux. While the Mexicans struggled to get their teams across the stream, the captain and the trader exchanged information of the trail and international politics. Robidoux asserted that only American annexation could save New Mexico from stagnation, and only American citizens develop its mineral wealth. He knew, he said, “Districts where, for twenty miles, it is impossible to find a handful of dirt without gold.”

“Why in the world have you not made your fortune collecting it?” the incredulous Cooke demanded.

With a Gallic shrug, Robidoux admitted that he had lost eight thousand dollars in just such a venture. Cooke dismissed the matter from his mind, and turned to note the discomforts of the trail he was following:

This cold September rain is doubly unpleasant, when the reflection is made that it is twenty miles to the first tree or bush for fuel, and that heavily laden wagons must bear one company; but it is the villain musquitos that fill the measure of discomfort; you perceive they take refuge from the rain within my greatcoat collar, and beneath the pent-house of my regulation visor. This “Turkey Creek,” which I left this morning, should have a truer name; it is a cold and rainy place, without fuel, and no turkey or other living thing did I ever see there, save a squad of horse-stealing Indians, which we once surprised at dark, after a forced march. Yesterday’s infamous roads and this rain are worst in the prospect of the great detention they will cause to the caravan; now every hours counts, and is one nearer to frost and snow.

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25 N. B. Bennet Riley’s 1829 escort, in which Cooke had played an important part, had first demonstrated the practicability of using oxen on the high plains. Council Grove was the last source of hardwood to the Rockies, hence its utility as a rendezvous and repair site.

26 Cooke, Report, p. 3.
27 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, pp. 243-44.
28 Near present McPherson, Kansas.
At the Little Arkansas River\textsuperscript{30} Cooke encountered Captain Enoch Steen\textsuperscript{31} with the promised reinforcements from Forts Scott and Gibson, with whom Cooke had been ordered to augment his force. Cooke had protested, with good reason, for these were "orphan" troops, detached from the regiment and stationed in the 2nd Military Department, where both regimental headquarters and the department commander had assumed it was the duty of the other to provide for them. Steen had fifty-four ragged troopers, with two-thirds of his horses and transport mules unfit for service. The testy Cooke dubbed Steen's scarecrows the "Falstaff Company," and depleted his own supplies in order to outfit them sufficiently to return to the frontier forts. Nevertheless, the order to include them in his command could not be ignored; Cooke compromised by selecting twenty-five of the most fit, and sending the rest home. They departed on September 11, "broken down and on the back track. Having pretty thoroughly exhausted the prairie plum crop . . . . they were now prone to the land of pork and beans."\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the abominable roads and the drag-footed Mexican train, the dragoons somehow approached the lower crossing (the "Caches") of the Arkansas on October 1. Cooke had learned from American traders returning from Santa Fé that the Texan raiders of June, after making an effort to continue their raid, had finally dispersed.\textsuperscript{33} Although this information indicated that the military escort was no longer necessary, it did not relieve Cooke of anxiety, for he feared lest further delay catch his troops abroad on the plains in cold weather, unable to advance or retreat. This would be certain death for the horses, if not most of the dragoons themselves. He wasted no time in rejecting the proposal of the traders that he accompany them to the city of Santa Fé.\textsuperscript{34}

That is the sore point; if I had got my roving commission in my spring campaign, what a pleasant, easy matter to have gone there and returned: but now if I go I shall stay until it sickens us to the heart of its barbarous dearth of all mental and creature comforts; for five or six months would some of us think of little but home. . . .

The captain's objections were practical as well as sentimental; despite the traders' assurances of welcome, the tender-skinned Latins might strongly object to the presence of a foreign military force in the capital of New Mexico. Furthermore, the coarse amuse-

\textsuperscript{30}Near present Buhler, Kansas.
\textsuperscript{31}Captain Steen had been appointed to the Mounted Ranger Battalion from Missouri on July 16, 1832, and had transferred to the Regiment of Dragoons in 1834; Francis B. Heitman, \textit{Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army} (2 vols., Washington, 1903), I, 919.
\textsuperscript{33}Cooke, \textit{Scenes and Adventures}, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 257-58.
ments of the city would be overly attractive to uneducated enlisted men. Desertion is the curse of professional armies, and by spring, Cooke might well have found his force depleted to the vanishing point by the seductions of tequila and dark-eyed belles.

Wintering at Bent’s Fort was a prospect dimmed by the suspicion that the supplies ordered sent to that place for the dragoons’ use might not have arrived. Likewise, spending the season on the trail itself would be difficult without buffalo, which the wet weather had meanwhile been driving to far-distant hilltops. With these factors in mind, Cooke assembled the principal traders on October 1, and then:35

. . . . Demanded of them if they desired escort beyond the boundary [the crossings of the Arkansas]. I confidently assured them of the absence of any danger but from Indians, (whom they then professed not to fear;) I offered to accompany them 60 miles beyond the Arkansas to the Semirone [Cimarron]: further than this, I told them, I had determined not to go, and attempt to return to Missouri: . . . . that if I went further I must go on to Santa Fe,— or their settlements for forage, and observed that the inconvenience and expense to which this would put our authorities, would probably prevent their being indulged with any future escort. But all to no purpose: they demanded escort to a point about 150 miles beyond the crossing: and said I would be welcome in Santa Fe.—

It seemed as though the captain would be obliged to give the traders what they desired, regardless of the hardships which his command might encounter on returning to Fort Leavenworth in winter. These physical difficulties should not be underestimated; Cooke gives an impressionistic but very vital picture of travel on the Santa Fé trail during these days of autumn chill and wet:36

Caught twenty-five miles from fuel in a thirteen hour rain . . . . for fifteen miles we soaked, and mayhap sulked; in vain was excitement offered in the shape of the most convenient herds of buffalo; cows, calves, in fat family groups, kicking up the mud as they ran past almost into our faces: —a cape saturated to board-like stiffness, thrown back—a sodden holster-cover half raised—a horse urged to a deeper splash or two—and then, reaction brought us to the cold stage again!

Fifteen miles! — and flesh and blood—mule flesh—could stand no more: the column’s head, followed by all its drill-cemented joints, was turned . . . . to the hospitable meadows of the Arkansas: I knew . . . . that in the low, flat bottom we should find dry ground; for it is composed of sand: but for fuel, the poor fellows, after their wet, cold ride, had to wade waist-deep, and over tedious quicksands, a quarter of a mile through the river to the grove, and return with the soaked sticks upon their shoulders; and the weather has turned cold.

On the same day that the traders were requesting Cooke’s company into Mexican territory, Charles Bent37 and the contract supplies were described. After some thought, Cooke decided that

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35 Cooke, Report, pp. 5-6.
36 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, pp. 262-63.
37 Charles, of the legendary brothers Bent, was the chief proprietor of Bent’s (Old) Fort and contractor for the expedition’s winter rations.
he would probably not be going to Bent’s Fort in any case; he told
the proprietor to reduce the stipulated amount of beef, but take the
flour and other barreled rations on to the post (where they were
to prove invaluable to Kearny and the South Pass Expedition in
1845). Thereupon, the traders quietly begged Cooke not to reveal
to Bent any of his plans, particularly as to the distance he intended
to escort the wagons. Cooke wanted to know what they meant;
the Mexicans replied that this information might be ‘‘communicated
to enemies; nests, they say, of semi-trappers and semi-brigands,
who harbor not very far from B’s establishment and not far from
a point on their route.’’ This overly-timid attitude clearly revealed
the Mexicans’ state of mind and the impossibility of dissuading
them from demanding escort at least to the Cimarron. Cooke re-
signed himself and signaled his decision by sending a request to
Fort Leavenworth for sufficient calomel and clothing to see his
command through a winter of camping beside the Santa Fé trail.

On October 3, Captain Cooke was surprised and delighted to
learn that a substantial Mexican military force had appeared on
the south bank of the Arkansas, a day’s march away. It had
been peremptorily ordered out from Santa Fé by President Santa
Anna, and consisted of fifty lancers, who had left treble their
number back on the Cimarron, distrustful of their ability to pene-
trate the Kiowa-infested sand hills between the two rivers. The
dragoons promptly marched to the lancers’ camp, whereupon Cooke
sent over his adjutant with his compliments to the Mexican com-
mander and a cordial invitation to visit with the American troops.
Cooke had seen this done during Riley’s expedition of 1829, but
now international tension was such that the Mexican commander
refused, alleging, ‘‘that he had received positive orders not to
cross the river, which he would disobey under no circumstances.’’
Cooke deduced that Santa Anna, informed of the intention to march
the dragoons to Santa Fé, had acted swiftly to forestall any oppor-
tunity for a coup de main by Cooke’s command in New Mexico.

Since no formalities were in order, Cooke delayed only long
enough to see the caravan over the river, then formed his men in
order of battle and fired a few howitzer shells into the water as
a ‘‘salute’’. No longer needed on the trail, the dragoons then
turned their faces to the east to begin the long march homeward to
Fort Leavenworth, spurred on by their anxious commander. The
march soon met increased difficulties in sudden and severe cold
weather; by October 5, no grass could be found near the trail it-

38 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, p. 267.
40 Young, First Escort on the Santa Fe Trail, pp. 145-49.
41 Cooke, Report, p. 7.
42 Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, p. 271.
43 Ibid.
self, and Cooke was reduced to the less direct course of closely paralleling the Arkansas, whose bottoms still afforded fuel and forage.\footnote{Cooke, Report, p. 8.} Two days later, the squadrons encountered the buffalo on their fall migration, "with a constant utterance of their very peculiar sounds, which may not be better described, than as something between the grunt of a great hog and the low bellowing of a bull . . . . ."\footnote{Cooke, Scenes and Adventures, p. 277.} Narrowly escaping from a prairie fire of their own making, the dragoons were at Diamond Spring within the week, and a day later, Council Grove itself. Half the wagon mules were foundered, and four or five troop horses also used up; it had been a hard, swift march against the onrushing winter.

From Council Grove the dragoons made their way northeastward until they struck the military road which connected the forts of the western Missouri border axis. Here, on October 24, the three southern companies under Lt. Ewell were dismissed to return to their stations; Cooke was undoubtedly glad to be rid of them, but not of Dick Ewell who held the command, "—that of a squadron—much above his rank, but not above his merit."\footnote{Ibid., pp. 9-10.} On the following day, the remainder of the escort was at Fort Leavenworth, and their commander beginning to wrestle with the inevitable paper-work. In his official report, submitted October 26, the captain had much to say concerning the Santa Fé trade, and little of it complimentary, but his is as good a summary as may be found of the trade in its latter days:\footnote{Ibid., pp. 11-14.}

1st. The Mexican tariff, with land transportation from Independence, Missouri, amounts to prohibition.

2d. The Province of New Mexico has been greatly impoverished, almost ruined in the last ten years by the aggressions of wilder Indians, the Apaches . . . .

3d. The trade is a necessity to New Mexico—poor— inland, and remote: hence by a stretch of power the duties are remitted, or commuted for an uncertain and arbitrary amount: such as $500 per wagon load: (this caused the overloaded wagons.)

Hence 4th. The traders are licensed smugglers, and a large portion of the goods entered go on to Chihuahua: a land transportation of 1500 miles to avoid the more regular custom house of Matamoras.

5th. The trade is falling into the hands of the Mexicans: of about 200 wagon loads which I have escorted this year, I do not believe ten have belonged to Americans who were resident citizens.

6th. With these few wagons of merchandise 68 Americans were reported to me in the summer caravan. Hence they are nearly all adventurers, who live cheaply on buffalo, avoid the restraint of society, and at Santa Fé plunge into the dissipations of probably the most abandoned and dissolute community in North America.
7th. In the abstract, the trade is a disadvantageous one; there being no return profits; and the wagons return empty.

8th. The tonnage, or value, of this year's trade is unequal to that of a single ship load from one of our commercial ports; or that of many a steamboat trading to St. Louis.

9th. The trade is only sensibly felt in Missouri, by the village of Independence, its Depot; and its enticing, corrupting influence upon a few citizens of a roving disposition.

10th. The American traders need none, and wish no military protection to the trade.

11. The Mexican traders profess to apprehend nothing from Indians.

& 12. This is the only year that the trade was ever molested by whites: or most probably ever will be again.

And having made his report, the captain was prepared to leave the Santa Fé trail for good. Events dictated otherwise, however, for Cooke had wrought better than he knew; from this time on, the dragoon officer would be distinctly persona grata to the Mexicans, just as he would be detested by Texans and (somewhat unjustly) accused of deliberately turning the Snively raiders unarmed upon the plains to be attacked by Indians. Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny intended to make good use of his captain's reputation, and after taking him along on the famed South Pass Expedition of 1845 (which may or may not have been set up as a potential strike on Oregon), the colonel insisted on Cooke's services when the Mexican War broke out. The captain somewhat reluctantly trailed Kearny's Army of the West to Bent's Fort, where he discovered that Kearny had actually intended to halt his march until Cooke put in an appearance! It was obvious that Kearny had in mind something for Cooke other than the command of a squadron of dragoons which the captain so ardently desired.

That something was the neutralization of Santa Fé, capital, stronghold, and keystone of the Southwest; without it, the Army of the West might fail of its objective or even perish of hunger on its march from Bent's Fort. Cooke's mission was to proceed there in advance of the army accompanied by two negotiators (James Magoffin and one José Gonzales), and cajole or intimidate Governor Armijo into evacuating the city. As the result of his popularity with the Mexicans, Cooke was of course ideally suited to be Kearny's military representative. The results are clear, even if the methods employed are somewhat obscure. After a midnight interview, Armijo agreed to evacuate the city, into which Kearny marched without firing a shot. The winning of the Southwest became an accomplished fact.

48 S. W. Kearny to Gen. G. M. Brooke, May 31, 1846 (WRD).
49 Cooke, Conquest of New Mexico and California, pp. 6-7.
50 Ibid., pp. 7-30, and especially p. 31; Cooke's memoirs seem to be the only extant account of the secret negotiations between President Polk's agent, Magoffin, and the venal Armijo.