

*Sir Charles Bagot to Mr. George Canning*

St. Petersburg

October 29th, 1823

Private, By Messenger Walsh.

"Who am I to side with? That seems to be in point of fact, the question to which Mr. Middleton's new instructions have given rise. Am I to side with America, and deny all claims of Russia to any part of the N.W. Coast South of the 61st degree of North Latitude? or am I to side with Russia, and deny all claim of the United States to any part of the coast north (for example) of the mouth of The Columbia river? or am I to side with neither—to admit that we have all three equal pretensions—and to give it to be understood that we would consent to divide the whole coast between the 42d and 61st degrees as well as we can, and according to our respective conveniences?

These are questions much too important in their consequences for me to give an opinion upon, even if I could form one in my own mind, which I can not, until I know more accurately than I do whether our principal object is to secure the fur trade on the continent for the Hudson's Bay Company, or to secure to ourselves a share in the Sea otter trade with China—or to secure both.

The pretensions of the United States are in the true spirit of their usual encroachment; and as there is something plausible in their argument, they may I think contrive to make this a troublesome business. The object of the United States is, I know, to obtain a boundary which shall give them both banks and the exclusive navigation of the Columbia River from its mouth to the Stony Mountains,<sup>1</sup> and, to secure this, they would desire a line drawn from about Widbegs<sup>2</sup> harbour, in something more than 46°N. Latitude (I use the map you sent me from the office) to the most northern bend of the river in something more than 51°N. Latitude: but I think, from a few words which Mr. Middleton let fall that they will not insist very stubbornly upon coming cranking in cutting "this huge Halfmoon, this monstrous cantle" out of the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company (who have actually a Post at Athabaska<sup>3</sup> at the very bend of the river), provided that they can secure the embouchure of the Columbia.

To this perhaps there would be no great objection, as, in regard to the Americans, any fixed boundary may be better than none; and the adjourned question of the Columbia river, which has, I believe, only 4 or 5 years more to sleep, would thus be quietly and finally disposed of in a general arrangement. But shall we consent, when boundaries are once established, to give freedom of trade, fishery, &c., to the other two parties in our allotment? I suspect that if we do, Jonathan will catch a world more otters than we shall—that he will get the whole of that trade with China into his own hands. And that he will contrive both to stir up and arm the Indians against us and our Company in the interior of the Country.

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<sup>1</sup>Rocky mountains.

<sup>2</sup>Whidbey harbour, now known as Grays harbour, Pacific coast of the United States, lat. 47°N.

<sup>3</sup>Boat Encampment, at the "Great bend" of the Columbia river, lat. 52° 04'N., long. 118° 36'W.; the west end of the portage *via* Athabaska pass.