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New Mexico's Delegate in the Secession Winter Congress, Part 2

MIGUEL A. OTERO RESPONDS TO HORACE GREELEY, AND GREELEY TAKES REVENGE

Mark J. Stegmaier

Part one of this research note mentions that former territorial delegate Miguel A. Otero and his wife, Mary Blackwood Otero, from Charleston, South Carolina, collaborated with the Confederates when they invaded New Mexico Territory between 1861 and 1862. But the question remains whether New Mexico's delegate Otero was pro-secession or pro-Confederate during the secession winter session of Congress, 3 December 1860–4 March 1861. According to Horace Greeley, famous editor of the *New York Tribune*, Otero was a devout Southern secessionist.

Waiting until the end of the Civil War, Greeley wrote that New Mexico's delegate "had issued and circulated an address to [New Mexico's] people, [and] intended to disaffect them to favor the Rebellion" as early as 15 February 1861. Greeley published this claim in his famous two-volume history of the Civil War, *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860–'65* (1864–1866), based on a date scribbled at the bottom of Otero's address. Two years later, in 1868, historian Benson J. Lossing echoed Greeley's accusation that Otero had written a document "to incite the inhabitants of New Mexico to rebellion" against the United States. However, Lossing reported that Otero published this address on 16 February 1861. Almost twenty years later, nineteenth-century western historian Hubert

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Howe Bancroft, having never seen Otero's supposed inflammatory address, repeated the same charge made by "Lossing and others." In the early twentieth century, pioneer New Mexico historian Ralph E. Twitchell acknowledged 15 February as the address date, citing Greeley and Lossing, but he neither commented on nor attempted to investigate the truth of Greeley's charge.¹

Regardless of whether Otero collaborated with Confederates in New Mexico following the secession winter session of Congress, it is time to exonerate Otero from Greeley's accusation of rank secessionism in February 1861. First of all, despite his proslavery sympathies, a wife from Charleston, and his close association with radical Southern Democrats in the House of Representatives, Otero did not express secessionist opinion during the second session of the 36th Congress. In a letter to James L. Collins of the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* on 8 November 1860, Otero frankly opposed Southern secession; he declared that Pres. Abraham Lincoln's election simply did not justify such an action. Writing a day later to Collins, Otero suggested that, if disunion occurred, New Mexico's most prudent course would be to join with California and other Pacific states to form their own confederation. Otero's suggestion was not unique; speculation of the Union dissolving into multiple confederacies was common at the time. During the October before Lincoln's election, Comdg. Gen. Winfield Scott cautioned Pres. James Buchanan that the Union might split into four confederacies. By 21 December 1860, Rep. Charles Scott (D-CA) wrote a letter to California's legislature recommending that California set itself up as an independent republic if the Union broke apart. On 8 January 1861 Unionist governor John Letcher of Virginia also suggested four subdivisions of the Union.²

Exactly what then was the disunionist manifesto written by Otero to which Greeley referred in his book? There is no record of any address written by Otero dated 15 February 1861. There is only one Otero document that Greeley could have referenced, and Greeley's own misdating of it in his book is the main reason for lingering confusion. The fog begins to clear a bit when one understands that Greeley dated Otero's address not on the day it was written by Otero but on the date it appeared in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*. Even then Greeley got it wrong, for the date of the issue in which a long editorial letter by Otero appeared was 16 February. Although Lossing somehow cited the date as published in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, it is obvious Lossing based his account on Greeley's earlier publication. However, Otero originally wrote the letter on 5 January and initially published it in the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* on 12 January.³

What had Greeley found so offensive about Otero's letter? Otero did not even hint at secessionism in his letter. Greeley's accusation constituted an

entirely false construction of Otero's letter. What angered Greeley was that Otero personally called him a liar in his letter and vigorously defended New Mexico and its people against one of Greeley's *New York Tribune* editorials. The Greeley-Otero dispute arose initially from the New York editor's campaign in the secession crisis against a movement to partly resolve the issues dividing North and South by making New Mexico a state. Greeley strongly opposed the New Mexico statehood bill devised by Rep. Charles Francis Adams (R-MA) as a way for Republicans to avoid taking a stand on the issue of slavery in national territories. Although most Republicans did not seriously believe that New Mexico, despite its nominal slave code in 1859, would really become a slave state, some radical Republicans, like Greeley, vehemently believed New Mexico might become a slave state and therefore opposed the bill. In the *New York Tribune* on 31 December 1860, Greeley printed the first of what would become a barrage of editorials attacking New Mexico and its population as unfit for statehood.⁴

In his editorial of 31 December, Greeley slurs New Mexicans as mixed-race, priest-ridden peons and portrays expelled San Francisco banditti, proslavery border ruffians chased out of Kansas, and other proslavery men migrating in droves to New Mexico. Otero answered these charges as passionately as Greeley had delivered them. Here follows Otero's letter as printed in the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* and later printed in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*:⁵

Letter, Dated 5 January 1861

To the Editor of the *Constitution*:

Sir: Not being a reader of the *New York Tribune*, my attention has just been directed to a defamatory and malevolent editorial which appeared in that paper a few days ago in reference to the Territory of New Mexico. The article appears to have been instigated by the recently-suggested proposition of admitting that Territory into the Union as a State; and the editor, in order to disparage the idea in the minds of the members of the republican party, accumulates all the misrepresentations and calumnies with which ignorance and malice have assailed the people of New Mexico ever since the acquisition of that country by the United States; and he intensifies those misrepresentations and calumnies with the virulence and frenzied animosity of a sectional enemy.

Mr. Greeley makes no concealment of his purpose; for he starts with the assertion that "the virtual surrender of New Mexico to slavery is gravely meditated by leading republicans at Washington." He then says: "Had New

Mexico been made a State in 1850, under Gen. Taylor's administration, it would, to a moral certainty, have been a free State. But times have bravely altered under the two last democratic administrations. The most insidious and systematic efforts have been made to plant slavery there, and not without success. Zealous propagandists fill all the important Federal offices. Pro-slavery army officers have been sent there, taking slaves with them. The border ruffians, who were finally beaten out of Kansas, have migrated thither in platoons, and some of them have been appointed to important federal posts. A slave code of singular atrocity and inhumanity has been put through the territorial legislature and is now in full force. The scum of Southern rascaldom, driven out of California by the San Francisco vigilance committee, has drifted into Arizona and found lodgment there." All of which allegations I pronounce, of my own knowledge and upon my own responsibility, unscrupulous exaggerations, to say the least, and most of them utterly, maliciously, and basely false.

If the editor of the *Tribune* means to assume that the policy of General Taylor, as President of the United States, had the Territory of New Mexico been under his Administration, would have inaugurated and fostered an anti-slavery sentiment, and, as a consequence, have insured the organization of a free State, the fallacy of that assumption becomes apparent in view of the fact that General Taylor was a Southern man, of Southern interests, Southern education, and Southern sympathies; or if he means to intimate that the people of New Mexico would at that time have acted less in conformity to a sense of justice and duty than they have recently done in regard to slave property, I can assure him and the world that he is most egregiously in error. If the sentiment of the people of New Mexico on the subject of slavery had been elicited in 1850, it would not, in view of the obligations imposed by the Constitution of the United States, have been in the slightest degree repugnant to the state of opinion and feeling existing upon the subject at the present day.

Mr. Greeley, in pursuance of his plan to impress upon the popular mind of the North the false idea that the existing feeling in New Mexico upon the subject of slavery has been the result of federal interference, charges upon Mr. Buchanan and his predecessor, Mr. Pierce, the intent of building up, through the instrumentality of federal appointments, the cause of slavery in that Territory. From my knowledge in regard to the appointments made there by both the present and late democratic administrations, I can boldly deny the imputation. In most of those appointments I took the initiative; and never, in a single instance, were the sectional opinions of the persons appointed made the subject of inquiry, either by the appointing power or myself. That "zealous slavery propagandists" fill all or any of the federal offices in New Mexico, is,

to the best of my knowledge and belief, utterly untrue. In some few instances officers of the army have taken slaves with them to that Territory, but in such cases they have been taken simply for domestic convenience, and with no intent of propagating there the institution of slavery. Officers of the army have but temporary abode anywhere; they may be stationed a while where slavery exists, and then be suddenly ordered to a sphere of duty where it has no existence; and they are the very last class of men who should be assailed with the charge of having gone forth as instruments for the propagation of slavery; and the enemies of the institution are reduced to a very low resort when they have to arraign democratic administrations upon the charge of having sent slaveholding officers of the army to New Mexico as slave propagandists, when, perhaps, not half a dozen slaves have been taken into that Territory by that class of men. Such imputations are nothing more nor less than the miserable subterfuge of a hard-pressed demagogue.

Were I dealing with a man whom I deem honest and sincere in what he asserted, I should say that the editor of the *Tribune* has fallen into an *error* in imputing the existing state of national feeling in New Mexico, on the subject of slavery, to any instrumentality exerted by the Federal officers. But I owe him not the charity of imputing the falsity of his assertions to error of opinion. I treat it as a wilful, deliberate, and gratuitous effort to pervert the truth to accomplish a political end. He knows, as well as I know, that whatever of national sentiment has been manifested by the people of New Mexico upon the subject of slavery has been the fruit of a plain, simple sense of justice, not deranged by a religious fanaticism; not perverted by an erroneous sectional education; not maddened by an inordinate and unholy lust for political power.⁶ If he has yet to learn that this is the truth, I will assume to be his instructor, and tell him that the people of New Mexico have viewed the subject which now threatens the destruction of this Confederacy in the light of justice, without the restraint of sectional fanaticism or the obliquity of political perverseness. Recognising the right of the citizens of the different States to take with them into the common domain of the people of the United States every lawful species of property, and there enjoy the same as fully and uninterruptedly as they were accustomed to do in the State from which they respectively came, the people of New Mexico, through their legislature, enacted a code for the protection of slave property. Although I have none of that kind of property to demand protection, I commend the wisdom and applaud the patriotism that prompted the enactment of such a code; and I denounce as false and malevolent the allegation that said code is one of signal atrocity and inhumanity. Its purposes are just and its provisions humane. It aims to protect the slave corporeally and morally, that his

usefulness to his master and his own sobriety, morality, and happiness may be in the highest degree attained. It may be, however, that Mr. Greeley finds some ground for the charge of atrocity in the 23rd section of the code, which forbids the amalgamation of white persons and negroes, declares marriages between such persons void, and punishes with a severe penalty any white person who may procure or attempt to procure marriage with a negro. The editor of the *Tribune* may regard it as rather atrocious and inhumane for any law to impose a restraint upon the exercise of a taste which the ultra members of his party occasionally evince, to indulge in the luxury of that sort of conjugal association.

That the “scum of Southern rascaldom”—to quote the elegant diction of Mr. Greeley—“driven out of California by the San Francisco vigilance committee, has drifted into Arizona, and found lodgment there,” is a charge no less false than the other allegations of the *Tribune*. I speak by the record when I say that not a single Southern man was expelled from California by the San Francisco vigilance committee. Those unhappy subjects were all from the North, and mostly citizens of New York. The interesting catalogue consists of Billy Mulligan, Reub Maloney, Charley Duane, Dan Alridch, [James P.] Casey, [Charles E.] Cora, Yankee Sullivan and others, all of whom were Northern men and addicted to the practice of shoulder hitting and ballot-box stuffing. They have never set foot in New Mexico, but are enjoying the association and pleasures of congenial spirits in the city which is honored with the presence of Horace Greeley. The only man now within the border of the Territory of New Mexico who, to my knowledge, has ever been there, who left California under the pressure of the San Francisco vigilance committee, is Judge Edward McGowan, who, after his expulsion, manfully returned, was tried by the said committee, was honorably acquitted, and is now a respected resident of that portion of New Mexico known as Arizona.⁷ As Mr. Greeley has seen fit to help out his disparagement and calumny of New Mexico by branding Southern men as outlaws and fugitives from justice, I trust he will have the magnanimity to excuse me for introducing, by way of set off, the names of some of his Northern friends.

That border ruffians who were finally driven out of Kansas have migrated to New Mexico in platoons I unequivocally deny. I venture to assert that there are not half-a-dozen of that class of men now within the borders of that Territory; and, to my knowledge, no man of that class has ever been appointed to any Federal office in New Mexico.

The editor of the *Tribune*, not content with the utterance of the foregoing calumnies, in order to accomplish his purpose of defeating the proposed admission of New Mexico into the Union, further manifests a total want of

every sense of decency and honor by entering upon an unbridled and unscrupulous attack upon the native inhabitants and domestic institutions of the Territory. He says: "The mass of the people are Mexicans—a hybrid race of a Spanish and Indian origin. They are ignorant and degraded, demoralized and priest-ridden. The debasing system of peonage—a modified slavery—is still maintained there." I deny that peonage, as it exists in New Mexico, is a modified slavery, or any slavery at all. It is merely a system of apprenticeship or temporary voluntary servitude, whereby a man is enabled to borrow money, or otherwise create a debt, and to give his personal service, at a stipulated rate of hire, as security for the payment thereof. The law authorized the making of the contract, and enforces its fulfilment, giving to the peon the privilege of changing from one temporary owner of his services to another whenever he becomes oppressed or unfairly treated. This change is made by a facile and unexpensive legal process, which is accessible and attainable by the humblest person who may have found it necessary or convenient to enter into that condition of temporary servitude. I deny that there is anything debasing in this system. The social and political *status* of an individual is not affected by his entering into the condition of a peon. His right of suffrage and all other civil rights remain unimpaired. There is no entailment of his services upon his family or any member thereof. It is simply a voluntary engagement to render personal service at a stated hire for a valuable consideration. It is an obligation entered into with the entire will of the obligor, which may be satisfied and discharged by him, at any moment, upon the payment of the debt on which the obligation was founded. This system has none of the elements or attributes of slavery; and if the slanderer of the people whom I have the humble honor to represent means to insinuate that the existence of this system of voluntary and temporary servitude has exercised an agency in producing that pro-slavery sentiment in New Mexico which has been manifested by the enactment of a slave code, I denounce such insinuation as an unwarrantable assumption.⁸

The attempt to disparage the Territory of New Mexico, by branding her people as a hybrid race of a Spanish and Indian origin, will meet a prompt refutation and rebuke from every mind that is familiar with the history of that portion of our country. Ever since the conquest and colonization of the valley of the Rio del Norte, under the prowess of Don Juan de Oñate in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the Spaniards and the aborigines, or Indians, have been separated and distinct from each other, and have so remained up to this day. The conquest of New Mexico by the Spaniards reduced the aborigines, or Indians, to a state of abject but sullen and reluctant slavery. In that relation they continued—socially separate and distinct races—until

a servile insurrection of the aborigines drove the Spaniards from the land. At the close of the seventeenth century the country was reconquered by the Spaniards; and from that time to the present day the Indians within the settlements have occupied pueblos or towns exclusively set apart for them, and they have scrupulously refrained from intercourse with the Spanish population, excepting so far as became necessary for the ordinary transaction of business. They have their own exclusive and peculiar government, their own places of worship, their amusements; their social intercourse is exclusively amongst themselves; they never intermarry with the Spanish people; and are to all intents and purposes separate and distinct from them. The two races never have amalgamated; and although the Spanish blood has sometimes manifested itself on the aboriginal race, and the Indian blood less frequently on the Spanish race, those instances are of rare occurrence—so rare as to render the sweeping allegation that the mass of the people of New Mexico are a hybrid race, of a Spanish and Indian origin, grossly defamatory and shamefully mendacious.

If the people of New Mexico are not so much enlightened as those of this more favored portion of the earth, it is their misfortune and not their fault; but it is not the part of magnanimity or justice to taunt them with a deficiency in mental culture, for which they are not responsible; much less so to attempt, by such an imputation, to retard their advancement in the path of political, intellectual, and material progress. If their minds are not highly illuminated by that kind of intelligence which books and scholastic cultivation alone can impart, I am able to assert, without fear of contradiction, that there is not to be found anywhere on the face of the earth a people possessing a greater mental aptitude or a more finely organized moral structure. Although they have not been abundantly blessed with schools and school-teachers, I have no hesitation in saying that there cannot be found anywhere else in the world a community of people who under the same disadvantages exhibit less of the inferiorities of the human mind and heart, or manifest more of the higher attributes of our nature. There is nowhere to be found a people who live together in greater amity, peace, and concord. There are none who more faithfully obey the laws of the land or render a more cheerful obedience to the legally constituted authorities. There are none more devoted to their country, her honor, and her cause. Only a few years ago they were reluctantly brought, by the hand of conquest, beneath the folds of your national flag, as it was thrown to the breeze, on which, just before, had floated their own national ensign. They have had the intelligence to discern and the wisdom to appreciate the blessing of the benign system of government of the United States, and now they proudly call the American flag their own. Yet with all these high commendations to the favor and affection of their conquerors,

a miserable reviler aims to retard their progress and suppress their patriotic development by calling them ignorant, degraded, demoralized, and priest-ridden. The Holy Scriptures somewhere say: "Thou, hypocrite, cast out first the beam from thine own eye and then thou shalt see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye." Let the editor of the *Tribune* take counsel from that high source, and before he visits the lash of his envenomed pen upon what he pleases to call the priest-ridden people of New Mexico, let him administer rebuke to the unholy fanaticism which, Sabbath after Sabbath, desecrates the pulpit of the North, by inculcations of resistance to the laws of the land, of treason against the Constitution of the United States; of war upon the peace, prosperity, and happiness of our imperilled country. Let him turn the battery of his press upon the insane ravings of pretended ministers of the Gospel throughout New England and New York, and he may then rebuke the priestcraft of New Mexico. When he shall have succeeded in the task of expurgating from the great city which tolerates his presence and his slanderous, dirty press the degradation, demoralization, and religious fanaticism which there exist, in the face of the highest moral and intellectual influences known to the world, he may then visit his denunciations, within the bounds of truth, upon the less favored region which I have the honor to represent.⁹ Until then his false and insolent effusions must brand him, in the estimation of every honest man, as an unscrupulous demagogue and a vile calumniator.

Miguel A. Otero.
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C., Jan. 5, 1861

Exoneration of Otero

One can easily discern the content of Greeley's earlier editorial by simply reading through Otero's impassioned and somewhat vitriolic response. At what point Greeley saw the Otero letter is not clear. He apparently did not read the original published in the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution*, for in his book Greeley referred to the letter's mid-February appearance in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*. He probably did not receive that copy of the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* until late spring of 1861, long after the secession winter session had ended. Greeley could only have been livid when he did finally read Otero's *ad hominem* argument. It would have increased his intense dislike of Otero, whom he considered a secessionist and an instigator of New Mexico Territory's slave code of 1859. When President Lincoln nominated Otero as territorial secretary in July 1861, one of Greeley's *New York Tribune*

correspondents in Washington, D.C., believed Senate Republicans would reject the nomination of “that half-breed Hidalgo,” and Greeley undoubtedly rejoiced when the Senate refused to confirm Otero.¹⁰

The vengeful Greeley was not about to let the matter rest. After the war, when he published *The American Conflict*, he categorized Otero’s *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* letter as an address designed to incite New Mexicans to rebel against the United States. This was not a legitimate construction to accord Otero’s letter, but Greeley wanted to impugn Otero in the public mind as best he could. Greeley’s confusing citation of the date of Otero’s letter made it difficult from that day to this to figure out exactly what document Greeley referred to in his book. Lossing, Bancroft, and Twitchell all repeated the charge without questioning Greeley’s veracity on it. Otero apparently made no response to Greeley after the war, possibly because he did not want to have people reminded of his actual collaboration with the Confederate invaders of New Mexico in 1862. So Greeley had his vengeance in print, but his charge about Otero’s letter was a false and malicious accusation by an eccentric *New York Tribune* publisher.

Notes

1. Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860–1865*, 2 vols. (Hartford, Conn.: O. D. Case, 1866), 2:21; Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America*, 2 vols. (Hartford, Conn.: T. Belknap, 1868), 2:186; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530–1888*, The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, vol. 17 (San Francisco, Calif.: The History Company, 1889), 684 n. 9; and Ralph E. Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History*, 5 vols., Joseph H. Mercer Memorial Donation series (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1911–17), 2:357–58 n. 281.
2. For extracts from Miguel A. Otero’s letters to James L. Collins on 8 November 1860 and 9 November 1860, see *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, 8 December 1860. The *New York Daily Tribune* on 25 April 1861 summarized Otero’s suggested Pacific states–New Mexico scheme from the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*. For Comdg. Gen. Winfield Scott’s views on four possible confederacies, see George T. Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan: Fifteenth President of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 2:310–11. For Rep. Charles Scott’s (D-CA) 21 December letter, see *Washington (D.C.) Constitution*, 22 December 1860, evening edition. For Gov. John Letcher’s 7 January message, see *Richmond (Va.) Daily Dispatch*, 8 January 1861.
3. *Washington (D.C.) Constitution*, 12 January 1861; and *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, 16 February 1861.
4. On the statehood bill, see Mark J. Stegmaier, “‘An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place’: The Issue of New Mexico Statehood in the Secession Crisis, 1860–1861,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 84 (spring 2009): 263–90. For Greeley’s editorials on New

- Mexico, see *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 December 1860, 1 January 1861, 5 January 1861, 23 January 1861, 22 February 1861, 25 February 1861, and 26 February 1861.
5. Otero's letter in the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution*, 12 January 1861, is nearly identical to the one published in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, 16 February 1861, differing mainly in punctuation. The version printed here follows the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* unless otherwise noted. Notes 6–9 refer only to substantive differences between the two versions.
 6. The original version in the *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* used the word “maddened” here, as repeated in the subsequent clause. I have retained the word “perverted” as printed in the *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* version.
 7. The *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* has “and honorably acquitted” rather than “was honorably acquitted.” On the San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1856, see John Myers, *San Francisco's Reign of Terror* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966). James P. Casey and Charles E. Cora were two notorious characters hung by the vigilance committee in their crusade for “law and order.” Judge Edward McGowan was a pretty rough-and-tumble character himself; however, he escaped the mob violence and then was acquitted of charges. “Ned” McGowan did become prominent enough among the Arizona inhabitants that in 1860 they selected him as a delegate to represent their interests in Washington during the secession crisis. He arrived there on 18 December, as noted by a Washington correspondent in the *New York Herald*, 19 December 1860. Undoubtedly Otero had become acquainted with this fellow Democrat by the time he wrote so positively about him in his *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* letter.
 8. The *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* omits the words “and temporary.”
 9. The *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette* omits “slandrous, dirty.”
 10. For the “half-breed Hidalgo” comment, see *New York Daily Tribune*, 15 July 1861. On Otero's nomination and rejection, see U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Journal*, 37th Cong., 1st sess., 10 July 1861, 376, 397; 13 July 1861, 430; 17 July 1861, 468; 20 July 1861, 472.

