

Shelby's Interview about Mexico

by Dick Titterington, aka theCivilWarMuse

Born to a wealthy family in Lexington, Kentucky, **Joseph Orville "JO" Shelby** moved to Waverly, Missouri, and went into business making rope for baling cotton. At the start of the Civil War, Shelby enlisted as a captain in the Missouri State Guard. Shelby rose to rank of brigadier general in the Confederate army during the war. After the war, Shelby refused to surrender but took what was left of his command into Mexico. In June 1867 Shelby returned home to Lafayette County, Missouri. Shelby farmed for several years and was involved in business ventures in Missouri. In 1893 President Grover Cleveland appointed Shelby as US marshal for the Western District of Missouri. Shelby died in 1897 and was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri.¹



JO Shelby, portrait by George Caleb Bingham (Wikimedia Commons)

In his *Centennial History of Missouri, Vol. II*, Walter B. Stevens published the transcript of an 1877 interview with former Confederate General JO Shelby. During this interview, Shelby described a plan where the Confederate Army in the Trans-Mississippi was going to enter Mexico, drive out the French, and then occupy the country. Shelby maintained it was the brainchild of President Abraham Lincoln.



Abraham Lincoln (Library of Congress)



Frank Blair (Library of Congress)

Interviewer: "You led an expedition in Mexico once, general."

Shelby: "Yes, an expedition of a thousand men. It could have been fifty thousand just as well."

Interviewer: "Tell me something about the first expedition then."

Shelby: "There were several things which led to that. Some have been told and others haven't. Perhaps the time is as good as any to make them known, inasmuch as the attention of the people and the government is diverted somewhat toward Mexican matters. There were a thousand men in my division who did not want to surrender. If there had been but two I would have felt it my soldierly duty to have stood by those two and to have gone with them into the unknown. Then again I had ideas, or dreams, or ambitions. I saw or imagined I saw an empire beyond the Rio. This river they call the great river.

"Through Gen. Frank P. Blair² I had received, long before the killing of Lincoln, some important information. It was to the effect that, in the downfall of the Confederacy and the overthrow of the Confederates of the east, the Confederates of the west would be permitted to march into Mexico, drive out the French, fraternize with the Mexicans, look around them to see what they could see, occupy and possess lands, keep their eyes fixed steadfastly upon the future, and understand from the beginning that the future would have to take care of itself. In addition, every disbanded Federal soldier in the Trans-Mississippi department, who desired service of the kind I have indicated, would have been permitted to cross over to the Confederates with his arms and ammunition. Fifty thousand of these were eager to enlist in such an expedition. On my march south from San Antonio to Pedras Negras.³ I received no less than two hundred messages and communications from representative Federal officers, begging me to wait for them beyond the Rio Grande."

Interviewer: "Do you mean to say, General, that President Lincoln was in favor of the movement you have outlined?"

Shelby: "I do mean to say so most emphatically. I could show nothing official for my assertion, but I had such assurances as satisfied me, and other officers of either army had such assurances as satisfied them. There was empire in it, and a final and practical settlement of this whole Mexican question."



Benito Juárez (Library of Congress)



Emperor Maximilian (Library of Congress)

Interviewer: "Why did the scheme fail?"

Shelby: "I will tell you why. Before marching into the interior of Mexico from Pedras Negras, a little town on the Rio Grande opposite Eagle pass, I called my officers and men about me

and stated to them briefly the case. Gov. Blesca⁴, the Juárez⁵ governor of the state of Coahuila, was in Pedras Negras. I had sold him cannon, muskets, ammunition, revolvers, sabres—munitions of war which I had brought out of Texas in quantities—and had divided the proceeds per capita among my men. Gov. Blesca offered me the military possession of New Leon and Coahuila, a commission as major general, and absolute authority from Juárez to recruit a corps of fifty thousand Americans. All these things I told my followers. Then I laid a scheme before them and mapped out for the future a programme which had for a granite basis, as it were, that one irrevocable idea of empire. But to my surprise and almost despair nearly the entire expeditionary force were resolute and aggressive imperialists. I could not move them from the idea of fighting for Maximilian⁶. They hated Juárez, they said, and they hated his cause. Maximilian had been the friend of the South, so had the French, and so had Louis Napoleon⁷. They would not lift a hand against the imperial government. I did not argue with my soldiers. They had been faithful to me beyond everything I had ever known of devotion, and so I said to them, 'You have made your resolve, it seems—so be it I will go with you to the end of the earth, and if Maximilian wants us we will bring him fifty thousand Americans.' That afternoon late I thanked Gov. Blesca cordially for all he had done and all he wished to do, and marched with my men toward Monterey⁸, where there was a heavy French garrison under Gen. Jeanningros⁹. Jeanningros had heard of the sale of the war munitions to the Mexicans, and he was furious in his wrath and threatenings. We marched, however, to within two miles of Monterey, drew up in line of battle in front of the cuirassiers¹⁰ covering the northern road, dispatched a flag of truce into the town to know whether it was to be peace or war, and Jeanningros made haste to send back word that it was peace. Then we entered the French lines promptly, and were known from that on until the evacuation as being in full sympathy and accord with the French."



Napoleon III (Wikimedia Commons)



Pierre-Joseph Jeanningros (Wikimedia Commons)

Interviewer: "And how did Maximilian receive you. General, and what did he say in answer to the proffer you made to him of your services?"

Shelby: “There is another feature of those plans which were never fulfilled which might be mentioned. Gen. [William] Preston, of Kentucky, was our negotiator, sent forward to represent to Maximilian and Marshal Bazaine¹¹ the necessity of organizing for immediate service a corps of fifty thousand Americans. Preston talked eloquently and well, but received simply courteous attention for his pains. Neither yes nor no was said to him. Three times he was accorded an audience by the emperor three times he came out from it as he went in. Meanwhile we were marching rapidly and fighting our way toward the capital. Guerrillas¹² beset us night and day. There was an ambushment in front and sometimes on both flanks at once. We whipped everything that encountered us from the Salinas River to Queretaro¹³, losing in killed on the rugged march over one hundred of my best and bravest soldiers. I never left a wounded man except in a town where there was a permanent French garrison. Of wounded there were over one hundred more. On reaching the City of Mexico I sought an interview with the emperor at once, and obtained it through Commodore Maury¹⁴, then Maximilian’s commissioner of immigration. It was a brief but emphatic one. The emperor was gracious yet reticent. He asked me what my men and myself desired. I told him service under the empire. He enquired further of the number of men I had with me, the number I could recruit in six months, and the uses that could be made of them after they were recruited. In six months I promised him fifty thousand veterans. As to their uses my answer was about in substance this: ‘I speak as a soldier, and I ask your majesty’s pardon for so doing; but my men expect me to bring them back word of this interview. Without foreign help you cannot keep your crown. The French will be forced to evacuate Mexico. Mr. Seward¹⁵ has sworn it, and a million of men in arms are anxious to begin today the enforcement of the Monroe doctrine¹⁶. The Mexicans are not for you. The church party, will not fight; the priests—ostensibly your friends—are as enemies working against you secretly; your Austrian and Belgian troops are too few to hold even your capital, and your native regiments are worse than militia. With fifty thousand American soldiers who are devoted to you and who have been schooled in either army to arms, you can hold your own, consolidate your power, develop this empire of yours, and finally get upon the most amicable terms with your naturally selfish, grasping, and unscrupulous neighbors of the United States. Otherwise, if you do not lose your life, you will surely lose your adopted country.’ Maximilian listened attentively as I told him this and much more like it, evidently pleased at my frankness and directness. He asked but one other question before the interview terminated.”



Matthew F. Maury (Wikimedia Commons)



François Achille Bazaine (Wikimedia Commons)

Interviewer: “What was that question. General?”

Shelby: “It was this: ‘Cannot diplomacy do for me what you propose to do with arms?’ I answered: ‘It cannot, your majesty,’ and I bowed and left him. Afterward, with Gen. Magruder¹⁷, I called upon Marshal Bazaine and made almost the same kind of a speech to him. Bazaine was a thorough soldier. He saw the situation exactly as we saw it. He knew that he would soon have to get out with all of his army. He knew that without foreign aid Maximilian was lost beyond redemption. He knew of what stuff the imperial Mexican soldiers were made. He knew that out of nine millions of people eight millions were for Juárez and the republic as against Maximilian and the empire, and that of the other million, who were imperialists from sentiment and aristocracy, not fifty thousand would take guns in their hands and stand about their king as became men true to honor or brave for the right. But Bazaine was powerless. His business in Mexico was, primarily, to collect through Maximilian the debt owed the French by the Mexicans. Afterward he was left there because Napoleon believed he might establish an empire if the Americans kept on cutting one another’s throats until there were left but few throats to cut. Napoleon, however, made the fatal mistake of fighting his battles for empire on the Rio Grande instead of on the Potomac. He landed his expeditionary corps at the wrong place. Instead of sending soldiers inland from Vera Cruz, Tampico, and Matamoros, he should have sent them inland from Charleston, Wilmington, and New Orleans. I said this plainly to Bazaine, and Bazaine shrugged his shoulders and bowed his head.”



William H. Seward (Library of Congress)



John B. Magruder (Wikimedia Commons)

Reference

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¹ Winslow, *Story of a Cavalryman*, 246.

² Francis P. Blair, Jr. was Shelby's cousin, a political confidant of Lincoln, a congressman from Missouri and a major general of volunteers in United States service.

³ A city on the Rio Grande in the Mexican state of Coahuila located about 150 miles southwest of San Antonio, Texas.

⁴ Shelby is likely referring to Andrés S. Viesca who served as governor of Coahuila off and on from 1864 through 1867.

⁵ Benito Juárez was president of Mexico from 1858–1872.

⁶ Ferdinand Maximilian Josef Maria von Habsburg-Lothringen was an Austrian archduke who was installed as Emperor Maximilian I of the Second Mexican Empire by French Emperor Napoleon III.

⁷ French Emperor Napoleon III.

⁸ Monterrey is the capital of the northeastern Mexican state of Nuevo León.

⁹ Pierre Jean Joseph Jeanningros was a French general, famous for having commanded the French Foreign Legion.

¹⁰ Cuirassiers were cavalry equipped with a cuirass (breast plate armor), sword, and pistols.

¹¹ François Achille Bazaine was an officer of the French army.

¹² After the French invasion and occupation, Mexican President Benito Juárez and his supporters waged a guerrilla war against the French occupying forces.

¹³ Querétaro is a small state in north-central Mexico.

¹⁴ Matthew Fontaine Maury was a Confederate naval officer who established relations for the Confederacy with Emperor Napoleon III of France and Archduke of Austria and Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico.

¹⁵ William H. Seward was Secretary of State for the United States of America.

¹⁶ The Monroe Doctrine was a United States foreign policy position that opposed European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere.

¹⁷ John B. Magruder was a West Point graduate who achieved the rank of major general in the Confederate States Army.