TO GEORGE BANCROFT

My Dear Sir: Washington City Jany. 30th 1847

I thank you for your several letters, the last under date of the 4th Instant. It is gratifying to your friends, to learn from various sources, that you have been so well received, in England. I doubt not that your mission will be eminently useful to your country, and that you will add to your already high reputation. Your nomination was promptly confirmed by the Senate, without objection from any quarter, a circumstance, which in these times of party excitement, is highly honorable to you.

My responsibilities have increased since you retired from the Cabinet, and especially since the meeting of Congress. We have as yet, no reliable assurance, of a disposition on the part of the Mexican rulers to treat for peace, still I think they are desirous to do so, but are restrained, by the fear that any concession to the U.S. would cost them their places. No party in power in Mexico is probably strong enough to make such a peace as we could accept, without producing a Revolution which would enable some other faction to come into power. The present party in power, I have reason to believe would treat for peace, if they possessed the means—to sustain the army, for the time being; and hence the great importance of the two million appropriation, for which I asked at the last Session of Congress, and again at the present Session. It is doubtful whether it will be granted. The vexed question of Slavery as connected with it, has again been thrust before Congress, as you will have seen. You will
be surprised I know, to see that this agitating subject, which can result in no
good, and must be mischevous was brought forward not by a Federal member
but by Mr Preston King of N.Y. It has distracted the Democratic party in
Congress, producing sectional excitement & destroying all harmony in their
action. The Federal party avail themselves of our divisions, and though the
Session of Congress is now two thirds over, nothing has been done to sustain
the Government in the vigorous prosecution of the War, unless it be a loan-bill
which did not pass until two days ago. All the War measures which
recommended in my annual message, still linger before Congress. Almost all
who have participated in the debates in Congress avow their willingness to
grant all the men & money which the Government want, but still every
measure is postponed, until the delay has become most embarrassing to the
Government. For myself I will do my duty, and leave the rest to God and my
country. The truth is that the spirit of the people is far in advance of that of
Congress. The factions in Congress, who it is not to be disguised are shaping
their course, with a view, to advance the interests of their respective favourites
in the next Presidential Election, have had much agency in producing the
present unfortunate state of things. For myself, I rejoice that I am under no
circumstances to be before the Country for re-election. This determination is
irrevocable. Personally—therefore I have no interest, in the question of the
succession, but I most ardently desire to maintain the ascendancy of my
political principles, and to hand over the Government, at the close of my term,
to a successor of my own political faith. Though I deeply regret the want of
energy—and prompt action by Congress, you must not suppose that I am disponding, or that I will not persevere the course of policy, which I presented to the country in my message.

This is the last day I can write, in time for the next Steamer: It is Cabinet day, and the hour of meeting has arrived. I must therefore conclude this hasty letter.

With the kind salutations of Mrs. Polk and myself to Mrs. Bancroft.

JAMES K. POLK

ALS. MHi. Addressed to London and marked “(Private).” See also ALS, press copy. DLC–JKP.

1. A historian and politician from Massachusetts, Democrat George Bancroft (1800–1891) played a key role in securing Polk’s nomination at the Democratic National Convention of 1844 in Baltimore. He served under Polk as secretary of the navy, 1845–46, and minister to the United Kingdom, 1846–49.

2. Bancroft’s other letters from London were dated October 4, 1846; November 3, 1846; December 1, 1846; and December 3, 1846.

3. The Senate confirmed Bancroft’s appointment as minister to the United Kingdom on December 23, 1846.

4. In August 1846, Polk had asked Congress for a two-million-dollar appropriation for the Mexican War. Although Congress never passed the subsequent “Two Million Dollar Bill,” a revised version known as the “Three Million Dollar Bill” became law on March 3, 1847.

5. King (1806–65) served in the U.S. House as a Democrat, 1843–47, and as a Free Soiler, 1849–53, and in the U.S. Senate as a Republican, 1857–63. He proposed a bill outlawing slavery in all new territories on January 4, 1847.
6. Although the Federalist party had ceased to exist decades earlier, antebellum Democrats persisted in the use of “Federal” and “Federalist” as pejoratives for that day’s Whig party. The usage underscored widespread popular equations between the Federalists and antidemocratic biases allegedly held by Whigs.

7. Polk signed the loan bill, which authorized the issue of twenty-three million dollars in treasury notes, the day it passed, January 28, 1847. “An Act authorizing the Issue of Treasury Notes, a Loan, and for other Purposes.” SL, 29th Congress, 2nd Session, Chapter 5.

8. Polk refers to his Second Annual Message to Congress, December 8, 1846.

9. Sarah Childress Polk (1803–91), the president’s wife, served her husband as an advisor and confidant. Born in Rutherford County, Tenn., she was the third of six children of Joel Childress, a wealthy planter and businessman, and Elizabeth Whitsitt Childress. She was educated at schools in Tennessee and at the Moravian Female Academy (now Salem College) in Salem, N.C.

10. Bancroft married widow Elizabeth Davis Bliss (1803–86), his second wife, in 1838. She had been born into the Davises, a prominent family of Massachusetts Whigs. She had married her first husband, Massachusetts attorney Alexander Bliss, in 1825, and they had remained married until his death in 1827.