

United States  
**Diplomatic Codes and Ciphers**  
1775–1938

*Ralph E. Weber*

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United States  

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*Ralph E. Weber*

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## Foreword

On September 22, 1825, Joel R. Poinsett, the first United States minister to Mexico, prepared in code a confidential dispatch to the Secretary of State, Henry Clay, concerning highly secret plans for an invasion of Mexico by French forces. Poinsett's confidential dispatch arrived in Washington, presumably was decoded on a separate sheet, read by Clay and President John Quincy Adams, then the encode and decode copies probably were filed. Sometime later the decode copy of the dispatch was destroyed or lost, leaving only the encoded dispatch in the State Department dispatch files. While collecting the diplomatic correspondence of Poinsett, I came upon this mysterious dispatch and wanted to know what it contained; thus began my search for a code key which resulted in this book.

My introduction to codebreaking 8 years ago began as a modest effort to solve what I believed to be a relatively simple research problem. Rather quickly, however, the challenge became increasingly complex. My careful review of the Poinsett Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania revealed no clues except the fact that Poinsett was given a code by the State Department before he sailed for Vera Cruz in May 1825. In Washington, D.C. I turned to Albert H. Leisinger, Jr., Deputy Assistant Archivist for the National Archives for assistance. His own historical interest in codes and generous encouragement added to my growing conviction that the quest for this diplomatic code would be considerably more difficult than I first imagined. Leisinger's openness and support contrasted markedly with the attitude of another government official, who shall be left nameless. I explained to the official I was seeking a code used by Poinsett and the State Department in the 1820's, and he replied that the earliest code he could locate was from the 1860's. Thinking that this code might prove helpful, I asked if I might see it. To my amazement, he stated I could not, on the grounds that the code was a matter of national security! His abrupt attitude served to strengthen my determination. Also, the considerable

number of encoded and enciphered American diplomatic dispatches for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which remain without plaintexts added a sense of mission to my search as well.

At first the diplomatic records in the National Archives yielded little information about the Poinsett code. Recalling that Irving Brant and his wife, Hazeldean, had written about codes used by James Madison, I sought their assistance. Their prompt reply, encouragement, and permission to use their worksheets on codes, located in the Irving Brant Papers in the Library of Congress, provided another source of information. Mrs. Brant had taken many of Madison's encoded dispatches with Robert Livingston, Edmund Randolph and James Monroe, which had the plaintext written immediately above each codenumber, and carefully reconstructed partial keys. While studying the worksheets, I found one of the partial keys to be the code Poinsett used. Her reconstructed code, which may have taken years to compile, contained about 1000 of the 1700 elements in the code. Her careful research spurred me on. At about the same time, I came across Professor James Hopkins' fine edition of *The Papers of Henry Clay*, volume I, which contained an encoded letter of William H. Crawford written in Paris to the American Commissioners in 1814; no plaintext was available. Through comparing it with Poinsett's encoded letter and Mrs. Brant's worksheets, I discovered that Crawford and Poinsett used the same code. Gradually the puzzle was being solved.

In the months and years which followed, my research in the New York Public Library, the National Archives, the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, the University of Chicago, the Library of Congress, and Huntington Library in San Marino, California, the diplomatic archives in Mexico City and back again to the National Archives led me to the code which Poinsett used. The elusive code was found among the diplomatic dispatches of the United States' Ministers to Mexico, filed immediately after a letter dated January 26, 1847! During my research, I located over 100 other American diplomatic codes and ciphers. Moreover, as I studied the original dispatches from other American ministers to Mexico, England, France, Spain, Germany, and Russia, I realized that many of the confidential reports in their dispatches, written in code or cipher, could not be read since no plaintext was available for those paragraphs. These experiences, as well as subsequent correspondence with other American diplomatic historians,

convinced me that the history of the first 170 years of secret diplomatic communication by the United States should be written. Moreover, the publication of the various codes and ciphers would serve as a valuable reference tool for all historians of diplomacy.

Ralph E. Weber

Monument, Colorado



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## Chapter One

### Secret Communications

Allen Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency for almost a decade, enjoyed telling a story he had first heard as a young foreign service officer. According to the Dulles account, published in 1963, “an estimable politician who had served his party well in the Midwest” was rewarded with an appointment as minister to Bucharest in 1913. Among the items which the State Department assigned him was a codebook carefully enclosed in a large sealed envelope. “At that time our basic system was based on a code book, which I will call the Pink Code, although that was not the color we then chose for its name” wrote Dulles.<sup>1</sup>

Upon the minister’s arrival in Bucharest, the codebook was supposed to be locked in the legation’s safe; however, the minister found the combination lock inconvenient and kept the codebook under his mattress. “One day it disappeared—the whole book and the Minister’s only code book!” The minister, too embarrassed to admit its loss and his laxity, told no one.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he allowed his legation’s relatively light traffic in encoded dispatches to pile up. Every now and then he took the train to Vienna where he borrowed the American ambassador’s codebook to decode a few messages “he had not had time to decode” before leaving on his trip. This kept up until events leading to the outbreak of the war brought him a flood of encoded dispatches. According to Dulles, the minister acknowledged his dereliction, resigned, and returned home.

Dulles’ point was the naiveté and casualness of earlier attitudes toward codes and communications security. The point of this retelling is that 50 years later, Dulles was reluctant to so much as give the codebook its proper name. The State Department continued to use the Green Cipher until 1918 when it substituted the Gray Cipher. In addition, Dulles may have misremembered or changed the name of the