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## **MANIFEST INJUSTICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR**

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**JCSP 38**

**Master of Defence Studies**

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MASTER OF DEFENCE STUDIES THESIS

**MANIFEST INJUSTICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR**

By Major Patrick Sullivan  
Par le major Patrick Sullivan

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## ABSTRACT

The Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 was one of the most profoundly significant events in the history of the United States, altering its face with the addition of vast swaths of territory, and defining its future with the release of unanticipated and intractable consequences. The war was heavily criticized by political opponents of its main architect, Democratic President James K. Polk, and it remains a divisive subject within contemporary academic circles, all owing to the unscrupulous aims for which the United States fought. A particularly eloquent criticism came from Ulysses S. Grant, who characterized the war in his memoirs as “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation.” This paper confirms the basis of Grant’s statement by using A. Walter Dorn’s Just War Index (JWI) to quantitatively evaluate the Mexican-American War against the seven Just War criteria: Just Cause, Right Intent, Last Resort, Legitimate Authority, Proportionality of Means, Right Conduct, and Net Benefit.

### CAMPAIGN & CESSION MAP



**Figure 1 – Campaigns of the Mexican-American War and The Mexican Cession**

Source: Wikimedia Commons. “Maps of the Mexican-American War.” [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps\\_of\\_the\\_Mexican-American\\_War](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps_of_the_Mexican-American_War); Internet; accessed 16 February 2012.

## CHAPTER 1 – TINDER

[The Mexican-American War] is one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation.

Ulysses S. Grant<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 was a profoundly significant event in American history. It was a conflict of “firsts” – first foreign war to be actively covered by America’s daily press, first use of war correspondents, first joint amphibious assault, first overseas war with a multi-modal supply chain, and first time that the American flag was raised over the capital of a conquered enemy country.<sup>2</sup> It completed the United States’ continental expansion and defined the national boundaries to where they basically exist today. It was inordinately expensive in terms of blood and treasure: 13,780 American lives (of 104,556 served, the highest death rate of any American war) and \$100 million (almost \$3 billion in 2012 dollars).<sup>3</sup> It set conditions for American economic hegemony from the 1890s onward. It spawned criticism that forecast Dwight Eisenhower’s warning against the military-industrial complex, as well as more recent opposition to George W. Bush’s pre-emptive and unilateralist foreign policy. And, with a nod to the indictment offered by a dying Ulysses S. Grant in his memoirs, it was a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Johannsen and P. Santoni, “America’s Forgotten War,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 56; Grant was a Mexican-American War veteran, Commanding General of the victorious Union Armies during the second-half of the U.S. Civil War, and the 18<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (1869-1877).

<sup>2</sup> Edward S. Wallace, “The United States Army in Mexico City,” *Military Affairs* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1949): 158; see also Ivor Spencer, “Overseas War – In 1846!,” *Military Affairs* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1945): 312, and Tom Reilly, “Jane McManus Storms: Letters from the Mexican War, 1846-1848,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (July 1981): 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, The Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 450; see also John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848* (New York: Random House, 1989), xviii.

patently unjust war of conquest manufactured by the United States to effectively seize territory from a sister republic.

This paper will confirm Grant’s statement by analyzing the war through the lens of Just War tradition. Our methodology for this is the Just War Index (JWI) introduced by A. Walter Dorn in his paper *The Just War Index: Comparing Warfighting and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*. Using Dorn’s seven criteria – Just Cause, Right Intent, Last Resort, Legitimate Authority, Proportionality of Means, Right Conduct, and Net Benefit – the war’s key events, processes, and actors will be evaluated on a seven-point scale. Although underscored by a certain degree of subjectivity, the scale allows for a quantification of “justness” (or lack thereof), and for each of the criteria to be evaluated independently.<sup>4</sup> The scale ranges numerically from +3 to -3, which corresponds to the following taxonomy:

+ 3	Strongly Just
+ 2	Moderately Just
+ 1	Slightly Just
0	Neutral
- 1	Slightly Unjust
- 2	Moderately Unjust
- 3	Strongly Unjust

We evaluate Just Cause and Right Intent in the next chapter (“Fuel”), in the context of both the United States’ annexation of Texas as well as the expansionist doctrine of Manifest Destiny *vis-à-vis* the Mexican territories of New Mexico and California. In the third chapter (“Spark”), the various intrigues of the war’s main architect, President James K. Polk, provide a platform to assess Last Resort and Legitimate Authority. The campaigns of American Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott enable investigation

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<sup>4</sup> A. Walter Dorn, “The Just War Index: Comparing Warfighting and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 10, no. 3 (September 2011): 242-243.



of Proportionality of Means and Right Conduct in the fourth chapter (“Flame”). And in the final chapter (“Embers”), Net Benefit is weighed against the war’s various implications, both immediate and longer term.

An average of the indices from each of these evaluations will show the Mexican-American War to be between the “Slightly Unjust” and the “Moderately Unjust” categories of the JWI, trending toward the latter. Before this work can proceed, however, and in acknowledgement of this paper being fundamentally a work of historical study, it is first necessary to investigate the war’s origins.

### **Origins**

The road to conflict between Mexico and the United States was a long one, originating in grievances and misunderstandings that dated to the earliest days of each republic. Of the many factors that contributed to this discord, the most trenchant involved Mexican resentment over the expansionist impulses of its powerful northern neighbor.

Westward expansion in the United States began with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which realized Thomas Jefferson’s geopolitical goals of securing the Mississippi River Valley, and establishing a “natural Western boundary” for the United States at the Rocky Mountains. Regarding such a boundary, Jefferson recognized that – due to the ongoing presence of Spanish, British, and French colonial interests in North America – it had to be wide enough to ensure peace. The “exceptionalism” that defined early American foreign policy was predicated in many ways on a rejection of the moral decay that spawned from the balance of power construct of European state relations. Jefferson knew that if petty rival republics were allowed to grow up on the North American continent, they could similarly engender "jealousies at each other," and thereby offer opportunities

for European despots to create divisions and harass the United States. The Monroe Doctrine was developed as a policy of prevention for just such a scenario.<sup>5</sup>

The territory now known as Texas was originally viewed by Jefferson as part of the Louisiana Purchase, but more immediate concerns regarding the possession of East Florida (and the fact that no Texas rivers have headwaters at the Mississippi) caused the lands east and south of the Sabine River to be negotiated away to Spain via the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819.<sup>6</sup> With Mexico's independence in 1821, Texas was incorporated into the states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas, delineating Mexico's northern and northeastern borders with the United States. Irrespective of national possession, Texas retained significant geopolitical importance to the United States – its occupation, coupled with American control of the Mississippi, kept Mexico open for invasion were the United States ever tempted to flirt with southern expansion (a prediction made by Benjamin Franklin as early as 1760, and an unrealized goal of Aaron Burr's "Mexican Association" in 1805).<sup>7</sup>

By the 1830s, and with the election of the populist hero Andrew Jackson to the presidency, a "rapacious national and ethnic chauvinism"<sup>8</sup> came to define the American character, and the older values of classical republicanism – patriotism, civic virtue, and

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Nugent, "The American Habit of Empire, and the Cases of Polk and Bush," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 5.

<sup>7</sup> Richard W. Van Alstyne, "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American Diplomatic History, 1686-1890," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 36, no. 2 (September 1949): 221-222, 234.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel J. Watson, "Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism: Junior U.S. Army Officers' Attitudes Toward War with Mexico, 1844-1846," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (April 1996): 467.

the like – seemed to be giving way before a new "spirit of gain."<sup>9</sup> This spirit, which gave expression to a more abstract sentiment held by many Americans since the days of the Pilgrims and Puritans, would be described by the *Democratic Review* columnist John L. O’Sullivan a decade later as Manifest Destiny: that America was a chosen land and that it was the providential destiny of white, Christian Americans to possess the entire American continent as a part of God's plan.<sup>10</sup>

An implication of the religiosity inherent in Manifest Destiny was that war could be necessary to realize it, and that any such war would be self-justifying. Beyond this, however, war was an important (yet still unrealized) step towards American national self-definition; a test of its democratic institutions, a potential means to legitimize its mission as the world’s “model republic.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, as the United States was approaching mid-century, while not bellicose *per se*, it was certainly willing to use its emerging strength to achieve its goals, territorial or otherwise. This gave the United States’ neighbors pause, particularly Mexico, for the “lowest hanging fruit” of Manifest Destiny was the annexation of Texas. Mexico’s loss of Texas to independence in 1835 was a festering wound of dishonor, and one they viewed as a result of an outright conspiracy on the part of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

It is ironic in comparison to the current milieu that immigration from the United States posed a conundrum for Mexico in the administration of its outlying regions (Texas, New

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<sup>9</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, “Forgotten War ...,” 97.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Axelrod, *Political History of America’s Wars* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2007), 129.

<sup>11</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, “Forgotten War ...,” 97.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy J. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 101, 114; see also Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism & Empire* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 153.

Mexico, and California) in the mid-1800s. The immigration was necessary for economic exploitation purposes, as it represented the only available mechanism to achieve population growth. The risk, however, was that American settlers displayed a hugely high rate of natural increase, and could easily displace the extant Mexicans in these regions by out-procreating them, with absorption into the American sphere of influence to follow.<sup>13</sup> The Mexican historian Lucas Alaman explained this phenomenon of “filibustering” quite bluntly:

They commence by introducing themselves into the territory which they covet ... with or without the assent of the Government to which it belongs. These colonies grow, multiply, become the predominant party in the population ... they begin to set up rights which it is impossible to sustain in a serious discussion ... and then follow discontents and dissatisfaction, calculated to fatigue the patience of the legitimate owner, and to diminish the usefulness of the administration and of the exercise of authority. When [these] things have come to pass, ... the diplomatic management commences ...<sup>14</sup>

The United States also recognized the utility of immigrants serving as the advance guard of expansion. When Spain opened its portion of the Louisiana territory to foreign immigration in 1788, Jefferson remarked that, “[I wish] a hundred thousand of our inhabitants would accept the invitation. It may be the means of delivering to us peaceably what may otherwise cost us a war.”<sup>15</sup> In that Mexico was an inevitable target of such acquisitive tendencies (owing to geographic proximity), and that Texan independence resulted precisely from the process Alaman described, heated anti-American discourse became a staple of Mexican politics in the late 1830s.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nugent, “The American Habit of Empire ...,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 35.

Mexican resentment towards the United States, and any insult it claimed regarding the loss of Texas, was very much attributable to its unwillingness to accept the failure of its own policies. It was simply easier to blame the perceived perfidy of the United States. It bears recognizing, however, that the provenance for these failures (and the attendant weakness of Mexico compared to the United States) lay in the bitter colonial legacy left for the Mexican nation by Spain. Stated simply, it was not preordained that the United States should have three times the population of Mexico by 1845, and 13 times the economy; there were negative factors at play for which Mexico felt understandably aggrieved.<sup>17</sup>

Early Spaniards came to the New World as plunderers and conquerors, whereas Anglos came as families looking for religious freedom or wealth borne of honest work.<sup>18</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Spain's intrusions into the colonial economy cost its colonists 35 times more than Great Britain cost its North American holdings. This condition kept Mexico in a perpetual state of economic underdevelopment in the three centuries prior to its independence. More intractable, however, were Mexico's geographic disadvantages, particularly as they related to its ability to bring goods to market – it lacked navigable rivers, and road building was a practical impossibility due to the mountainous terrain separating its largest port (Veracruz) with the economic centers inland. The resultant

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<sup>16</sup> Otis A. Singletary, *The Mexican War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 15; see also Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs ...*, 177.

difficulty and high cost of transportation served as a permanent check on Mexico's economic development.<sup>19</sup>

As bad a hand as Mexico was dealt in the economic arena, its political and demographic challenges were even more formidable. Unlike the American experience with Great Britain prior to the Revolutionary War, Spain excluded its colonists entirely from imperial politics, leaving leaders of independent Mexico with little political experience or traditions to draw from. Most of Mexico's seven million inhabitants in the 1842 census were ill-assimilated Indians who performed manual labor, with anti-Spanish sentiment post-independence having driven off many of the better-trained elites. Consequentially there was little Mexican industry, which in turn limited government revenue almost exclusively to the collection of import tariffs.<sup>20</sup> The convergence of political immaturity, unbalanced demographics (with major racial and class divisions), and national poverty provided a sufficient condition for despotism to flourish. Indeed, Mexico had been dominated so long by militarists and corrupt politicians that the propertied and mercantile classes had little to say about the government, except to equate "best" with "that which robbed the least."<sup>21</sup> United States Senator Lewis Cass, despite his lack of magnanimity in so doing, probably offered the best description of the Mexican political system: "Her government is ephemeral. Its members are born in the morning,

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<sup>19</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 13-17.

<sup>20</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, "Forgotten War ...," 100.

<sup>21</sup> B.H. Gilley, "'Polk's War' and the Louisiana Press," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 14.

and die in the evening. Administrations succeed one another, like the scenes of a theater."<sup>22</sup>

The single greatest challenge facing Mexico in the mid-1800s (and, by extension, the single greatest contributor to her weakness) was one derived from the interaction of economic underdevelopment with political dysfunction: exaggerated regionalism. The whole idea of a national spirit – *a la* the Manifest Destiny fueling American expansionism – was unimaginable because Mexico was not a nation, rather a loose confederation of disparate interests that became more entrenched the further a region was from Mexico City.<sup>23</sup> Or, in the words of the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt (Mexico's answer to Alexis de Tocqueville), disunity was the only thing that defined a Mexican national identity: "Mexico is *the* country of inequality. Nowhere does there exist such a fearful difference in the distribution of fortune, civilization, ... and population."<sup>24</sup>

Mexico's resentment of the United States only explains half of the mutual distrust that existed between the two nations;<sup>25</sup> most Americans had an extremely negative view of Mexico, but for different reasons. Much of this negative view was informed by the cultural and religious biases that underpinned Manifest Destiny, as many in the predominantly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant United States considered the Catholic and racially mixed (Indian and Spanish) Mexicans uncivilized, even barbaric.<sup>26</sup> Those not in

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<sup>22</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 345.

<sup>23</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 20.

the Nativist crowd were likely southern slaveholders, who took an even less charitable view towards dark-skinned peoples.

Several episodes demonstrating Mexican tyranny did little to repair such biases. The Texas Revolution of 1835-1836, and Mexico's unwise continuation of the border war for several years afterwards, were particularly bloody affairs for the Anglo Texan population, whom most Americans still considered their countrymen. Two events in particular served to reinforce the image of Mexican brutality, and were sensationally reported in the United States (and only from the Texan point of view).<sup>27</sup> The first was the Goliad Massacre on March 27, 1836, during which 382 Texan soldiers who had surrendered at the Battles of Coleto and Refugio were all shot or bayoneted pursuant to General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's "no quarter" policy, which was designed to terrify Anglos into leaving the territory. The second involved a Texan invasion of the border town of Mier in 1842, taken in retaliation for an earlier Mexican incursion. The invaders became surrounded by the forces of General Pedro de Ampudia, and surrendered under the promise of a short imprisonment in northern Mexico, followed by parole. The prisoners were instead paraded "like dogs" in various border towns, and then marched to the dungeons of Mexico City for an extended sentence. As a punishment for their attempted escape *en route*, 170 Texans were forced to participate in a so-called "Lottery of Death," whereby each man drew a bean from a jar, black or white at a ten-to-one ratio. The 17 men drawing white were murdered and left as carrion in the northern Mexican desert.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Axelrod, *Political History* ..., 133-134.

<sup>27</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 97.



Mexico's poor administration of its northern provinces, particularly its inability to contain the Comanche Indians, lowered its standing even further in the eyes of the American people. Beginning in the 1830s, Indian raids and Mexican counter-raids claimed thousands of lives, depopulated much of its countryside, and fueled even greater division between Mexicans at all levels of politics. Rightly or wrongly, the United States was extremely proficient in Indian removal, and – as a subset of Manifest Destiny – viewed the practice as a supreme exhibition of state power. That the same Indians were driving Mexicans backwards, and in defiance of the Mexican government's stated aims, was a not a contrast lost on American observers.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the immense popularity of William Hickling Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* in 1843 turned public attention toward Mexico, thereby creating a much greater number of those observers than might otherwise be expected.<sup>30</sup>

The net effect of residual outrage over Mexican abuses and bemusement (at best) over Mexican struggles was that Americans in the mid-1800s, at all strata of social and political integration, were entirely indifferent to Mexico's realities, and wholly disrespectful of its people and institutions.<sup>31</sup> As such, any Mexican grievance was to be dismissed out-of-hand, and any American cause was assumed to be righteous (or, at least immune to Mexican resistance). It was to this tinderbox of long-standing mutual discord

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher D. Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar: The Battle for Monterrey, Mexico, 1846* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 18-19; see also Charles L. Dufour, *The Mexican War: A Compact History, 1846-1848* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1968), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Delay, "Independent Indians and the U.S.-Mexican War," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 1 (February 2007): 35-36.

<sup>30</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, "Forgotten War ...," 105.

<sup>31</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, xix.

– Mexican resentment towards the United States, American disregard for Mexican interests – that the United States in 1845 took the “low hanging fruit” and introduced the spark of Texas annexation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 22.

## CHAPTER 2 – FUEL

Alas, poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States!

Porfirio Diaz<sup>33</sup>

A war of invasion without good reason ... is a crime against humanity;  
but it may be excused ... when conducted with great motives.

Antoine-Henri, baron Jomini<sup>34</sup>

### Overview

This chapter investigates why the United States fought the Mexican-American War, in terms of the Cause claimed and the Intent of its prosecution. The Cause was ostensibly a border dispute with Mexico inherited from Texas when it was annexed, as well as debt payments to American citizens that the Mexican government was in default for and refused to pay. The United States did not entertain the prospect of war with the (exclusive) Intent of resolving the border issue or gaining remuneration for the debts, however. Rather, they did so with an eye towards other Mexican territory that was much more valuable than a disputed strip of land on the Texas frontier.

Texas was formally integrated as the 28<sup>th</sup> state of the United States of America on December 29, 1845, pursuant an endorsement by the Texas Congress the previous July of a formal annexation offer. The nine year delay between the Texas Revolution and incorporation into the United States can be explained by a variety of factors, foremost being concern over the implications of admitting a pro-slavery territory into a geopolitical landscape arbitrated by the ever-delicate Missouri Compromise of 1820. By the elections

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<sup>33</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 374; Diaz was a brigade commander during the Mexican-American War and future president of Mexico.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 1998), 169.

of 1844, however, a majority of Americans had bought into Manifest Destiny and favored the annexation of Texas towards achieving it, regardless of such consequences as slavery or sowing further discord with Mexico.<sup>35</sup> The Jacksonian Democrat James K. Polk ascended to the presidency at this time on just such a platform.

Far more compelling than public opinion, however, were concerns over foreign designs in the American Southwest. During the delay between Texas independence and annexation, both France and Great Britain began making overtures to the Lone Star Republic, eyeing it as a client state or perhaps even a colonial possession.<sup>36</sup> The benefits of such a relationship were readily apparent. A strong and independent nation, allied commercially and politically with Europe, would serve as a check on American expansion to the west and south.<sup>37</sup> Also, preferential trade between Great Britain and Texas would undercut the United States' discriminatory tariff and better position Great Britain's West Indian exports in competition with commodities originating from American southern plantations.<sup>38</sup>

The American view of the situation was even more sinister, fully defined by fears of the "foreign devil." A European power allied with Texas could disembark 30,000 troops before the United States could react, thereby threatening American control of the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. As an abolitionist power, Great Britain in particular could foment slave insurrections in the south, which would tie up the United States Army indefinitely while British forces possibly fortified their positions throughout

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<sup>35</sup> Axelrod, *Political History* ..., 130.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.

<sup>37</sup> Robert S. Henry, "West by South," *The Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 1 (February 1958): 9-10.

<sup>38</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 135-136.

Canada and in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>39</sup> And any conflict with the British, regardless of how it emerged, would carry serious economic consequences for the United States, owing to Great Britain's dominance of the import market and control of trans-Atlantic shipping lanes.<sup>40</sup>

The United States annexed Texas knowing full well that to do so would invite conflict with Mexico. In 1843, when the winds of political favor began to blow towards annexation, the Mexican Foreign Minister J.M. Bocanegra outlined his nation's policy to American Minister Waddy Thompson:

... the Mexican Government will consider equivalent to a declaration of war against the Mexican Republic the passage of an act for the incorporation of Texas with the territory of the United States; the certainty of the fact being sufficient for the immediate proclamation of war.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of such overheated rhetoric, President Polk (correctly) insisted that the United States and Texas were independent nations and that Mexico had "no right to ... take exceptions to their reunion;" the United States acted within its rights (and international proprieties) in offering annexation, and was under no obligation to consult with another power.<sup>42</sup> To reinforce this view – and to put the Mexicans on notice that the United States would intervene if they sought any military redress over the annexation issue – Polk sent a small army first to the eastern bank of the Sabine River, the border between Texas and Louisiana, and then to Corpus Christi where the Nueces River flows into the

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<sup>39</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 74.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 23-24.

<sup>42</sup> John Zimm, "On to Montezuma's Halls: The Story of Alexander Conze," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 90, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 31; see also Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 9, and Henry, "West by South," 12.

Gulf of Mexico.<sup>43</sup> Yet Polk knew that the Mexican rhetoric was not only overheated, but it was empty. From his Annual Message to Congress in late 1845: “From the day the Battle of San Jacinto<sup>44</sup> was fought until the present hour, Mexico has never possessed the power to reconquer Texas.”<sup>45</sup>

The disconnect between Polk’s recognition of Mexican impotency and his deployment under General Zachary Taylor of what would become known as the Army of Occupation begs the question of what did Polk really intend to use this army for? As it turned out, not for defense of Texas exclusively, but rather resolution of a long-standing border dispute between Texas and Mexico – a dispute that the United States gladly assumed upon annexation. Let us shift our attention to the Rio Grande ...

### **Just Cause**

The Rio Grande (known in Mexico as the Rio Bravo Del Norte) was arguably the “recognized boundary” of Texas since LaSalle’s discovery of it in 1670,<sup>46</sup> but its formal status had not been adjudicated by the time of annexation. The Treaties of Velasco ending the Texas Revolution provided that, in a *treaty to be later made*, the Texas boundary *might* be allowed to extend to the Rio Grande, but in the meantime Mexican forces would retreat south of the river and the Texans would not advance past it.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> John S.D. Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 219.

<sup>44</sup> The Battle of San Jacinto was the final battle of the Texas Revolution, during which Sam Houston’s forces captured Santa Anna and destroyed his army. The Treaties of Velasco establishing Texas independence followed.

<sup>45</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 323.

<sup>46</sup> Ernest M. Lander, Jr., “The Reluctant Imperialist: South Carolina, the Rio Grande, and the Mexican War,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (January 1975): 257.

Mexican Congress ultimately repudiated the treaties, but even if they had not, they probably would not have agreed to an indemnity that was extracted from Santa Anna at gunpoint, and that reflected a claim that had no prior basis. To wit, a boundary further north and east at the Nueces River had appeared on all of the reliable maps and atlases from 1829 through 1836, and had been accepted by Stephen F. Austin (the founder of Texas) and by no less an expansionist luminary than Andrew Jackson himself. Moreover, no Anglos lived in the disputed area, and no Texas counties had been carved from it as of 1845.<sup>48</sup> In the period between independence and annexation, Texas had only positively asserted the Rio Grande boundary once, in 1841, when they sent an ill-fated (and ill-advised) diplomatic, military, and marauding expedition toward Santa Fe.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the boundary being in dispute, Mexico never seriously threatened the Lone Star Republic over the issue, rather just reiterating that Texas had extended no further south than the Nueces while under Spanish and Mexican rule. Nor did Mexico take measures to dominate the disputed territory by military occupation or settlement, if it was even believed that they had the capacity to do so.<sup>50</sup> Yet, even with a Texas claim to the Rio Grande never being properly recognized by any law or treaty, Polk sought to establish it as the boundary even before Texas was admitted to the Union, categorically declaring in a message to Congress a couple of weeks before annexation was finalized

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<sup>47</sup> Frederick Merk, "Dissent in the Mexican War," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 3, no. 81 (1969): 121.

<sup>48</sup> Nugent, "The American Habit of Empire . . .," 17-18.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 17.

<sup>50</sup> Robert A. Brent, "Nicholas P. Trist and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (April 1954): 454.

that American jurisdiction had been “peacefully extended to the Del Norte.”<sup>51</sup> The problem with this declaration was that it was unsupported by the course of events up to that point, as the joint Congressional resolution originally offering annexation to Texas only proposed to settle the boundary question via a future treaty with Mexico.

It is possible that Polk was simply supporting the earlier Texas claims to the disputed territory, and a (very) strict interpretation of the United States Constitution suggests that he was duty-bound to do so, since the federal government cannot bargain away the land of a sovereign state without its consent.<sup>52</sup> It is more likely, however, given Polk’s expansionist zealotry and love of power politics, that he took a more pragmatic view. If the Rio Grande were the boundary, then the United States could claim Mexican territory west to Santa Fe. A southern boundary on the Nueces shrank Texas to about a third of that size.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, with Texas and a western Rio Grande boundary, the United States would gain powerful natural fortifications from the extensive barren plains characterizing the area. As Andrew Jackson advised his *protégé* in early 1845, “... with such a barrier to our west, [the United States] is invincible.”<sup>54</sup>

The duplicity of Polk’s actions (and underlying motivations) was not lost on certain members of Congress. To Abraham Lincoln, then a first-term Whig Congressman from Illinois, Polk represented a class of “men in high office [willing] to use falsehood as an instrument of policy.”<sup>55</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, a powerful Democratic Senator from

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<sup>51</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 121; see also Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission ...*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Brent, “Nicholas P. Trist ...,” 455.

<sup>53</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar ...*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs ...*, 74.



Missouri, posited that, were Texas a revolted Canadian province, the United States would never attempt to claim a boundary without justification. If such conduct towards Great Britain was inconceivable, then why treat Mexico so? His conclusion: “Because Great Britain is strong and Mexico is weak.”<sup>56</sup>

Even more disingenuous, among the things that Mexico supposedly owed the United States redress over, was Polk’s linking of the Rio Grande issue with that of American debt claims against Mexican government. An 1840 bi-national commission established an aggregate claim amount of \$3.25 million. Mexico defaulted after three installments, and Polk made the defaulted payments a major grievance:

The redress of wrongs of our citizens naturally and inseparably blended itself with the question of boundary. The settlement of the one question in any correct view of the subject involves that of the other. I could not for a moment entertain the idea that the claims of our much-injured and long-suffering citizens, many of which had existed for more than twenty years, should be postponed or separated from the settlement of the boundary question.<sup>57</sup>

It is certainly true that no self-respecting nation can allow such pecuniary abuse of its citizens to continue indefinitely, and that Mexico had failed to perform, in Polk’s words, “the plainest duties of government.” France had actually attacked Mexico over a similar issue, and Britain later gained redress for its citizens’ claims by threatening military reprisals.<sup>58</sup> But Polk’s message of “much-injured and long-suffering” rings a bit false when you consider that, in 1845, American states and corporations were in default on

<sup>55</sup> Norman A. Graebner, “Lessons of the Mexican War,” *Pacific Historical Review* 47, no. 3 (August 1978): 339.

<sup>56</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 42.

<sup>57</sup> Russell D. Buhite, *Calls to Arms: Presidential Speeches, Messages, and Declarations of War* (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2003), 36.

<sup>58</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 475.

bonds in British possession to a total estimated \$200 million.<sup>59</sup> One cannot help but wonder which government had failed its “plain duties” more.

The reality of the situation was that Polk knew Mexico could not pay the debt claims, and that neither Texas nor Mexico had an incontestable title to the Rio Grande boundary. The disputed territory in between the Nueces and Rio Grande – a virtual wasteland so arid that it could not support a cotton crop until the 1920s – was certainly not worth fighting for.<sup>60</sup> No, the object of Polk’s scheming was far more valuable. He hoped to use possession of the disputed territory and Mexico’s impoverished condition relative to the debt claims as bargaining chips to gain the crown jewels of the northern Mexican provinces: New Mexico and California.<sup>61</sup>

### **Right Intent**

The coupling of Texas and California was an old favorite among the expansionist crowd. It was first proposed by Andrew Jackson at the end of his presidency in 1837, and was affirmed by Sam Houston in 1844 during the annexation debate.<sup>62</sup> Beyond this, both Texas and the United States were guilty of attempting to wrest the northern provinces from Mexican control prior to 1845. We have already mentioned the abortive Texan Santa Fe expedition of 1841. The following year, Commodore Thomas Catesby Jones seized the California port of Monterey, in the mistaken belief that war had broken out between Mexico and the United States. Although somewhat half-hearted and

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<sup>59</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 121.

<sup>60</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 92-93; see also Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 170.

<sup>61</sup> Zimm, “Alexander Conze ...,” 31; see also Hietala, *Manifest Design ...*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission ...*, 83.

inconsistent with their respective national policies at the time of occurrence, both episodes were reflective of a deep seated Anglo-American desire to acquire New Mexico and California.<sup>63</sup> This desire was informed by American commercial and whaling interests in the Pacific Ocean, as well as a realization that the world was becoming a smaller place. The opening of the Oregon Territory and California to immigration in the four decades since Jefferson espoused his “natural Western boundary” idea made the Rocky Mountains quite obsolete as a barrier.<sup>64</sup>

It bears mentioning here that any discussion of acquiring California necessarily included New Mexico. There were two factors driving this, connectedness and economics. The connectedness argument was elementary: since a western boundary in Texas was physically separated from California, the taking of California required the extension of American sovereignty over all the territory that lay between.<sup>65</sup> Regarding economics, effective use of California’s ports required easy overland access. The Santa Fe Trail through New Mexico, along with that city’s dominance over the southwestern caravan trade, provided the best such access.<sup>66</sup>

Beyond the economic benefit of gaining California – Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster was certainly not exaggerating when he stated that, “... the port of San Francisco [alone] would be twenty times as valuable to us as all of Texas”<sup>67</sup> – President

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<sup>63</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 55.

<sup>64</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission ...*, 33; see also Hietala, *Manifest Design ...*, 84-85.

<sup>65</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission ...*, 110.

<sup>67</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land ...*, 93.

Polk's geopolitical calculus was undoubtedly aided by the fact that California was ripe for the taking, a "derelict on the Pacific" long neglected by Mexico. In 1845, California's population was barely 25,000, the majority of whom were uncivilized Indians.<sup>68</sup> The only significant population dynamism in California was coming from American immigrants, at the rate of approximately 1,000 per year; Mexico and the United States both knew if trends continued that California would go the way of Texas.<sup>69</sup> And like Texas, California displayed a strong independent spirit. Since it was effectively empty of Mexicans, California was devoid of any meaningful Mexican history, and by 1845 was in a state of chronic revolt.<sup>70</sup>

California's "unqualified aversion to the continuance of Mexican Authority" (in the words of a British consular agent in Monterey) revealed many of the same grievances that Texas held a decade prior. In addition to gross neglect and the disaffection suggested therein, the few Mexican troops posted to California failed to protect the hard-pressed settlements from Indian attacks, instead harassing the citizens with insults and outrages. Reflecting the Mexican government's tendency to promote central interests at the expense of the outlying provinces, taxes were levied unequally and unfairly. To be fair, the remoteness of California relative to Mexico City made provincial administration difficult at best, but the Mexican government did themselves no favors by only using the little bureaucracy that was present for injury (vice protection or promotion of commercial interests).<sup>71</sup> And such was the emotional distance between California and Mexico that

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<sup>68</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 138.

<sup>69</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 301.

<sup>70</sup> Delay, "Independent Indians ...," 63.

the few Mexican immigrants to the territory had more difficulty in gaining acceptance than Anglos, despite being the same race as the extant Californios.<sup>72</sup>

Although American designs on California showed a deep disrespect for Mexican territorial rights, Mexico's effective abandonment of its northern provinces (a public admission from the Mexican War Minister in March, 1845) violated the unspoken rule of colonialism that possessions not populated by their conquerors usually became independent.<sup>73</sup> It was generally understood in (what passed for) the international legal regime that a country's claim to a given territory remained tenuous until it could establish settlement necessary to "cement" ownership, and public sentiment consistently repudiated possession of territory without use.<sup>74</sup> Thus, it was clear to the United States that Mexican control of California was beyond regeneration, and that possession of the territory must pass into another nation's hands.<sup>75</sup> Which nation remained an open question.

Enter again the "foreign devil" of Great Britain. Although President Polk and other interested parties may have been willing to allow California to enter the American sphere by way of the slow mechanics of filibustering, Polk did not think that time was on the United States' side. The British fleet had been reinforced in the Pacific in anticipation of a conflict with the United States over the Oregon Territory, and rumours abounded that

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<sup>71</sup> Justin H. Smith, "La Republica de Rio Grande," *The American Historical Review* 25, no. 4 (July 1920): 660-662.

<sup>72</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 200.

<sup>73</sup> Nugent, "The American Habit of Empire ...," 6; see also Smith, "La Republica ...," 663.

<sup>74</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 35, 137.

<sup>75</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land ...*, 93.

the British Governor-in-Council was eager to send this fleet to San Francisco.<sup>76</sup>

Intentionally or not, British newspaper editors did their part in promulgating such rumors; from the London Times: "England must think of her own interests, and secure the Bay of Francisco and Monterey ... to prevent those noble ports from becoming ports of exportation for Brother Jonathan [a derisive term for the United States] for the Chinese market."<sup>77</sup> Additional rumors included the plan of a Father Eugene McNamara to settle several thousand Irish Catholics in California, and the Hudson Bay Company offering Mexico large sums of money and arms to reassert their dominance.<sup>78</sup>

The fact that California represented Great Britain's last opportunity to limit American westward expansion in North America further placed Polk's fears in the arena of the rational. As long as a periphery existed in the continent, the British were potentially dangerous aggressors along it, and their ambition to hem in the United States was well-established; the Monroe Doctrine was not without basis, after all. American acquisition of California eliminated the periphery, at least in any meaningful sense, as the United States would then control all of the Pacific ports from the Strait of Juan de Fuca in the north to San Diego in the south.<sup>79</sup> Hence Polk's extraordinarily aggressive statement to James Gordon Bennett, the founder of the *New York Herald*: "We must have [California], others must not."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.

<sup>78</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 294.

<sup>79</sup> Lind, *The American Way of Strategy*, 70; see also DeVoto, *The Year of Decision* ..., 20.

<sup>80</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design* ..., 84-85.

The prospect of a power vacuum being filled by Great Britain in California invited pre-emption. As Waddy Thompson declared, “It will be worth a war of twenty years to prevent England acquiring it.”<sup>81</sup> And, although New Mexico did not show the same secessionist bent as California, and was not as susceptible to seizure by a European power, it lacked any means to defend itself, thereby offering the promise of easy conquest.<sup>82</sup> Polk was intent on securing California and New Mexico before Great Britain could meddle; this was a hidden foreign policy aim from the start of his presidency (as expressed to Senator Benton), and an item of interest to the American people for which Polk perceived he had a mandate.<sup>83</sup> If Mexico would not deal, either by purchase or treaty, then the United States would go to war for the territory.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, war was a notion for which neither Polk nor most of the American public were particularly circumspect. From Bernard DeVoto’s seminal work, *1846: The Year of Decision*:

Few people in America thought clearly about war. War was militia muster-day, it was volunteers shooting Seminoles in the Florida swamps, it was farmers blowing redcoats to hell from behind stone walls, most of all it was embattled frontiersmen slaughtering Wellington's veterans at New Orleans. It was rhetoric, a vague glory, and at bottom something that did not imply bloodshed.<sup>85</sup>

It was from this nexus of territorial ambition, fear of the British, disregard for Mexican interests, and naiveté that Polk transformed a border dispute on a distant frontier into a

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<sup>81</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security ...*, 19; see also Lind, *The American Way of Strategy*, 70.

<sup>82</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Nugent, “The American Habit of Empire ...,” 12; see also John J. Carter, *Covert Operations as a Tool of Presidential Foreign Policy in American History from 1800 to 1920* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 81.

<sup>84</sup> DeVoto, *The Year of Decision ...*, 198-199; see also McDougall, *Promised Land ...*, 94.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

full-fledged war to coerce Mexico into relinquishing its valuable northern provinces,<sup>86</sup> a war for which Minister John Slidell and General Zachary Taylor would serve as his agents of creation.

### **Assessment**

The United States' claim to the Rio Grande border was at best tenuous, and not worth fighting for. Also, any redress that the United States sought over the unpaid debt claims was inherently hypocritical. Despite being arguably invalid, or at least failing to meet some sort of "reasonable standard," these two Causes had some basis, however, and cannot be dismissed entirely. In contrast, President Polk's unstated Intent of acquiring New Mexico and California, and his blithe consideration of war as an acceptable means to achieve it, are indefensible by any standard of conduct between nations (other than right of conquest, which would have required that Mexico be "criminally aggressive" towards the United States).<sup>87</sup>

*Just Cause*     -2  
*Right Intent*   -3

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<sup>86</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design* ..., 83.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 113.



### CHAPTER 3 – SPARK

[President Polk] possessed a trait of sly cunning which he thought shrewdness, but which was really disingenuousness and duplicity.

Gideon Welles<sup>88</sup>

#### Overview

This chapter establishes whether the Mexican-American War (in terms of the actual hostilities) was an option of Last Resort for the United States, by analyzing the actions of Minister John Slidell in attempting to purchase New Mexico and California from the Mexican government outright, and the provocations of General Zachary Taylor along the disputed Rio Grande border. President Polk's conduct also comes under further scrutiny, as his Authority in bringing the United States to war was suspect.

Although President Polk “wanted” war to the extent that he wanted California and New Mexico, he did not necessarily want to start it.<sup>89</sup> The United States had never acquired territory except by peaceful purchase or by request of a neighboring people to enter the Union, and was not keen on starting a (visible) imperialist tradition. Moreover, Polk was very politically savvy, no doubt recognizing that overtly initiating the use of force carries a cost, one that the still-young republic might not yet be ready for.<sup>90</sup> It will be shown later that this cost came regardless, and demanded the worst possible payment.

Polk had no qualms, however, about occupying the disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande until its status could be resolved through negotiations, ordering General Zachary Taylor and his 2,400-strong Army of Occupation in March 1846 to

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<sup>88</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 238; Welles was a civilian naval officer in the Polk administration.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>90</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 194; see also Gaddis, *Surprise, Security* ..., 3.

advance from Corpus Christi to the Rio Grande.<sup>91</sup> His justification for doing so was weak: that defense of the disputed territory was an “urgent necessity” because the Senate had authorized a revenue officer to reside there.<sup>92</sup> This was in spite of the fact that, as we have already outlined, no Anglos lived in the area, and that no Texas administrative districts preceded annexation. That European despots used the same defense-based argument to justify forcible seizure of territory – irrespective of the wishes of its occupants – was a hypocrisy apparently lost on Polk.<sup>93</sup> Regardless, Polk’s political opponents in Congress were quite correct in questioning what right the United States had in occupying the territory before the dispute had been resolved. And the Mexicans were quite correct in viewing the occupation as an act of war. Unfortunately, their response in turn, their willingness to allow pride to overtake prudence, played straight into Polk’s hands.<sup>94</sup>

### **Last Resort**

It is possible that, in sending Taylor’s army to the Rio Grande, Polk was running a bluff based on his knowledge of Mexican weaknesses, and that he hoped to simply force Mexico to listen to American monetary offers for California and New Mexico. This is substantiated by the fact that Taylor’s movements did not merit mention in Polk’s diary, thereby suggesting that Polk did not view occupation as a significant change in the *status quo*.<sup>95</sup> The overwhelming consensus within Taylor’s officer corps was that Mexico

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<sup>91</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 240.

<sup>92</sup> Buhite, *Calls to Arms* ..., 38.

<sup>93</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 72.

<sup>94</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 251, 475.

would back down; they took it for granted that Mexico was no match for the United States, and that Mexico's material disadvantages would prove too numerous to overcome.<sup>96</sup> Also, reports of ongoing secession movements convinced the United States that the disaffected federalists south of the Rio Grande would either not grant passage to the Mexican army, or would actively support the American cause.<sup>97</sup>

Then again, logic (and simplicity) suggests that Polk sent Taylor to the Rio Grande with the intention to provoke an incident that would provide a pretext for war. Ulysses S. Grant, then a quartermaster Lieutenant in Taylor's army, thought so:

We were sent to provoke a fight, but it was essential that Mexico should commence it ... Mexico showing no willingness to come to the Nueces to drive the invaders from her soil, it became necessary for the 'invaders' to approach within a convenient distance to be struck.<sup>98</sup>

Regardless of the underlying reasons, Polk's order was a belligerent one, and Taylor carried it out belligerently. He commanded the public areas of the Mexican border town of Matamoros with cannon from high points across the river, began construction of permanent fortifications, and blockaded the mouth of the Rio Grande (which Taylor specifically conceded was an act of war in his diary), all which prevented the Mexicans from being resupplied by sea.<sup>99</sup> It was easy to predict what would happen under these circumstances. As the editor of the *Charleston Mercury* posited, with Taylor's army

<sup>95</sup> David Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista: The Decisive Battle of the Mexican-American War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), 57; see also Felice Flanery Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil War Leaders* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>96</sup> Watson, "Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism ...," 469, 480, 484.

<sup>97</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 32.

<sup>98</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 52.

<sup>99</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 87; see also Merk, "Dissent ...," 121.

exposed “under the very nose of Mexico,” clashes were inevitable between scouts and stragglers, from which Taylor “on some fine morning” would be ordered to invade Mexico.<sup>100</sup>

Provocations were not restricted to military action along the Rio Grande, however; they would be played out, too, on the diplomatic front in Mexico City. Although Mexico severed diplomatic relations with the United States upon Texas being annexed, they agreed in late 1845 to receive a representative to resolve the annexation issue. Polk chose John Slidell, a New Orleans merchant and former congressman. While Mexico had only agreed to discuss annexation, Slidell’s instructions (which were deliberately leaked to the press) reflected Polk’s broader foreign policy goals, combining the issue of the unpaid debt claims with Mexican recognition of the Rio Grande boundary. Slidell was also authorized to offer up to \$25 million for California and New Mexico.<sup>101</sup> Polk already had his next power play in mind when issuing these instructions: “[Should your mission fail] we must take redress for the wrongs and injustices we have suffered into our own hands, and I will call on Congress to provide the proper remedies.”<sup>102</sup>

Many observers in the press predicted that this “last-ditch peace negotiation” would fail, primarily because Slidell lacked experience, and because the mission was far too unilateralist in flavor, revealing Polk’s complete disregard for the complex political factions in Mexico.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Slidell’s mission proved to be a futile gesture that only

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<sup>100</sup> Lander, “The Reluctant Imperialist ...,” 255.

<sup>101</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 121.

<sup>102</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 240.

<sup>103</sup> Reilly, “Jane McManus Storms ...,” 26; see also Nugent, “The American Habit of Empire ...,” 10, 12.

inflamed anti-American sentiment in Mexico, with the Mexicans refusing to see him on the grounds that they had only agreed to discuss annexation. This position also reflected Mexico's assessment that American actions to-date were illegitimate. Acceptance of Slidell with the full slate of his instructions would have implied the normalization of relations in the face of *yanqui* bellicosity, an appeasement from which no Mexican government could hope to survive.<sup>104</sup>

Even if Slidell were received, the American position left him with little to assuage the Mexicans. Despite being authorized to offer payment for California and New Mexico, Slidell was specifically instructed to offer no reparation for Texas – which, all things considered, would have been eminently reasonable – and to ensure that any resolution of the debt issue included a Mexican admission of “injuries and outrages committed by ... Mexico on American citizens.” It certainly did not help matters, nor show the United States as being committed to the cause of peace, when Slidell as he was departing insinuated Mexican bad faith in a manner that was patently designed to build the case for military intervention: “The Mexican Government cannot shift the responsibility of war to the United States ... A plain, unanswerable fact responds [to such an attempt] ...; that fact, is the presence in Mexico of a minister of the United States, clothed with full powers to settle all the questions in dispute between the two nations ...”<sup>105</sup>

If nothing else, Polk and Slidell's failed approach demonstrated that Mexico was not a nation worthy of the respect that the United States demanded in its own foreign relations; it is not difficult to imagine American pride being outraged to the point of hostile action

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<sup>104</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land* ..., 93

<sup>105</sup> Kevin Dougherty, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 143-144; see also Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 45.

if, say, Great Britain applied the same approach in the disputed Oregon Territory.<sup>106</sup> Had their point of view not been obscured by ethnocentric and racial biases, had they given more attention to the culture and motivations of the Mexicans, Polk and Slidell would have realized that attempts at intimidation were practically guaranteed to offend Mexico's deep-seated sense of honor and incline their leadership towards greater obstinacy.<sup>107</sup> Viewed objectively, it is clear that Mexico could have never relinquished territory without a fight; few people, certainly not the proud Mexicans, would ever entertain offers to purchase parts of their countries at the point of a gun.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, it is entirely reasonable that Mexico welcomed invasion to a degree, as it would potentially discredit the United States in the eyes of Europe.<sup>109</sup> From these perspectives, and despite Mexican intransigence containing an element of "tempting fate," we can at least appreciate the commentary offered by the influential Mexican daily *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* on November 30, 1845:

However lamentable and deplorable the rigors of war may be, Mexico cannot and must not purchase peace at any price other than that of blood. Defeat and death on the banks of the Sabine would be glorious and beautiful; a peace treaty signed in Mexico's National Palace would be infamous and execrable ... War at all cost! That is our cry ...<sup>110</sup>

Polk knew the full measure of Slidell's failure by early 1846. Given the lack of any reports, good or bad, from the Rio Grande and a narrow window of opportunity in which to leverage the public support his agenda enjoyed, Polk decided to ask Congress for a

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<sup>106</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design* ..., 153-154.

<sup>107</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 148, 154.

<sup>108</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 370.

<sup>109</sup> Gilley, "'Polk's War' and the Louisiana Press," 16.

<sup>110</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., frontispiece.

declaration of war against Mexico solely on the strength of the “insults” that Slidell had sustained. Polk knew that this was a shaky basis on which to declare war, but he now perceived California and New Mexico to be impossible to attain by another means.<sup>111</sup> Equally suspect is the fact that – despite J.M. Bocanegra’s statement of policy to Minister Thompson in 1843 – Mexico had not made a formal declaration of war against the United States; rather, they simply viewed the United States as having launched an aggressive war, first by annexing Texas, and then by invading it.<sup>112</sup>

In an incredible coincidence of history, Mexican foolishness overtook Polk’s hypocrisy. On May 11, 1846, quite literally the day before Polk was to take the war declaration request to Congress, he received a simple dispatch from Zachary Taylor on the Rio Grande: “Hostilities may now be considered to have commenced.” In a skirmish that would be later known as the Thornton Affair, 70 mounted infantry from the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Dragoons were killed or captured by Mexican cavalry during a scouting mission.<sup>113</sup> Regardless of the long course of American duplicity in the lead-up to the war, Mexico had now thrown the first punch, and dared the United States to grin and bear it. It would not, and on May 13, 1846, Congress gave President Polk his war. The manner in which this declaration came to pass – only the second formal declaration of war in the nation’s history, after the War of 1812 – was not exactly in keeping with the Founding Fathers’ view of Executive power, however.

### **Legitimate Authority**

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<sup>111</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 222; see also Charles A. Lofgren, “Force and Diplomacy, 1846-1848: The View from Washington,” *Military Affairs* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 58.

<sup>112</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 23-24.

<sup>113</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 475.

In his modified war request to Congress, informed by Taylor's statement on the commencement of hostilities, Polk recounted the following:

Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own [Mexico] has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after repeated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil ... War exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself.<sup>114</sup>

As our analysis has shown, there are some obvious exceptions to be taken from Polk's summary of events leading to conflict with Mexico. Stated properly, the United States provoked an attack in territory that they claimed on dubious grounds, thereby qualifying the above account as a "masterpiece of rationalization."<sup>115</sup> Also, as the editor of the *Charleston Mercury* (the same analyst who accurately predicted that Taylor's move to the Rio Grande would devolve into armed conflict) eloquently pointed out, "The refusal merely to receive a minister, is not sufficient cause for war."<sup>116</sup> Yet this is precisely what Polk built his *causus belli* on – perceived Mexican provocations and insults. Both are morally insignificant, however, for provocations are not the same as threats, and insults are never a sufficient cause for war. No, real injury must accompany them, yet this is something only the United States was offering. Mexico, despite its imprudent language throughout the annexation crisis and foolish actions along the Rio Grande thereafter,

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<sup>114</sup> Buhite, *Calls to Arms* ..., 40.

<sup>115</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 155; see also Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 67.

<sup>116</sup> Lander, "The Reluctant Imperialist ...," 255.



never, by any reasonable standard, pushed the United States to the “point of sufficient threat” to justify Polk’s unilateralist aggression.<sup>117</sup>

The most remarkable component of Polk’s war message was his declaration that, “War exists ...” This was the first instance in American history where a President informed Congress that a state of war existed before Congress had the opportunity to exercise its Constitutional authority to actually declare war.<sup>118</sup> More significantly, Polk’s declaration represented possibly the broadest assertion of Executive power that the historical context permitted, even grander than the already-expansive view of presidential prerogative held by Jacksonian Democrats.<sup>119</sup> But had Polk’s Whig opponents been paying close attention, they would have detected a pattern of behavior. He did not consult Congress before deploying Taylor’s army into the disputed territory.<sup>120</sup> And when Polk ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande, he basically empowered the general to determine if a state of war existed and implied a *carte blanche* for him to call reinforcements, both of which were far beyond Polk’s authority to guarantee.<sup>121</sup> Most damning, however, was Polk’s commission of “political subterfuge;” when Congress attempted to re-assert their war powers during the lead-up to the Thornton Affair, Polk simply shifted responsibility for the advance to the Rio Grande to Taylor.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 80-81.

<sup>118</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 120.

<sup>119</sup> Carter, *Covert Operations ...*, 87.

<sup>120</sup> Nugent, “The American Habit of Empire ...,” 10.

<sup>121</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 50.

<sup>122</sup> Gilley, “‘Polk’s War’ and the Louisiana Press,” 21.

Such evasiveness continued after Congress received Polk's war message, except among the Democrats writ large. It what would be later characterized as a "victory of stampede tactics," debate over the war bill was limited in Congress to two hours by order of the Democratic majority, and the bill was structured in such a way that a "yay" vote was tantamount to endorsing Polk's position that the war was a defensive one. Any dissenting voices were not recognized by the Speaker of the House. The Senate was slightly better off, receiving a day of debate, but was denied the opportunity to study any of the 1400 pages of supporting documentation that the Polk administration had submitted. These constraints were justified by an urgency of action to "rescue" the Army of Occupation. This argument denied two basic realities: first, if Taylor really were endangered along the Rio Grande, there was nothing anyone in Washington could do about it, given communication challenges over the distance involved; and second, Taylor's continued presence at the river was akin to "pointing a gun at the [Mexicans'] chest," prompting the obvious question of who really needed saving, the Americans or the Mexicans?<sup>123</sup>

An influential and unaffiliated Senator from South Carolina, John C. Calhoun, was representative of the various legislative elements that were disturbed by the Polk administration's "unseemly haste" in seeking a war declaration. The Thornton Affair had not even been verified, let alone investigated to determine if the "point of sufficient threat" had been reached!<sup>124</sup> In private correspondence to his friend, Henry W. Conner, Calhoun offered a scathing indictment of Polk's dealings with Congress:

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<sup>123</sup> Merk, "Dissent . . .," 122-123.

<sup>124</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* . . ., 64.

A war with Mexico has been precipitately forced on Congress contrary to its deliberate opinions ... If it had not been deliberately put to a vote, whether it was right to order [General] Taylor to the Del Norte [Rio Grande], or for him to take post opposite Matamoros, and plant his cannon against it, or that Mr. Slidell should be sent to Mexico, when he was under the circumstances that he was, or whether he should declare war on account of the claims against Mexico, most of which are without foundation, there would not have been a tenth part of Congress in the affirmative, and yet we have been forced into a war.<sup>125</sup>

The subtext of Calhoun's letter is that none of the issues contributing to the state of war that Polk declared to exist were inquired into, nor could they be in a day. In consideration of Polk's apparent contentment over an uninformed war vote, how can one conclude that he did not basically manufacture the war? Polk certainly set the stage for the Thornton Affair. And, at a minimum, a government without ulterior motives is far more circumspect before entering into war.<sup>126</sup>

Polk was well-attuned to public sentiment, however, and recognized that their "wolfish eye" towards California and New Mexico, and their "cut-throat mood" towards Mexico provided him all the authority he really needed.<sup>127</sup> And as went the public, so went the majority of Congress on the war vote, despite their misgivings – both the House of Representatives and the Senate were forced to accede to Polk's "confirmation" of the state of war and to appropriate funds for its prosecution.<sup>128</sup> This action on Congress' part did not legitimize the war, however, or make it any less unconstitutional. As then-Congressman Lincoln stated during the war debate, "Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation whenever he shall deem it necessary ... and you allow him to do so,

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<sup>125</sup> Lander, "The Reluctant Imperialist ...," 256.

<sup>126</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 94.

<sup>127</sup> Graebner, "Lessons of the Mexican War," 337; see also Lander, "The Reluctant Imperialist ...," 259, and Hietala, *Manifest Design* ..., 84.

<sup>128</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 223.

whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such purpose - and you allow him to make war at pleasure." Executive power of this form is completely antithetical to republican ideals. The main reason that the Founding Fathers invested Congress with war-making authority, and overlaid a system of checks and balances on the three branches of government, was to ensure that no one man should be able – like the European despots – to bring war to the people under the guise of protecting them. In their mind, this was the worst of “kingly oppressions.”<sup>129</sup>

For all his machinations and usurpation of power, though, Polk was not a king, and the fickle nature of the public sentiment that provided his authority ultimately curtailed it. "American blood shed on American soil" was a sufficient cause for war initially, yet Polk had to devote two-thirds of his Annual Message to Congress (antecedent to the State of the Union Address) in December 1846 to various elaborations of the war's origins. Polk's political opponents seized on the fair and obvious question: why was the original argument no longer sufficient?<sup>130</sup> The debate's arrival at this point, and the increasing dissent that followed, resulted from the war taking a life of its own, and unleashing consequences and implications for which the United States was wholly unprepared. Before we analyze this, however, it is first necessary to investigate how the war was actually fought.

### **Assessment**

Although Polk deserves some credit in attempting to avoid war with the Slidell mission, the mission itself was not oriented on conflict resolution. Rather, it was a bald-

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<sup>129</sup> Mark E. Neely, Jr., “War and Partisanship: What Lincoln Learned from James K. Polk,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 74, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 204.

<sup>130</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 129-130.

faced attempt to buy Mexican territory without invitation ... just a quicker and cleaner means than war to achieve the same questionable Intent (acquisition of New Mexico and California). Thus, it defies logic for any insults sustained in the mission's failure to constitute passage of a Last Resort threshold.

Despite Taylor's provocations along the border, and his responsibility in turn for helping to cause the Thornton Affair, the Affair was nonetheless an act of Mexican aggression for which the United States had cause to seek redress. Redress is not necessarily war however, particularly in the case of a border skirmish whose facts were never fully determined. In the absence of such an inquiry, it is impossible to determine if there were other conflict resolution steps to be taken before Taylor declared that hostilities had "commenced."

Polk's preparedness to seek war purely on the basis of the failure of Slidell's mission, while cynical, has little bearing on his Authority to do so. The railroaded war vote and the presumptuous language Polk used in his war message to Congress are different matters. Polk supplanted Congress' war-making Authority in a manner diametrically opposed to the vision of the Founding Fathers in crafting the Constitution. Congress was not entirely blameless in acceding to Polk's request, however. Also, Polk's conception (and application) of Executive power is fairly close to the modern war-making standard, as codified by the 1973 War Powers Resolution. This coupled with Congress' shared culpability moderate our overall rating of the Legitimacy of Polk's Authority in bringing the United States to war.

*Last Resort* -2  
*Legitimate Authority* -2

## CHAPTER 4 – FLAME

I will fight the enemy wherever I find him.

General Zachary Taylor<sup>131</sup>

I shall march with this army upon Puebla and Mexico. I do not conceal this from you ... We desire peace, friendship, and union; it is for you to choose whether you prefer continued hostilities.

General Winfield Scott, proclamation at Jalapa<sup>132</sup>

We had now in our front, and on our left flank, eighteen thousand Mexicans, with between twenty-five and thirty guns – among the troops, six or seven thousand cavalry ... We were at most three thousand three hundred strong, and without artillery or cavalry.

Brigadier General Persifor Smith at the Battle of Contreras<sup>133</sup>

### Overview

American Conduct of the Mexican-American War is considered in this chapter, to include whether the employment of force and overall strategy were appropriately Proportional to both the military objectives and Mexican counter-capabilities. An investigation of Conduct (and a follow-on assessment of “Rightness”) in the Just War tradition is less concerned about tactics than target selection, and determining if the force applied against those targets is ethical. Within this vein, although the Lieber instructions (antecedent to more formal laws of armed conflict) would not be promulgated in the American army for another 20 years, minimizing the risk of civilian casualties was a reasonable expectation of it in the mid-1840s (if you accept the proposition that an army should reflect the values of the society from which it is drawn).

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<sup>131</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 211.

<sup>132</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 229-230.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

## Proportional Means

Although President Polk was quite ready for war with Mexico, the United States Army as a whole was not. Belying the fact that the administration conducted extensive strategic planning for a full six months before shots were fired on the Rio Grande, the army could only count 5300 effective troops at the start of the war, the lowest manning level since 1808.<sup>134</sup> Beyond the sheer inadequacy of numbers of men under arms, the army's fourteen regiments were scattered across thousands of miles of frontier, exhausting most of its energy since the War of 1812 on chasing Indians and building public-works projects. Furthermore, the lack of a federal retirement policy ensured that the upper ranks of the officer corps were clogged with the elderly and incapacitated. Even had these men been functional, it is doubtful that they would have been able to maneuver a regiment, let alone a brigade (at least without the prompting of a West Point-trained subordinate).<sup>135</sup>

The situation down in the ranks was not much better. The army's manning challenges might have been allayed somewhat were the soldiers themselves of a high quality, but this was debatable. The 1840s in the United States was a period when any able-bodied and generally capable male who could speak English could earn a comfortable living on a farm just about anywhere. As such, the army (more posse, really) was not composed of self-sacrificing patriots, rather the type of men who could be induced to join when service

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<sup>134</sup> Axelrod, *Political History* ..., 134.

<sup>135</sup> Allan Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 134.

was unpopular, pay was low, and equipment was marginal – in short, foreigners from large cities who had no other prospects.<sup>136</sup>

Zachary Taylor's Army of Occupation followed this demography, with 47% foreigners, mainly Irish (24%) and Germans (10%).<sup>137</sup> Before hostilities commenced (and volunteer regiments were raised to complete the army's force structure), Taylor's dependence on foreigners posed an opportunity that the Mexicans were quick to seize. The recent immigrants were not spared Nativist biases just because they were serving in the army. Based on their unkind treatment at the hands of "true Americans," many of these soldiers had cause to identify more closely with the similarly-reviled Mexican people, with whom many of the soldiers shared a Catholic faith. This reality made them susceptible to desertion. So significant was pre-war desertion in Taylor's army that an entire body of deserted Irish and German troops – 260 in all – formed a distinct unit in the Mexican army, the so-called *San Patricio* (St. Patrick) Battalion. This was the first and only time such an episode has occurred in American history.<sup>138</sup> Desertion was not the only external factor that battered Taylor's forces before the fighting began in earnest. Disease and non-battle injury rates skyrocketed once the volunteer regiments arrived, owing to lack of discipline in fieldcraft and personal hygiene, inactivity (initially), and the unique dietary challenges posed by field rations.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> DeVoto, *The Year of Decision* ..., 14; see also Darwin Payne, "Camp Life in the Army of Occupation: Corpus Christi, July 1845 to March 1846," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (January 1970): 339.

<sup>137</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 60.

<sup>138</sup> Edward S. Wallace, "The Battalion of Saint Patrick in the Mexican War," *Military Affairs* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1950): 84-85.



Additional challenges for the United States Army in Mexico centered on the fact that, despite the Mexican-American War being effectively an overseas conflict with all the attendant logistical and command complexities, President Polk and Secretary of War William Marcy were intent on cutting corners, demanding the most from Taylor, and later General Winfield Scott when a second front was opened in central Mexico in the spring of 1847, with the least cost.<sup>140</sup> Taylor lacked a detailed threat assessment at the start of his campaign, and both generals often entered major battles without authentic intelligence owing to the lack of specie with which to develop spy networks.<sup>141</sup> All coordination had to be done with a minimum of staff, without modern conveniences such as the recently invented telegraph or, for the most part, even railroads.<sup>142</sup> And the combination of communications challenges with the brutal nature of Mexican terrain ensured that neither army could mutually support the other, with each having to give constant attention to the tenuous nature of their supply. So perilous was Scott's situation on approaching Mexico City in August-September 1847, after he was forced to cut his supply lines due to a lack of available manpower to secure them all the way back to Veracruz, that one of his officers remarked, "Mexico must fall or we must all find a grave between this and the city."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> J.T. Dorris, "Michael Kelly Lawler: Mexican and Civil War Officer," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1955): 370.

<sup>140</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 233.

<sup>141</sup> Watson, "Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism ...," 469; see also Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 125.

<sup>142</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 224.

<sup>143</sup> Johnson, 197; see also Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 277.

Despite the fact that the United States was stronger than Mexico in a great many ways (economically, size of population, degree of national unity, availability of resources), the Mexican government had at least a reasonable expectation of success at the start of the war. The Mexican army was in a position to field a larger number of experienced soldiers, and its officers were more experienced in warfare than their American counterparts, having been tested in a long series of civil wars and foreign threats; some even utilized Scott's own books of tactics as their training manuals. Years of revolutions had hardened the troops: they could suffer long marches quickly, and subsist on skimpy rations. The Mexican cavalry, which constituted the bulk of their fighting force, were mounted on small but nimble ponies, and its riders were among the best in the world. Also, there were the potentially decisive advantages enjoyed by any defender – interior lines, familiarity with the terrain and weather, immunity to indigenous diseases, and (presumably) friendly relations with the local populace.<sup>144</sup>

Mexican commanders could also mobilize irregular forces to disrupt the American advance inland. Mexican *vaqueros* – semi-organized groups of bandits – could serve in a guerilla capacity against the long and vulnerable American supply lines, and most of owners of the large *haciendas* that constituted the Mexican land-holding system had private armies available.<sup>145</sup> Also, it was not unprecedented in previous invasions for the Mexican leadership to open the jails in areas they stood risk of losing, with the criminal elements typically engaging in an orgy of looting and sniping. This was in addition to the

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<sup>144</sup> Henry, “West by South,” 12-14; see also Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession ...*, 137, and Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista ...*, 48.

<sup>145</sup> Frank E. Vandiver, “The Mexican War Experience of Josiah Gorgas,” *The Journal of Southern History* 13, no. 3 (August 1947): 385; see also Lander, “The Reluctant Imperialist ...,” 258.

enduring problem for invaders posed by *leperos*, the swarms of semi-criminal professional beggars that exist in Mexico's urban areas even today.<sup>146</sup>

Further brightening Mexico's prospects for success were perceived American vulnerabilities on the political and diplomatic fronts. The United States' dispute with Great Britain over the Oregon Territory (and Great Britain's alleged designs on California) had not played out at the start of the Mexican-American War, thereby leaving open the prospect of foreign intervention. Although Polk got what he wanted from Congress pursuant to the "railroaded" war vote, a vocal minority was bitterly opposed to his expansionist agenda, particularly those emerging abolitionist elements that saw Texas annexation as part of a conspiracy to advance slaveholders' interests. Lastly, and most pragmatically, the Mexicans viewed the *yanquis* as moneygrubbers foremost; why would a country that cut their army to the bone funding-wise permit treasure to be wasted on a long and costly war?<sup>147</sup>

The greatest Mexican advantage in the conduct of the war, however, was that Taylor's army (and later Scott's) was almost always assured to be outnumbered, owing to President Polk's intent to fight a limited war for the limited objectives of the Rio Grande boundary and Mexican cession of California and New Mexico. The correlation of forces in some of the war's major battles practically defied comprehension. During his assault (without heavy artillery, incidentally) on the northeastern Mexican city of Monterrey – described variously as "a perfect Gibraltar," and "probably the strongest position to conquer on the continent" – Taylor never faced less than a three-to-one disadvantage, yet

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<sup>146</sup> Wallace, "Mexico City . . .," 161.

<sup>147</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista . . .*, 48.

these were the best odds of any of his battles.<sup>148</sup> At the later Battle of Buena Vista, the most storied American victory of the war, Taylor squared off with the strongest Mexican force ever fielded, with individual American units facing Mexican formations five to twelve times their size, on a field of battle where “[Mexican] bullets fell around [the American units] like snowflakes.”<sup>149</sup> If the Mexican army had been able to fully exploit the strategic advantages it enjoyed at both battles, Taylor’s army would have almost surely been destroyed.<sup>150</sup>

Winfield Scott was rarely better off than Taylor. His campaign into the Valley of Mexico necessarily started at Veracruz, which was most certainly the strongest fortification in North America if Monterrey was not, what with its 15-60 foot walls and 200-plus cannon.<sup>151</sup> And, at the war’s *denouement* in the Halls of the Montezumas, Scott was faced with the challenge of capturing a city of 200,000 residents with his comparatively puny army of 7,200 that no longer had a supply line. Such a task may have remained in the realm of the feasible were Mexico City not defended by 36,000 men and several hundred cannon.<sup>152</sup>

Feasible or no, Scott did capture Mexico City, just as the Americans won the previous ten battles that comprised the Mexican-American War. To put the significance of these

<sup>148</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar* ..., 31, 83.

<sup>149</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 154; see also Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 398, and Zimm, “Alexander Conze ...,” 38.

<sup>150</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 145, 212.

<sup>151</sup> K. Jack Bauer, “The Veracruz Expedition of 1847,” *Military Affairs* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1956): 162; see also Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession* ..., 150.

<sup>152</sup> Charles S. Hamilton, “Memoirs of the Mexican War,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (September 1930): 78; see also Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 83, Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 247, and Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 307.

accomplishments in perspective, a much less prepared Mexican army decisively defeated a force of 30,000 French regulars in 1863 over much the same terrain where Taylor and Scott fought. Scott's campaign was particularly impressive, with the Duke of Wellington declaring it to be among the greatest in history.<sup>153</sup> Clearly, Mexican numerical superiority counted for less than it may have initially appeared, and the Americans were not nearly as limited as Polk's niggardly policies might have suggested; there were other important factors at work.

In the end, the same factors that guaranteed dysfunction in Mexican society and politics had a fatally negative impact on the Mexican army. The army's ultimate failure in the Mexican-American War was a failure of broader Mexican national defense, in which almost all aspects of the Mexican societal and political fabric demonstrated extraordinary disorganization and a complete absence of purpose. Instead of resolve, Mexico's flagrant weakness in the face of the "bantam-sized and dangerously exposed" American armies begot recrimination. Quite simply, Mexico was a country adrift for so long that, at the moment of decision on the Rio Grande and in every battle afterwards, any vigor necessary to repel the Americans had long since been extinguished.<sup>154</sup> As bad as this condition was, it was perhaps salvageable if Mexico had been blessed with a great military leader who could coordinate the country's efforts and communicate a strategic vision. Unfortunately, the available candidates were of the character for whom "the

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<sup>153</sup> Wallace, "Mexico City ...," 159.

<sup>154</sup> Charles A. Hale, "The War with the United States and the Crisis in Mexican Thought," *The Americas* 14, no. 2 (October 1957): 153; see also Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession ...*, 137, and Spencer, "Overseas War ...," 313.

treasury [was] god ... and no creed or doctrine [was warranted] beyond the simple belief that the Mexican people were created to be plundered.”<sup>155</sup>

This lack of unity among the Mexicans quickly manifested as two revolutions in the six months immediately following Taylor’s initial victories at the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. As a consequence of these revolutions, all sense of integrity from the Mexican government’s direction of the war was irretrievably lost, embittering the Mexican people in kind and creating an “inert majority.” Factionalism within Mexican society followed, and individual loyalties created a situation whereby “patriotism to one Mexican was treason to another.”<sup>156</sup> In the words of one frustrated nationalist, only “madness” could explain Mexican infighting while a foreign army occupied its territory, a madness indicating Mexico as a “nation determined on suicide.”<sup>157</sup>

National disunity goes a long way in explaining why Mexico was never able to effectively harness its irregular capabilities, despite the extant potential among the *hacienda*-aligned private armies (described hereafter as militias) and the *vaquero* criminal element. With respect to the militias, it is debatable whether the Mexican government ever fully intended to mobilize them. A strong federalist bent in most of the provinces, with its attendant view of the central government as an abusive authority, caused the *caudillos* who owned the *haciendas* to protest any loss of their autonomy. Moreover, the militias tended to be the vanguards of revolution in Mexico, so their very presence worked against any national interest, with conservative political elements in

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<sup>155</sup> Reilly, “Jane McManus Storms ...,” 34.

<sup>156</sup> Dennis E. Berge, “A Mexican Dilemma: The Mexico City Ayuntamiento and the Question of Loyalty, 1846-1848,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 50, no. 2 (May 1970): 229-230.

<sup>157</sup> Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession ...*, 156.

particular eyeing the prospect of an armed citizenry with extreme alarm. So significant was this fear that American occupation of Mexico was, to many, less unsettling than the specter of a race war enabled by weapons in the hands of the unwashed masses.<sup>158</sup> Along more practical lines, keeping citizens from their occupations harmed what little economy Mexico had, and as a country constantly on the edge of bankruptcy, any funds available for weapons, ammunition, and clothing would necessarily be given to the army proper.<sup>159</sup>

A Mexican popular insurgency was similarly non-emergent, albeit for different reasons. From a contextual standpoint, the 100,000 “perpetually insecure” people of the northern Mexican provinces especially (Taylor’s unwitting “hosts” after he crossed the Rio Grande) were not the stuff from which insurgencies are typically made.<sup>160</sup> Beyond their traditional aversion to military (or, in this case, para-military) service and their non-enterprising nature, the northern Mexican people were tired, impoverished, and bitterly depressed after the constant Indian raids of the previous 15 years. Furthermore, they were naturally skeptical of the benefits of resistance; given the whipsaw nature of revolution in Mexico, rare was the time and place for bold ventures of any sort. Most significantly however, the absence of a Mexican national spirit caused the populace to view American occupation not as a call to arms, but rather a stark reminder of their own insignificance and helplessness.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 173.

<sup>159</sup> Pedro Santoni, “The Failure of Mobilization: The Civic Militia of Mexico in 1846,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 170-187; see also Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar ...*, 41.

<sup>160</sup> Delay, “Independent Indians ...,” 59.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36, 62.

It bears mentioning that Mexican war interests, while not aided by a popular insurgency in the north, were at least not harmed by the secessionist movement that President Polk had anticipated gaining support from when he first sent Taylor to the Rio Grande. There were two main reasons why states like Coahuila and Tamaulipas did not go the way of Texas, so to speak. The first was that they would have had to assume all the risk, as the United States would not commit to recognition or support for the independent states after a prospective treaty ending the war. While completely disingenuous on Polk's part, it was in his interest to preserve Mexican nationality somewhat – one poor and weak southern neighbor would be far easier to deal with than a group of them that would always probably be fighting each other. Second, the northern states themselves were concerned that independence was tantamount to extinction, as they had no intrinsic counters to the absorption techniques that the Americans were so proficient in (and that they had witnessed firsthand in Texas).<sup>162</sup>

As may well have been expected, the *vaqueros* remained far more criminal than guerilla, preying on Mexicans and Americans alike. When they found American supplies well-guarded, they often took the easier course and looted their own countrymen, which in turn cost the *vaqueros* popular support – the lifeblood, of course, of guerilla warfare.<sup>163</sup> Accordingly, any attacks on by the *vaqueros* on American interests cannot be counted as part of the Mexican war effort; they were simply robbers in search of booty.<sup>164</sup> Taylor and Scott, who were inclined to recognize heroism in worthy opponents as was the

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<sup>162</sup> Smith, "La Republica . . .," 665-673.

<sup>163</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far . . .*, 348.

<sup>164</sup> Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest . . .*, 188.



custom of Napoleonic era warfare, spared no insult for these supposed guerillas. In their minds, they were cowards not much better than the “hideous, sub-human” Indians of the Texas frontier, and who employed “barbaric and lawless” tactics that “no soldier should emulate.”<sup>165</sup>

The military force that Mexico could actually field – its army – was severely hampered by negative dispositional factors, namely poor leadership, an ill-conceived force structure, and substandard armaments. These alone most likely nullified any numerical superiority that the Mexicans enjoyed. Any discussion of Mexican leadership during the Mexican-American War must begin with a proper description of their army-in-being: a loose alliance of warlords.<sup>166</sup> Years of revolution fighting taught them little about conventional warfare, and military merit played no role whatsoever in promotion. Rather, the most successful officers were the ones who curried the most favor with powerful *caudillos*.<sup>167</sup> As Mexico’s dictator (qualitatively at the start of the war, and then formally from late 1846 until Scott’s capture of Mexico City in September, 1847), senior military officer and, by extension, sole strategist, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was less concerned with national defense than elevating his personal position in the eyes of the Mexican people. As such he sought decisive military victories, enjoining battles recklessly, instead of developing a proper campaign.<sup>168</sup> The men that Santa Anna and his generals so poorly led were inadequately clothed and fed, almost never paid, and so

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<sup>165</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, “Guerilla Warfare, Democracy, and the Fate of the Confederacy,” *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 2 (May 2002): 275-276.

<sup>166</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 317.

<sup>167</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar ...*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 175; see also Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar ...*, 9.

lacking in morale and tactical proficiency that they could often only be used in static defense.<sup>169</sup> They were not even successful in this narrow mission set, as the combination of inaccurate and non-standardized smoothbore rifles, unreliable powder, a lack of gunsmiths, and poor marksmanship (especially under pressure) ensured that Mexican soldiers were unable to hit either moving or small-aperture targets.<sup>170</sup> And the soldiers that the Mexicans could rely on for maneuver – their vaunted mounted lancers and cavalymen – were no match for the devastatingly effective American artillery or the deadly accuracy of the American riflemen.<sup>171</sup>

Any student of American military history, if asked to perform word association with the Mexican-American War, would no doubt respond with “flying artillery,” an innovation at which the Americans were the finest in the world. Using a four-to-six gun battery, each gun pulled with its caisson by four-to-six highly trained horses, the American artillery of the 1840s could achieve extraordinary fluidity in operations, firing up to eight rounds per minute over ground that conventional thinkers would deem impassable.<sup>172</sup> The effect of this rate of fire and freedom of positioning on the Mexican army was devastating, and artillery advantages played a decisive role in all but one American victory. During the Battle of Buena Vista in February, 1847, Taylor was able to use artillery to engage Santa Anna’s forces at a comfortable distance, making it nearly impossible for the Mexicans to mount an effective charge.<sup>173</sup> Select anecdotes from the

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<sup>169</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 164.

<sup>170</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar* ..., 193; see also Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 51, 118.

<sup>171</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 2.

<sup>172</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 233.

battle were telling: seven Mexicans being killed by a single solid shot; a lone American battery single-handedly defeating a combined Mexican force of 4000 soldiers and lancers;<sup>174</sup> and so much artillery being discharged that it concentrated the moisture in the air and brought on a local thunderstorm.<sup>175</sup>

Other forms of American artillery were similarly effective. Rockets and mountain howitzers were a feature of every battle in Scott's campaign, and were useful in dislodging Mexican defenders from strongholds in most types of terrain. The rockets themselves were the most effective indirect fire platforms of their technological era, with the American Hale-style offering far better range, accuracy, stability and payload than the Congreve-style employed by most armies at that time.<sup>176</sup> Another aspect of Scott's use of artillery was his reliance on heavy ordnance to defeat Mexican fortifications. Forecasting what is now known as the "American Way of War," Scott expended massive amounts of firepower instead of the lives of his soldiers to seize Veracruz at the start of his campaign, firing over 6500 rounds into the city.<sup>177</sup> This translates to approximately five rounds in the air continuously over the four-day length of the bombardment.<sup>178</sup> Scott would repeat this technique at Chapultepec fortress outside of Mexico City, maintaining at least one projectile on target for 14 hours straight.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 164.

<sup>174</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 207.

<sup>175</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 205, 210.

<sup>176</sup> Paul D. Olejar, "Rockets in Early American Wars," *Military Affairs* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1946): 16-32.

<sup>177</sup> Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession* ..., 159.

<sup>178</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 265.

<sup>179</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 268.

The Americans also enjoyed a material advantage with respect to firearms. Soldiers in Taylor's and Scott's armies carried a combination of conventional flintlock rifles, long-range "Plains" rifles, and the newly invented short-barreled and percussion-capped Mississippi rifle. Each of these was far more accurate and maneuverable than the various antiquated Mexican styles, and they further benefitted from infinitely superior powder.<sup>180</sup> Placed in the hands of the generally superb American marksmen, such weapons became truly lethal indeed. Superior marksmanship was most prevalent among the Texas volunteers that comprised much of Taylor's force. These men could not count on logistical support during months-long rides over the desolate Texas plains, and were thus conditioned to treasure every bullet.<sup>181</sup> The Texans also typically carried a Patterson Colt 5-shot revolver, which could be discharged rapidly at close range – a terrifying prospect for the Mexicans when you consider that Texas volunteer units had a 15:1 kill ratio during engagements that would be categorized as "close quarters battle" in modern parlance.<sup>182</sup>

As significant as American material advantages were in countering Mexican numerical superiority, the great equalizer was more abstract: American leadership and morale. In the words of Otto Zirckel, a Prussian observer: "The Americans are brave as lions, and always swept the enemy off the field."<sup>183</sup> In the early battles especially, American advantages in bravery, confidence of soldiers in their officers, and training were decisive. By contrast, Mexican soldiers were not lacking in bravery; in fact, their

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<sup>180</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista ...*, 71.

<sup>181</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar ...*, 146, 150-151, 189.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>183</sup> Wallace, "Mexico City ...," 159.

“brutish indifference to death” was a characteristic that most American soldiers grudgingly admired. But their training and leadership were wholly inadequate to withstand a charge from a motivated and competent foe, no matter how small. Accordingly, since the Mexicans had a propensity to flee, American victories were nearly all won with the bayonet.<sup>184</sup>

This description of American prowess admittedly contradicts the characterization of Taylor’s soldiers at the outset of hostilities as a collection of immigrants and misfits. It is important to recognize, however, that the introduction of volunteer regiments fundamentally altered the composition of the American army as the war progressed. Although regular officers often (fairly) derided the volunteers as unruly and undisciplined freebooters, it was equally true that many volunteers came from the most respectable and industrious elements in American society. No other army in the world at that time could boast a soldiery with comparable skills and education, qualities which were positively reflected in battlefield performance.<sup>185</sup> They were also reflected in plummeting desertion rates, which settled to around 7% after the *San Patricios* left, a figure less than peacetime desertion. To be fair, however, the poor condition of Mexican soldiers and the presence of Catholic clergy in the volunteer ranks no doubt helped to keep many a wayward soldier in line.<sup>186</sup>

A soldiery is only as good as its leaders, and this is an area where the Americans were truly blessed, particularly at the small unit level. The main contribution to this was the

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<sup>184</sup> Hamilton, “Memoirs of the Mexican War,” 88.

<sup>185</sup> Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession ...*, 171.

<sup>186</sup> Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest ...*, 206; see also Wallace, “St. Patrick ...,” 87.

United States Military Academy at West Point, still a nascent institution during the last American conflict in 1812. Fully one-third of all the volunteer regiments were commanded by West Point graduates, and another third of all field officers had some West Point training – 523 in all.<sup>187</sup> Those officers that did not attend West Point were at least college educated, at a time when college attendance was quite rare. And within the regular ranks, since so many of the higher ranking officers were too old or infirm to deploy with their regiments, a vast majority (92% in artillery units, 70% in the other combat arms) of the *de facto* troop commanders were young and energetic junior officers, ambitious to succeed and endowed with the latest training in doctrine and tactics.<sup>188</sup> So important were West Pointers – as represented by such luminaries as Grant, Robert E. Lee, and 161 other future general officers – to the American cause that Winfield Scott remarked almost a decade later:

I give as my fixed opinion, that but for our graduated cadets, the war between the United States and Mexico might, and probably would have lasted some four or five years, with, in its first half, more defeats than victories falling to our share; whereas, in less than two campaigns, we conquered a great country and a peace, without the loss of a single battle or skirmish.<sup>189</sup>

All new cadets are required to memorize this statement, and it is inscribed on the barracks at West Point that bear Scott's name.

### **Right Conduct**

Any Mexican threat to Texas, if it ever really existed, was eliminated with Zachary Taylor's victories at the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma on the north bank of

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<sup>187</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, "Forgotten War . . .," 99.

<sup>188</sup> Watson, "Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism . . .," 472, 287.

<sup>189</sup> Edward M. Coffman, "The Duality of the American Military Tradition: A Commentary," *The Journal of Military History* 64, no. 4 (October 2000): 973.

the Rio Grande, with the Mexican army subsequently retreating far south of the border area.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, by July 1846, the Oregon controversy with Great Britain had subsided, and the American navy occupied California without foreign intervention. These developments were expected to pressure the Mexican government to sue for peace, but did not.<sup>191</sup>

Although Taylor would proceed to occupy much of northern Mexico, it became readily apparent to President Polk that this campaign would not be decisive in the sense of bringing the Mexican nation to her knees. Simply invading a province hundreds of miles from the Mexican capital would not be enough for Polk to achieve the territorial concessions that he privately sought (and would not publically declare until December 1847, after the fighting was over).<sup>192</sup> He would have to expand the war and strike at Mexico's vital center – not only was Mexico City the seat of political and financial power, but much of the Mexican government's reputation was built on its maintenance.<sup>193</sup> As long as the Mexican leaders were far removed from actual scenes of combat, their pride and stubbornness would keep alive the hope, however futile, that the Americans could be defeated.<sup>194</sup>

Thus were Winfield Scott's campaign conceived and a second front opened into central Mexico with the Veracruz landing on March 9, 1847 (the largest amphibious

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<sup>190</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 225.

<sup>191</sup> Gilley, "'Polk's War' and the Louisiana Press," 9.

<sup>192</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 54; see also Hamilton, "Memoirs of the Mexican War," 68, and Norman A. Graebner, "Party Politics and the Trist Mission," *The Journal of Southern History* 19, no. 2 (May 1953): 139.

<sup>193</sup> James W. Pohl, "The Influence of Antoine Henri de Jomini on Winfield Scott's Campaign in the Mexican War," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (July 1973): 99-100.

<sup>194</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 152.

assault in history until Allied forces landed in North Africa almost a century later).<sup>195</sup> To Polk's credit, although still in pursuit of territory, he was now waging peace as much as he was war. Taylor was ordered to go on the defensive, thus indicating Polk's commitment to using only the minimum force necessary to induce Mexico to treat, and neither he nor Scott viewed the destruction of the Mexican army as necessary for winning a peace.<sup>196</sup> Both men recognized that the capture of Mexico City by the most direct means possible (and the lowest casualties commensurate to that purpose), was just a means to the real prize – a treaty legitimizing the United States' claims to the Rio Grande boundary, New Mexico and California.<sup>197</sup>

Taylor's occupation of northern Mexico and Scott's overland thrust to Mexico City necessarily brought their respective armies into contact with the Mexican populace. And they were subject to targeting during Scott's campaign in particular, concomitant to his operational objectives of Veracruz at the start of the campaign, and Mexico City at its endgame. The comparatively small size of American army in comparison to the formidable nature of Veracruz's defense posed a tactical dilemma for Scott: how to capture the city without losing the bulk of his force? Moreover, yellow fever (*el vomito*, in local parlance) season was rapidly approaching in Mexico's coastal region, so time was of the essence.<sup>198</sup> Hence Scott's selection of bombardment; in his words, he proposed to "... [capture the city] by head work, the slow, scientific process [than by

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<sup>195</sup> Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest ...*, 174; see also Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 255.

<sup>196</sup> Lofgren, "Force and Diplomacy ...," 59.

<sup>197</sup> Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), 74; see also Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny ...*, 302-303.

<sup>198</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista ...*, 48.



storming] at the cost of immense slaughter to both sides.”<sup>199</sup> This effort was to be supported by a strangulation of the city, with Scott’s forces cutting off the city’s water supply and the United States Navy’s Home Squadron blockading all commercial traffic to nearby towns.<sup>200</sup>

In keeping with the conventions of siege warfare (despite Veracruz being invested as opposed to formally under siege), Scott offered the defending Mexican forces an ultimatum, which their commander, General Juan Morales, defied. So did the many foreigners in the city, who seemed to take Scott’s threats lightly. Though free to leave until the bombardment began, most of the foreigners elected to stay, to their great sorrow.<sup>201</sup>

Scott’s forces pounded the city for four days beginning on March 24, relying on naval guns and French-made Paixhan cannon, which were the only assets in Scott’s arsenal that could soften Veracruz’s fortifications. These three-ton “monsters” fired solid shot between 32 and 62 pounds, and their effect was predictably devastating.<sup>202</sup> The bombardment was reinforced with Scott’s threat to fire upon anyone (soldier and non-combatant alike) who attempted to leave the city. From a witness in Veracruz, after the first two days of shelling:

Veracruz then presented a sad sight. Fathers of families, who had lost their homes, their fortunes, and their children, unhappy infants, who now had no parents, wounded men, without food, without surgical aid ... The people were hungry ... Such was the spectacle presented by Veracruz.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 207.

<sup>200</sup> Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest* ..., 177.

<sup>201</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 242.

<sup>202</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 208.

An officer in Scott's army who occupied the city after its surrender offered a similar account:

Vera Cruz presents a woeful aspect. Houses beaten in, with cannon shot, many disemboweled with the exploding bomb shells which fell through the roofs, then bursting and tearing the whole inside out, and in many cases setting fire to the buildings ... there were more women and children killed in the taking of the city than soldiers, which is unhappily true ... but the hard necessity of war is equally true.<sup>204</sup>

This same officer was quick to assign blame for this condition to General Morales, however, who managed to sneak out of Veracruz before its ultimate surrender. The Mexican forces cravenly remained behind the walls of Fort Santa Barbara and Fort Juan de Ulea while the unarmed and unprotected residents took the brunt of the punishment, and it was only when the forts themselves were threatened (and when the city's foreign consuls gave a final plaintive appeal that the Mexican officers could not deny) that Veracruz capitulated.<sup>205</sup>

Scott was remarkably lenient and generous with the city after its brutal investment, which was in keeping with his fundamentally humanitarian nature. The Mexican defenders were paroled and allowed to march out of the city with the full honors of war, and their sick and wounded were granted sanctuary.<sup>206</sup> To lessen the suffering on the already-damaged populace, the Americans only confiscated public property, and Scott ensured that the prices of foodstuffs were regulated. Additional measures included the

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<sup>203</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 243.

<sup>204</sup> Reilly, "Jane McManus Storms ...," 37.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>206</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 76.

distribution of 10,000 rations of meat and bread, and imposition of a duty on merchandise, the proceeds of which were to be applied to the poor of the city.<sup>207</sup>

Scott generally repeated the Veracruz model at Mexico City six months later. He had hoped to avoid assaulting the city altogether, and offered Santa Anna a cease fire following the decisive Battle of Churubusco, where Mexican losses were so severe that half of Santa Anna's army ceased to exist as an effective fighting force. Scott was most concerned about the impacts on the peace process if the Mexican government were to disband for fear of surprise or capture; in correspondence to Secretary of War Marcy:

... [I counsel] against precipitation; lest, by wantonly driving away the government and others - dishonored - we might scatter the elements of peace, excite a spirit of national desperation, and thus indefinitely postpone the hope of accommodation ... remembering our mission to conquer a peace ...<sup>208</sup>

Unfortunately, Mexican obstinacy carried the day and Scott ultimately had to capture the city by force of arms. To set the necessary conditions to enable the peace process, however, Scott knew that he had to do no more than display the Stars and Stripes from the *Palacio Nacional*, and thus positioned himself more as administrator vice conqueror.<sup>209</sup> His relationship with the local *ayuntamiento* (equivalent of a mayor and city council) was friendless, to be sure, and preyed on Mexican self-interest, but was extremely fair and effective. The city leadership's reasonable attitude to the Americans in turn reduced tensions, caused Scott's soldiers to moderate their treatment of Mexican citizens, and enabled much-needed reforms in the judicial system. Instead of a perhaps expected reign of terror and attendant breakdown of social order, daily life in Mexico

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<sup>207</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 212.

<sup>208</sup> Carlos E. Castaneda, "Relations of General Scott with Santa Anna," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 29, no. 4 (November 1949): 456, 464-465.

<sup>209</sup> Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 75.

City under American occupation followed almost a normal course, marred only by random acts of violence.<sup>210</sup>

Achieving such normalcy required that the city be fully pacified, of course, an effort for which Scott was forced to draconian measures. For the first couple of days of American occupation (and after Santa Anna's army had fled), the Mexican population devolved into a frenzy of violent crime and mass rage. Once satisfied that the disturbances were not caused by American soldiers on a spree, Scott notified the *ayuntamiento* that whole blocks of houses would be destroyed if necessary, and that he would turn the whole city over to unrestrained looting. To demonstrate his resolve, Scott sent squads through the streets with orders to mercilessly blast houses with artillery where firing was spotted, and he positioned sharpshooters in church towers to pick off any Mexicans seen bearing arms. These measures worked; city officials and the Catholic hierarchy did their utmost in stopping resistance, with the latter group particularly motivated by the fact that much church wealth was concentrated in the city.<sup>211</sup> Scott also levied a \$150,000 contribution from the city (an official policy of Polk's throughout the war, but one which Scott and Zachary Taylor both generally ignored)<sup>212</sup> to purchase supplies for the sick and wounded, and to remind potential opponents of the treaty process that American occupation could sustain itself for a long time yet. As soon as he received the money, Scott restored religious freedom and full civil rights to law-abiding Mexican citizens.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Berge, "A Mexican Dilemma . . .," 239-255.

<sup>211</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* . . ., 300-301.

<sup>212</sup> Lofgren, "Force and Diplomacy . . .," 63.

Winfield Scott's success as a military governor in Mexico City was a continuation of well-considered civil policies that he used since Veracruz. As a student of Napoleon's failed Peninsular Campaign, in which the French army was thoroughly frustrated by Navarrian resistance for six years, and owing to his own frustration with the Seminole Indians in Florida in the 1830s, Scott was acutely aware of the dangers of guerilla warfare. In fact, Scott owned a copy of Sir William Francis Patrick Napier's *History of the Peninsular War*, and was no doubt cautioned by Napier's admonition that guerilla warfare emerges from "unprincipled violence, and disrespect for the rights of property." Moreover, Scott believed that Mexicans shared the characteristics that Napier assigned to Spaniards: "... bitter in his anger ... vindictive, bloody, remembering insult longer than injury, and cruel in his revenge."<sup>214</sup> As such, Scott conducted his campaign with an eye towards avoiding actions which might unduly inflame Mexican emotions and prolong the war as a result.<sup>215</sup> This included a strict regard for the rights of Mexican citizens, sparing the populace from bloodshed as much as possible, limiting interaction with the population to the minimum necessary for sustenance and morale, and scrupulously paying for all supplies (even when the lack of specie would have justified not compensating the Mexicans).<sup>216</sup>

Scott's discipline was harsh by present-day standards; a soldier committing even a minor infraction would be trussed on a sort of saw-horse and left in the broiling sun from

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<sup>213</sup> Wallace, "Mexico City ...," 161; see also Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 362, and Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny ...*, 303.

<sup>214</sup> Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest ...*, 168-169.

<sup>215</sup> Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 72-75; see also Ralph H. Gabriel, "American Experience with Military Government," *The American Historical Review* 49, no. 4 (July 1944): 633.

<sup>216</sup> Dufour, *Compact History ...*, 227.

veille to retreat, with a half-hour out for meals, for periods up to 60 days.<sup>217</sup> More severe infractions such as rape, theft, or murder would often warrant execution. In the words of one volunteer, “More persons have been shot or hung for various crimes by the American officers in Mexico during the past two years than would be capitally executed in the whole United States in the ordinary course of justice during ten years.”<sup>218</sup> Harsh or not, the discipline worked, as crimes and disorder within Scott’s ranks were rare. This contrasted favorably in the eyes of the Mexican people with Santa Anna’s undisciplined horde, and helped Scott to gain the support of the Mexican Catholic hierarchy in the towns of Jalapa and Puebla *en route* to Mexico City.<sup>219</sup> This forbearance was especially important at Puebla, Mexico’s second largest city with 70,000 inhabitants, where Scott had to take a tactical pause and wait for reinforcements when most of his volunteer regiments were mustered out of service. One of his officers described the precarious nature of the situation in a letter home: “When we came into this Place there were enough Mexicans around us, as could have eaten us up, but no, we marched into the city unmolested.”<sup>220</sup>

Unfortunately, Scott’s wholesale rejection of *inter arma enim silent leges*<sup>221</sup> also contrasted with the earlier behavior of Zachary Taylor’s men. There were some commonalities between their respective approaches. Like Scott, Taylor admirably

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<sup>217</sup> Wallace, “Mexico City . . .,” 160.

<sup>218</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 146.

<sup>219</sup> Gabriel, “Military Government . . .,” 635-636.

<sup>220</sup> Walter B. Hendrickson, “The Happy Soldier: The Mexican War Letters of John Nevin King,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1953): 163.

<sup>221</sup> Loosely translated, “In times of war, the law falls silent.”

enforced a “no desecration” policy with respect to churches, with the exception of those used by Mexican troops for military purposes (most notably at the Battle of Monterrey in September, 1846).<sup>222</sup> His General Orders No. 30 guaranteed non-interference with Mexican religious and civil rights “under [any] pretext [or] in any way,” and pledged that whatever his army needed would “be bought ... and paid for at the highest prices.”<sup>223</sup> He was also generous in granting cease-fires, even if the Mexicans were being obviously duplicitous in requesting them. A notable example of this was after the Battle of Monterrey, in which Taylor allowed General Pedro de Ampudia’s forces to retire under terms similar to what Scott later granted at Veracruz, seeing no need to sacrifice people on both sides merely to impose harsher terms.<sup>224</sup> But, in the main, whereas Scott left law and order in his wake, Taylor left “traces of violence and desolation” that laid “foundations of lasting animosities.”<sup>225</sup>

There were several reasons for the differences in the two armies’ conduct towards the Mexican people. Unlike the erudite and humane Scott, Taylor lacked subtlety, unable to conceive of “any argument but the sword” and fully deserving of the sobriquet “Old Rough and Ready.”<sup>226</sup> As an extension of this character, Taylor was lax in his enforcement of discipline, believing it “the blessing of a free Constitution that under it any man learns to govern himself, and does not grow accustomed to look up to a man

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<sup>222</sup> Gabriel, “Military Government ...,” 636.

<sup>223</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 49; see also Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 100.

<sup>224</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 158.

<sup>225</sup> Gilley, “‘Polk’s War’ and the Louisiana Press,” 12; see also Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest* ..., 181.

<sup>226</sup> Reilly, “Jane McManus Storms ...,” 35; Scott’s nickname was “Old Fuss and Feathers,” befitting his formal style and love of pomp.

higher up who will subdue his passions through slavish fear.”<sup>227</sup> Although the relationship between Taylor’s soldiers and Mexican civilians was occasionally friendly, including instances where the Americans defended Mexican towns against bandits and Indian raids, breaches of discipline were the norm. This was particularly true during long periods of inactivity in which drinking (made worse by the fact that good drinking water was hard to come by), gambling, and other forms of debauchery were allowed to take root.<sup>228</sup> Individual acts of violence against civilian lives and property, usually retaliatory in nature, were generally not punished.<sup>229</sup>

Belying their generally high education level and skill base, the volunteer regiments in Taylor’s army comprised the bulk of the perpetrators, and incidents of violence began as soon as Taylor crossed the Rio Grande and occupied Matamoros. The volunteers mostly were not bad men, but they were off their balance. As the eminent early-20<sup>th</sup> Century historian Justin H. Smith explained:

[The volunteers] viewed as their duty to fight, and Mexicans were the enemy ... the law of courage was often the only rule of conduct ... [they had completely] lost sense of personal responsibility; civil virtues had been left behind, but were not yet replaced by military ones.<sup>230</sup>

The “law of courage” gained expression in a variety of ways, from the comparatively benign to the shockingly criminal. Lieutenant George G. Meade (future victor at the Battle of Gettysburg during the U.S. Civil War) described typical volunteer foraging behavior in a letter home to his wife: “They rob and steal the cattle and corn of the poor

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<sup>227</sup> Zimm, “Alexander Conze ...,” 35; see also Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 73.

<sup>228</sup> Payne, “Camp Life ...,” 341; see also Johnson, *Winfield Scott: Quest ...*, 165.

<sup>229</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, “Forgotten War ...,” 101.

<sup>230</sup> Smith, “La Republica ...,” 669.



farmers, and in fact act more like a body of hostile Indians than of civilized whites ... [they] inspired the Mexicans with a perfect horror of them.”<sup>231</sup> And then there were instances where volunteers literally got away with murder. The 1<sup>st</sup> Mississippi Rifles, commanded by future President of the Confederate States of America Jefferson Davis, and otherwise distinguished by a superb battle record, were known to finish off Mexican wounded with the 18-inch Bowie knives that they each carried.<sup>232</sup>

The most notorious episodes easily belonged to the Texas regiments, however. These men, mostly former Texas Rangers, were an enigma – probably the best scouts and bushwhackers in the world at that time, and thus an invaluable asset to Taylor’s army, but wholly averse to any form of military discipline whatsoever.<sup>233</sup> David Lavender offers a vivid description of the typical Texas Ranger in his book, *Climax at Buena Vista: The Decisive Battle of the Mexican-American War*:

Take them altogether, with their uncouth costumes, bearded faces, lean and brawny forms, fierce wild eyes, and swaggering manners, and they were fit representatives of the outlaws which made up the population of the Lone Star State.<sup>234</sup>

The fundamental problem with the Texans was that they were often unable or unwilling to differentiate between the vicious Mexican leaders whom they long hated, and the Mexican people who evidenced no antagonism against the Americans unless provided a

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<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 670.

<sup>232</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 113, 213; see also Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 189, and Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession* ..., 159.

<sup>233</sup> Edward S. Wallace, “General William Jenkins Worth and Texas,” *The Southwest Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (October 1950): 164.

<sup>234</sup> Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista* ..., 36.

good reason.<sup>235</sup> Viewed by the local populace as “Comanches of the North,” the Texans generally thought it a meritorious act to rob or kill a Mexican, and engaged in a “running warfare, embittered by old ... feuds and waged between the half savage guerillas of Mexico and the lynch gangs of the border.”<sup>236</sup> Torture was not an uncommon practice on their scouting missions; they would hang suspected spies until they begged for their lives, and the primary record is replete with examples of captures who refused to talk being turned over to the Texans to be “put out of the way.”<sup>237</sup>

So great was the terror posed by the Texas regiments to the Mexican population (and so costly were the effects of their misconduct in comparison to the benefits of their service) that Taylor was forced to muster them out of service after the Battle of Monterrey and send them home.<sup>238</sup> Sadly, this decision did not come before the so-called Ramos massacre, which was perhaps the worst atrocity of the war on either side. Taking revenge for a *vaquero* attack that killed one of their teamsters and destroyed their supply train, the Texas Rangers murdered the entire male population of a nearby village, estimated up to 40 men. Major Luther Giddings, a volunteer officer from Ohio, described Ramos as “one of the darkest passages in the history of the campaign,” one that could “not be justified [by] necessity of any kind.”<sup>239</sup> Taylor simply remarked, with a rare note of eloquence, “Let us no longer complain of Mexican barbarity.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 93.

<sup>236</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 145.

<sup>237</sup> Dishman, *A Perfect Gibraltar* ..., 45, 95; see also Eisenhower, *So Far* ..., 179.

<sup>238</sup> Hendrickson, “Happy Soldier ...,” 166-167; see also Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 145.

<sup>239</sup> Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory* ..., 216.

## Assessment

Although the United States was the much stronger nation in the Mexican-American War, this was not reflected in the force sent to wage it. The armies of Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott achieved victory through superior tactics and leadership, not overwhelming combat power. While it is true that American advantages in marksmanship and artillery proved decisive at several battles, the Mexicans had several legitimate opportunities to achieve a decisive victory, and to fundamentally change the course of the war as a result. Their failure to do was not a material one, rather a failure of leadership and operational command.

Winfield Scott conducted his campaign into the Valley of Mexico with remarkable temperance, sparing civilian suffering. The suffering that did occur – the bombardment of Veracruz, the pacification of Mexico City – was a military necessity, and only occurred after the Mexicans rejected Scott’s demands of surrender.

The atrocities that occurred in Taylor’s command outweigh Scott’s leniency, however. Some incidents of violence were bound to occur, of course. But such incidents were broadly preventable had Taylor punished crimes swiftly and visibly, and otherwise enforced discipline within his ranks. The Ramos massacre, and the generally lawless behavior of the Texas Rangers that preceded it, are among the least creditable episodes in the ethical history of the United States armed forces.

<i>Proportionality of Means</i>	+2
<i>Right Conduct</i>	-1

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<sup>240</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, “Forgotten War ...,” 102.

## CHAPTER 5 – EMBERS

Those the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.

Captain E. Kirby Smith, USA<sup>241</sup>

Mexico is an ugly enemy. She will not fight – & will not treat.

Daniel Webster<sup>242</sup>

### Overview

This final chapter determines if the Benefits that the United States gained in the Mexican-American War outweighed the harm created by its prosecution, an analysis far less clear than the acquisition of New Mexico and California would suggest superficially. Also, this paper is concluded with an overall assessment of the war (taken as an average of the JWI evaluations for each of the seven criteria) against Ulysses S. Grant's declaration of it as "unjust," as well as an assessment of the war's longer-term implications, some of which resonate still.

### Net Benefit

Significant controversy and ill-will towards President Polk's war policies emerged with the opening of the second front and Winfield Scott's movement into the heart of Mexico, despite the American public not being subject to conscription or war taxes.<sup>243</sup> Some of this was simple disillusionment – patriotism has a short shelf-life, after all, and the slapdash beginnings of the war and its initially tentative progression virtually assured

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<sup>241</sup> Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny* ..., 260; A regular army officer in the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry, Smith was one of the war's most prolific letter writers, and served as a bit of a moral conscience for both Taylor's and Scott's armies. Smith was killed at the Battle of Molino del Rey ("King's Mill") on September 8, 1847.

<sup>242</sup> Graebner, "Party Politics ...," 148.

<sup>243</sup> Spencer, "Overseas War ...," 311-312.

that hostilities would last longer than necessary.<sup>244</sup> More significantly, however, Polk's presidency had the effect of intensifying partisanship, a reality not helped by the fact that his war aims so unscrupulously evolved from protecting Texas sovereignty to obtaining a territorial indemnity for various claims and injuries to, most ominously as Scott approached Mexico City, potentially overthrowing the despotic Mexican government.<sup>245</sup>

As Scott approached Mexico City and the war appeared to be approaching its terminus in the fall of 1847, the American political consciousness had to confront the implications of the United States potentially acquiring California and New Mexico. Many of these implications were unpleasant, specifically the status of slavery in the new territories, and the long-term harm to republicanism posed by such a blatantly immoral example of European-style imperialism.<sup>246</sup> Despite the war's emerging unpopularity, Polk bore a responsibility for seeing it carried to a successful conclusion; if nothing else, failure to achieve a reasonable peace that accurately reflected American battlefield success would be an irresponsible conclusion to an already irresponsible use of Executive power. Thus, even with Congress threatening to withhold appropriations, Polk was unwilling to forego the territorial ambitions that had been so largely responsible for the war in the first place (despite those ambitions not being publically stated).<sup>247</sup>

Polk could not be entirely dismissive of these external pressures, however, and further understood that the Mexicans would not meet his territorial ambitions of their own accord. As such, he dispatched Nicholas Trist, Chief Clerk of the State Department, to

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<sup>244</sup> Gilley, "'Polk's War' and the Louisiana Press," 5-6.

<sup>245</sup> Neely, "War and Partisanship . . .," 202; see also DeVoto, *The Year of Decision* . . ., 208.

<sup>246</sup> Axelrod, *Political History* . . ., 134-135; see also DeVoto, *The Year of Decision* . . ., 295.

<sup>247</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 103; see also Castaneda, "Relations with Santa Anna . . .," 458.

Scott's army in mid-1847 to serve as a peace negotiator. Trist was authorized to offer the Mexican government up to \$30 million for New Mexico, Upper and Lower California, and a right of commercial transit across the Tehuantepec isthmus in southern Mexico.<sup>248</sup> New Mexico, Upper California, and a formal recognition of the Rio Grande boundary were Trist's explicit minimums, pegged to a payment of \$20 million.

Scott's capture of Mexico City on September 13, 1847 provided Trist an opportunity to seek a treaty ending the war, as Scott had "won the peace." As with the failed pre-war mission of John Slidell, however, the Polk administration had completely underestimated the depth of Mexican national pride, and was caught unaware when the Mexican government refused to negotiate.<sup>249</sup> From the Mexican viewpoint, Scott's occupation of the capital changed nothing; negotiating with the *yanquis* was tantamount to recognizing their right to expand American boundaries at will, which was as unpalatable now as it was during the pre-war annexation crisis. Moreover, seeking a treaty would have necessitated the various Mexican factions to compromise in a political environment that had only grown more dysfunctional as the war progressed. Also, the Mexicans were rightfully suspicious of the United States' ability to maintain its position; Scott's army remained small, and Polk's political capital was in rapid and visible decline with the Whig-dominated Congress.<sup>250</sup> Lastly, radical elements in the Mexican government were quite happy to extend the war in order to see the control of the Catholic hierarchy and propertied classes broken once and for all.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Brent, "Nicholas P. Trist . . .," 456-457.

<sup>249</sup> Axelrod, *Political History* . . ., 136-137.

<sup>250</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 158.

Mexican intransigence created a significant dilemma for President Polk. The further the war was prolonged, the narrower Polk's choices became: continue military escalation against an enemy that had been defeated by all the standards of civilized war, or withdraw without a formal peace.<sup>252</sup> Escalation was the only acceptable course in Polk's mind, as withdrawal would likely leave Mexico even more intractable than it had been before the war, and "...the doctrine of no territory is the doctrine of no indemnity; and, if sanctioned, would be a public acknowledgement that our country was wrong ... an admission unfounded in fact, and degrading in national character."<sup>253</sup> Also, acquisition of new territory by military occupation did not require Congressional approval, whereas annexation would. Thus, Polk determined in November, 1847 that a treaty could not be achieved and that the additional cost of American blood and treasure warranted additional Mexican territory (if not all of Mexico, then all Mexican territory north of Rio Grande and Gila Rivers and west to the Pacific Ocean). Trist was recalled to Washington.<sup>254</sup>

The problem with indemnity is that it is an elastic term, stretching as the need requires. In logic it has no limits, something that Trist recognized.<sup>255</sup> This recognition supported other misgivings Trist had about potential expansion of the war, which he already viewed as a shameful display of naked American power.<sup>256</sup> The most compelling

<sup>251</sup> Thomas J. Farnham, "Nicholas Trist & James Freaner and the Mission to Mexico," *Arizona and the West* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1969): 251.

<sup>252</sup> Graebner, "Lessons of the Mexican War," 329-337.

<sup>253</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 151; see also Graebner, "Lessons of the Mexican War," 334.

<sup>254</sup> Graebner, "Party Politics ...," 149; see also Farnham, "Trist & Freaner ...," 249-250, and Brent, "Nicholas P. Trist ...," 463.

<sup>255</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission ...*, 112.

<sup>256</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs ...*, 426.

of these was that an extended military occupation required "to create under our republican government a military despotism" whose influence (if unrestrained) would "endanger our existence as a nation."<sup>257</sup> Trist also recognized that he represented probably the only chance for a peace that would be sustainable, meaning one that limited Mexican humiliation while sating Polk's hunger for territory. Trist was in a far better position than the president to evaluate Mexican politics and, unlike Polk, knew of the almost insurmountable opposition weathered by Mexican peace advocates to even agree to negotiations. Their sacrifice – and Mexico's future, however negatively affected by American greed – deserved better than abandonment.<sup>258</sup> In the words of Edward Thornton, secretary of British legation in Mexico, in a letter to Trist upon being notified of his recall:

I am sure you will, and I leave it to your ... charity for this unhappy nation to lend a helping hand towards the preservation of her nationality. I look upon this as the last chance, for either party, of making peace.<sup>259</sup>

This letter provided Trist the balance of moral courage he needed at a time and place when too many other men lacked it. Ignoring Polk's recall order, Trist delivered his "minimums" (for only \$15 million) via the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848.

The treaty was the most lenient that Trist could have achieved under Polk's instructions, a fact not lost on the Mexicans. Bernardo Cuoto, one of the Mexican negotiators, appreciated Trist's generosity:

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<sup>257</sup> Farnham, "Trist & Freaner ...," 257.

<sup>258</sup> Brent, "Nicholas P. Trist ...," 464-472.

<sup>259</sup> Graebner, "Party Politics ...," 147.



The present treaty does not merely prevent an increase of our losses by a continuance of the war; but it serves to recover the better part of that which was already under the control of the conquering army of the United States; it is more exactly an agreement of recovery than an agreement of cession.<sup>260</sup>

And despite Trist being an “unauthorized agent” and negotiating the treaty “with an unacknowledged [Mexican] government,” political reality forced Polk to accept it. Polk could not well request more men and money to conquer a “better” peace, not when one on the basis of his now-public war aims had been delivered.<sup>261</sup> His only recourse was to pass the treaty to the Senate for ratification, an action that body completed on July 4, 1848. The Mexican-American War was officially at an end.

Those taking a purely realist view towards the Mexican-American War might suggest that James K. Polk merits a degree of praise, especially in maintaining a reasonable balance between the means and ends of his policies. Instead of conquering all of Mexico (and acceding to the demands of some ideologues to provide for that nation’s social and political regeneration), Polk limited expansion to only territory that Mexico had let lie fallow, and most likely would have lost to filibustering regardless.<sup>262</sup> And Mexico, while victimized, was certainly not blameless, as their government was deeply committed to a policy of hostility towards the United States in the lead up to the war.<sup>263</sup> Moreover, Polk fulfilled the vision of his constituency, which is the ultimate measure of political success in a democratic system.<sup>264</sup> This may explain why presidential historians view Polk’s

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<sup>260</sup> Eisenhower, *So Far ...*, 368; see also Van Alstyne, “Mississippi Valley ...,” 234.

<sup>261</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 136; see also Farnham, “Trist & Freaner ...,” 260, Brent, “Nicholas P. Trist ...,” 469, and Graebner, “Party Politics ...,” 137, 155-156.

<sup>262</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land ...*, 96.

<sup>263</sup> Dufour, *Compact History ...*, 25.

presidency favorably, consistently rating him in the “near-great” tier, only slightly below such towering figures as Washington, Lincoln, Reagan, and FDR.

The same realists might further suggest that, owing to Polk’s policies, the Mexican-American War was refreshingly stripped of any moral pretensions. The \$15 million that the United States paid for California and New Mexico was effectively “conscience money,” and Polk and his expansionist allies were untroubled by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo’s excusal of the \$3.25 million in debt claims held by American citizens – despite this alone being claimed as a *causus belli* by Polk before the Thornton Affair.<sup>265</sup> Indeed, moralism in regards to the Mexican-American War, or any war for that matter can miss the fact that history does not necessarily stop for concepts of political virtue.<sup>266</sup>

History also tends to devote more attention to the victims of territorial expansion, rather than the benefits it provides; after all, no one has ever seriously suggested a retrocession of the American Southwest.<sup>267</sup> And in the case of California and New Mexico, the benefits to the United States were hugely significant. The acquisition of California’s ports, coupled with the passage of the Walker Tariff in 1846, allowed American exports to be increased dramatically, thereby protecting the predominantly agrarian economy from overproduction. Implicit with this increase in exports was an increase in Great Britain’s dependence on American grain and cotton, which would serve as an important future check within that strategic relationship. Also, the war clearly

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<sup>264</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 477.

<sup>265</sup> Singletary, *The Mexican War*, 5; see also Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 184.

<sup>266</sup> Merry, *Vast Designs* ..., 476.

<sup>267</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security* ..., 32; see also Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 25.

demonstrated the long dormant military capabilities of the United States, particularly to the European powers. As Polk explained to Congress in mid-1848, “Our power and our resources have become known and are respected throughout the world, and we shall probably be saved from the necessity of engaging in another foreign war for a long series of years.”<sup>268</sup>

The moral issues raised by the Mexican-American War were not easily quieted, however, despite the war’s benefits. Jane McManus Storms, an influential Washington letter-writer during the 1840s, was particularly poignant in describing the war’s implication for the presumed national character: “The sword is not the implement of republicanism. The shouts of victory hide the blood, ruin, and desolation with which it is bought.”<sup>269</sup> By any objective standard, the United States – the assumed vanguard of Western ideals, the model republic, the antithesis of European despotism – waged an aggressive war against a fellow republic to gain territory that it had long set covetous eyes upon. As was shown in Chapter 2 (“Fuel”), Polk and his supporters partially justified this action in the language of preventive war, but preventive war is a completely subjective concept, and is thus fraught with problems in application. From Michael Walzer’s book, *Just and Unjust Wars*:

Preventive war presupposes some standard against which danger is to be measured. Such a standard exists only in the idea of a balance of power, not in the immediate security of boundaries. A preventive war is fought to maintain the balance, to stop ... a shift into a relation of inferiority. The balance is often talked about as if it were the key to peace among states. But it cannot be that, else it would not need to be defended so often by force of arms.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design* ..., 88-89, 205-207.

<sup>269</sup> Reilly, “Jane McManus Storms ...,” 38.

<sup>270</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 76-78.

Equally troubling is the argument that the war simply accelerated that which the United States was certain to possess via eventual absorption. Just because California and New Mexico were “ripe for the picking” did not justify Polk taking the fruit, or declaring some right of conquest. In the absence of effective Mexican control, those territories, like Texas before them, had a right to self-determination through revolution or other means. Again, Walzer provides unequivocal commentary: “As with individuals, so with sovereign states: there are things we cannot do to them, even for their own ostensible good.”<sup>271</sup>

Polk’s stated reasons for prosecuting the Mexican-American War being morally inadequate demonstrate an overarching truth: that Manifest Destiny, in contrast to its religious undertones and its foundation in a national superiority complex, was really just a cynical and calculated land-grabbing scheme. The imperialist and militarist habits so readily learned in Mexico were ones that many Americans were all too willing to advance. Consider the self-satisfied words of Southern editor J.D.B. DeBow at the war’s close (original emphasis preserved):

The North Americans *will* spread out far beyond their present bounds. They *will* encroach again and again on their neighbors. New territories *will* be planted, declare their independence and be annexed! We have New Mexico and California! We will have Old Mexico and Cuba! The isthmus cannot arrest – not even the St. Lawrence. Time has all this in her womb.<sup>272</sup>

For Americans still attuned to the moral implications of the war, this was too much. The same spirit of conquest that now emboldened the expansionists hardened its opposition in

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<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>272</sup> Dufour, *Compact History* ..., 290; see also Nugent, “The American Habit of Empire ...,” 6.

equal measure. And this opposition had no more an ominous expression than the Wilmot Proviso.

The Wilmot Proviso, named for the Democratic Congressman David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, was a seemingly innocuous rider to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (and several appropriations bills that preceded it) that sought to ban the extension of slavery into any territory gained from the war. When first introduced, the Proviso was a bit of an adventure into the legislative unknown, and many in Congress did not know what to do with it from a parliamentary perspective. But as a moral abstraction, it held great power, placing the pro-slavery southerners under siege.<sup>273</sup> The southerners had cause to worry – the exclusive addition and population of “free” territory would disrupt the balance of influence that the slave-holding states enjoyed in Congress, thereby making abolition a political likelihood in as little as a decade. Before the Mexican-American War, many southerners had long seen slavery as a necessary evil and were resigned to its eventual replacement by a different (and more economically viable) labor system. With the Wilmot Proviso placing them on the defensive in an expansionist environment, however, they quickly came to view the “peculiar institution” as a hard-won and absolute southern right.<sup>274</sup>

Thus, the real legacy of the Mexican-American War was not the realization of Manifest Destiny for the United States, but rather a Sectional Destiny that almost destroyed it. For the deep and violent emotions released by the Wilmot Proviso enabled the rise of sectionalism, which in turn served as the proximate cause of the U.S. Civil

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<sup>273</sup> Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission* ..., 166.

<sup>274</sup> Henderson, *Glorious Defeat* ..., 180; see also Farnham, “Trist & Freaner ...,” 257.

War, a conflict that the verdict of history suggests was eminently avoidable.<sup>275</sup> So, the United States paid quite a bit more than \$15 million for California and New Mexico, and is paying still, as the black diaspora and bitter racism that followed the Civil War yet influence the American social and political discourse. Was the Civil War and all of its long-standing effects a fair price? For Ulysses S. Grant, whose indictment of the Mexican-American War as “unjust” motivated this paper at the outset, it probably was not. In the same memoirs, he offered a single-word description of the Civil War: “Punishment.”<sup>276</sup>

### **Assessment**

The Mexican-American War altered the face of the United States in a highly Beneficial manner, but also set the country on a course towards the costliest war of its history. That the Civil War could have been prevented makes it even more tragic, and, by extension, the effects of the Mexican-American War even more harmful. Also, the war’s Benefits have a bit of a zero-sum flavor: although there are no doubt economies of scale involved, anything economically or otherwise that the United States gained from possessing California and New Mexico came at expense of lost potential for Mexico. A more rigorous inquiry along this line of thinking is far beyond the scope of this thesis, however.

*Net Benefit* -2

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>275</sup> Merk, “Dissent ...,” 132; see also Henderson, *Glorious Defeat ...*, 181.

<sup>276</sup> Johannsen and Santoni, “Forgotten War ...,” 96.

The average of the indices for the seven Just War criteria gives a figure of -1.42, placing the Mexican-American War in between “Slightly Unjust” and “Moderately Unjust” on the Just War Index. Given the fact that all of the criteria save two rated as “Moderately Unjust” or lower, and that only one (Proportionality of Means) rated on the just side of the scale, an overall assessment of “Moderately Unjust” is probably more accurate. Moreover, the criteria were each weighted equally, which is arguably inappropriate in the context of the Mexican-American War. Given the war’s long-term and excessively negative implications, Proportionality of Means and Right Conduct (the next highest evaluation) are the least significant criteria, as they do not speak to either the war’s origin or the manner in which it was resolved. This is just nuance, however; no matter how you interpret the numerical results (with their attendant subjectivity) it is clear from this paper’s argument that the Mexican-American War was unjust, qualitatively and quantitatively. Grant’s statement is confirmed.

And yet, none of it can be undone, so what is the point? Well, the Mexican-American War provides a far more relevant lesson to the United States of today than its temporal distance might otherwise suggest. The characteristics ascribed to James K. Polk and his war policies – arrogant, uncompromising, cunning, Puritanical – describe how much of the world views American hegemony, particularly in response to the unilateralism that has informed American foreign policy since 9-11. It is true, as suggested earlier, that moralism in a world so dominated by the *realpolitik* and competing national interests can be misplaced. But that does not mean it has no place. For the manifest injustice of the Mexican-American War was not disregard for Mexico and the taking of her land – it was the immorality displayed by a country that knew better. That espoused better. That the

world writ large expected better from, and still does. The lesson is that immoral national conduct enflames baser instincts, embrace of which can create a fire of unintended consequences that burns uncontrollably. The fire created by the Mexican-American War almost consumed the United States. Its embers remain hot ...



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