

# America's Forgotten War

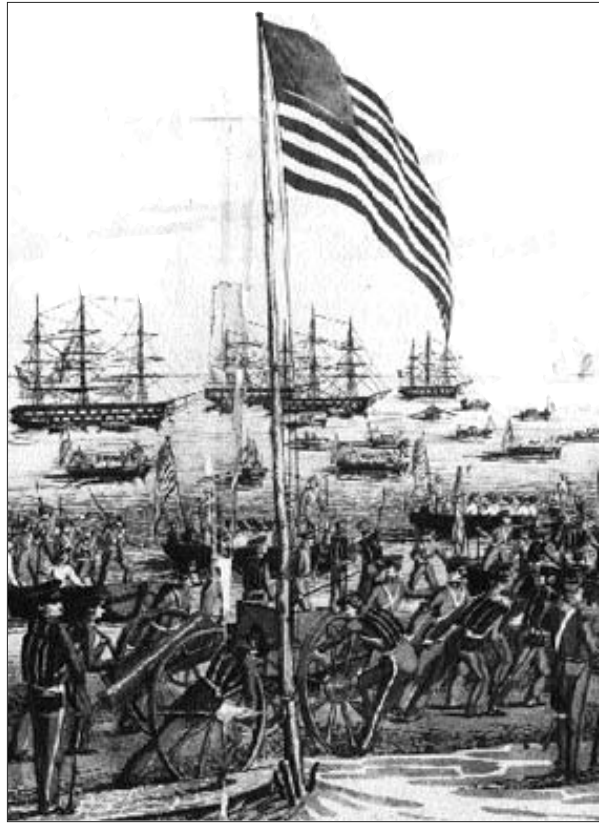
*A century and a half after it began, the Mexican War has become a footnote to American history. When not forgotten, it has been misinterpreted—as America's first imperial venture or its first unpopular war. The truth about the conflict, and its effect on the nation, is far more interesting.*

by Robert W. Johannsen

Long after we are dead," wrote the popular mid-19th-century novelist George Lippard, "History will tell the children of ages yet to come, how the hosts gathered for the Crusade, in the year 1846."

One hundred and fifty years ago, the United States took up arms against Mexico, engaging in a war fought wholly on foreign soil for the first time in its history. It was a conflict fraught with significance for both nations. Yet for all its importance (and despite Lippard's confident prediction), the war with Mexico has become America's forgotten war. Few today can recite its causes. Few Americans even recall the battlefield triumphs. If remembered at all, it is thought of, wrongly, as an unpopular war, in large part because certain luminaries of the day, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, inveighed so eloquently against it.

To be sure, wars often create more problems than they settle, and the Mexican War was no exception. A bitter and divisive sec-



tional struggle over the issue of slavery's expansion into the territories gained from Mexico was an unintended consequence of the conflict. Many Americans were later convinced, as was Ulysses S. Grant (himself a participant in the war), that "the Southern rebellion was largely an outgrowth of the Mexican War." Writing 40 years after the fact, failing in health, the old general influenced much subsequent thinking about the war when he charged that it was "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation." The Civil War, he declared, was "our punishment." The war with Mexico, when it was viewed at all, was considered within the context of the struggle over slavery and as a precursor to what Grant called "the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times."

But the Mexican War had importance far beyond its contributions to the outbreak of the Civil War—and in its day was viewed far more favorably than subsequent opinion would have us think. The first major national crisis faced during a period



*In the largest amphibious operation in its time, the forces of General Winfield Scott land at Veracruz on March 27, 1847.*

of unprecedented economic and social change, it came at a crucial moment in the young life of the United States. Rapid commercial and industrial expansion, with new opportunities for material advancement, was changing people's lives. Social reformers, utopian visionaries, political theorists, and religious enthusiasts were offering a host of projects and schemes in their quest for individual improvement. Questions were being raised about the true nature and purpose of republican government, as older values of patriotism and civic virtue—the heart of classical republicanism—seemed to be giving way before the new “spirit of gain.”

The United States at midcentury was a nation in search of itself, and the war with Mexico became an important step toward self-definition. For a time and for some people, the war offered reassurance, giving new meaning to patriotism, providing a new arena for heroism, and reinforcing popular convictions regarding the superiority of republican government. The war

was seen as a test of democratic institutions, as legitimizing America's mission as the world's “model republic.”

The outbreak of the Mexican War had a long and complex background in years of uneasy relations between the two countries. To many Americans, the frequency of revolutions in Mexico rendered that country's republican government more a sham than a reality. The United States had lodged claims against Mexico for losses incurred by American citizens during the revolutions, but even though the claims were arbitrated in 1842 at Mexico's request, they remained unpaid.

Yet for all the moments of irritation and tension, the cause of the Mexican War might be simply stated in a single word—Texas. The United States wanted Texas, and Mexico did not mean for the Americans to have it. From the moment Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836, Mexico blamed the United States for its loss and nurtured hopes for its recapture. The boundary with the United States, as far as Mexico was concerned, continued to be the Sabine River, which separated Louisiana and Texas. For the United States, it was the Rio Grande, the “traditional” line claimed in the 1803 treaty with France, which suggested that Texas was a part of the Louisiana Purchase, and confirmed by John Quincy Adams in his 1819 negotiations with Spain. The land between the two rivers—the Sabine and the Rio Grande—was the disputed territory.

Sentiment in support of the annexation of Texas to the United States gained strength as it was linked with questions of western settlement and territorial expansion. John L. O'Sullivan, outspoken New York journalist and editor of the *Democratic Review*, reflecting the romantic idealism of the time, placed the issue in broader perspective (and unwittingly coined a phrase that soon became a popular American idiom) when he asserted that America's claim to Texas was “by right of our manifest destiny to over-spread and possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self government.”

Any action by the United States aimed at acquiring Texas, Mexican authorities repeatedly warned, would be regarded as a declaration of war against Mexico. When Congress passed a joint resolution annexing Texas, on March 1, 1845, Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States. As he left Washington, the Mexican minister angrily denounced annexation as an act of aggression against Mexico, “the most unjust which can be found recorded in the annals of modern history.”

The ensuing year was marked by the rapid breakdown of relations, by threats and ultimatums, by military movements and countermovements, by bellicose invective and futile peace feelers. Mexico’s repeated threats of invasion, the mobilization of its armed forces, the massing of Mexican troops on the south bank of the Rio Grande, and the appeals from Austin for protection following the official acceptance of annexation prompted President James K. Polk to order General Zachary Taylor’s army into Texas. Taylor’s force crossed the Sabine River and by late August 1845 was camped near the village of Corpus Christi.

The outbreak of hostilities now appeared certain. In a last-ditch effort to avert war, Polk dispatched John Slidell to Mexico City with authority to negotiate the differences between the two countries, a futile gesture that only inflamed anti-American feeling. Slidell was rebuffed, and a short time later Mexico’s government was toppled by a revolution led by military hardliners who pledged to defend Mexican territory as far east as the Sabine River.

The admission of Texas to statehood in December 1845 raised the stakes. When news of Slidell’s failure reached Washington shortly afterward, an impatient President Polk ordered General Taylor to move his army to the Rio Grande. By the end of March 1846, the troops were in position on the river opposite the Mexican town of Matamoros. Taylor had been instructed not to treat Mexico as an enemy unless its

forces committed an “open act of hostility.”

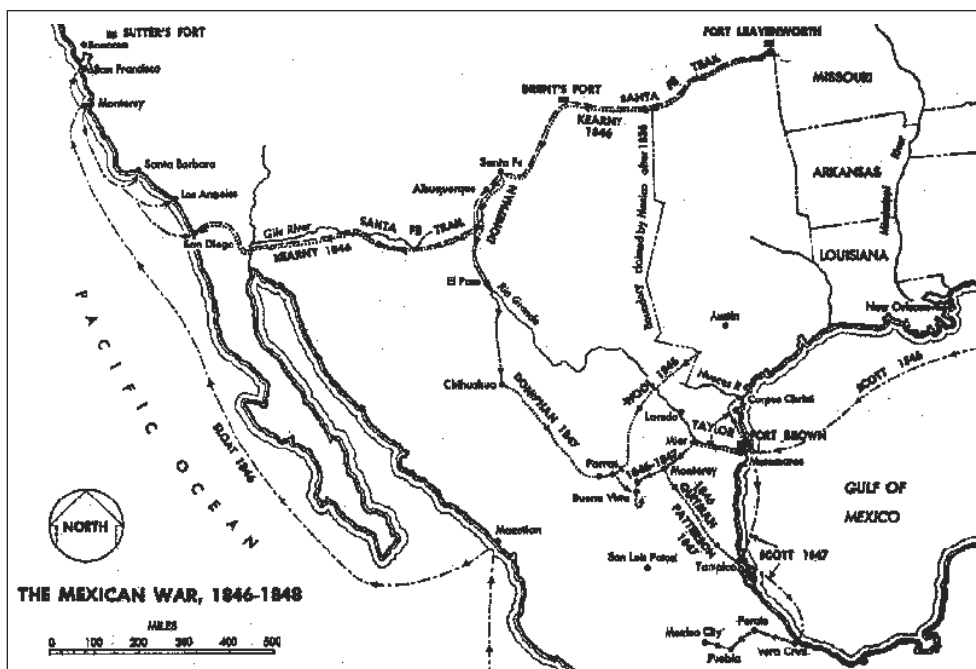
Within weeks of Taylor’s movement, the new Mexican president, General Mariano Paredes, declared a “defensive war” against the United States, and the Mexican commander on the Rio Grande informed Taylor that hostilities had commenced. A Mexican force crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed a detachment of American dragoons on a reconnaissance mission, killing and wounding a number of them in the process. When Polk received the news on May 9, he summoned his cabinet into an emergency meeting. On May 11, he submitted his war message to Congress. Within two days, both houses had concurred, authorizing the president to raise 50,000 volunteers and appropriating \$10 million to meet the expenses.

What neither Polk nor Congress could know was that the Mexican army had already crossed the Rio Grande in force and had engaged Taylor’s army in the first major battles of the war, Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, in and near the present city of Brownsville. In both engagements, Taylor’s outnumbered soldiers sent the invaders reeling in disorganized retreat back across the river.

The call for volunteers coincided with the news reports of the victories on the Rio Grande. The response was electric. Quotas, initially assigned to those states nearest the scene of operations, were quickly oversubscribed. Thousands of young men had to be turned back; Illinois provided enough men for 14 regiments when only four were called. The rush of volunteers, according to one writer, confirmed the superior nature of republican government: “We had to show the Mexicans that a people without being military, may be *warlike*.”

The volunteers came from all walks of life. Individuals from the upper ranks of society—sons of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, a descendant of John Marshall, and Edward Everett’s nephew, as well as scions of families with proud Revolutionary

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War connections—mixed with farmers, merchants, lawyers, journalists, members of fire companies, students, recent immigrants, and even a sprinkling of American Indians. As one Illinois volunteer looked about him at a rendezvous where recruits had gathered, he noted “lead-miners from Galena; wharf rats and dock loafers from Chicago; farmers on unpurchased lands from the interior; small pattern politicians, emulous of popularity; village statesmen, pregnant with undeveloped greatness, and anxious to enlarge the sphere of their influence by a military *accouchement*; briefless lawyers and patientless physicians; and a liberal allowance of honest, hard-fisted ‘Suckers.’ ” Whatever their background or occupation, the volunteers were united by a spirit of adventure, eagerly anticipating a “grand jubilee in the halls of the Montezumas.” It was an army of democracy, and the citizen soldier became an honored symbol of the republic.

Many of the volunteers had military experience, in the War of 1812 or the Seminole wars in Florida, and a large number of them had spent time at West Point. One-third of the volunteer regiments were commanded by West Pointers, and well over a third of the field officers had had at least some West Point training.

Everywhere they went, the volunteers

attracted crowds of well-wishers. Residents of the towns and farms along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers gathered on the riverbanks to shout their encouragement, waving flags and handkerchiefs, as the volunteers passed on their way down river to New Orleans. There, they camped on the Chalmette battlefield, where Andrew Jackson had humbled a proud British army only 31 years before. At what they called Camp Jackson, they awaited transportation by sea to the mouth of the Rio Grande.

The Civil War has customarily been regarded as America’s first literate war, that is, the first war in which significant numbers of literate individuals served as soldiers. Although statistics are sketchy or nonexistent, a good case for possession of this distinction might be made for the Mexican War. Numbered among the volunteers were many men of education, including college graduates and products of the country’s common-school systems. They were avid letterwriters, corresponding with their families and friends and often serving as special correspondents for their hometown newspapers. Following the hard-fought battle for the northern Mexican city of Monterrey in September 1846, the volume of letters that passed through the New Orleans post office from the men in Taylor’s

## Mexico's War of 1847

As the specter of war loomed over Mexico during the spring of 1846, its leaders pondered the prospect of an armed conflict with the United States. The outlook was not promising. Only 25 years before, after a destructive 11-year war to win its independence from Spain, the new nation had begun a long and largely unsuccessful struggle to achieve social, economic, and political stability. But apart from a widespread determination to preserve Mexico's honor and its territorial integrity, little unified the bankrupt and divided nation in the mid-1840s.

The lack of domestic solidarity was largely the result of Mexico's failure to establish a durable political arrangement. Since independence, the nation had experimented with an empire, a federal republic, and various forms of centralized rule, but none of these had lasted. By midcentury, most of the country's roughly seven million inhabitants were ill-assimilated Indians who performed manual labor, while anti-Spanish sentiment had long driven off many of Mexico's better-trained elites. To make matters worse, the nation had little industry, a poor transportation network, and almost no government revenue apart from import tariffs.

On the eve of the war, the Catholic church and the military (whose chief strongman was General Antonio López de Santa Anna) were firmly established as the country's most powerful institutions. Separate entities within the state, they had their own courts and privileges, and any effort by reformers to curb their power ignited political disputes, including one that pitted three powerful factions against one another during the 1840s.

Led by Valentín Gómez Farías, the radicals (or *puros*) wanted to eradicate all vestiges of traditionalism by limiting the Church's economic and political privileges and by establishing a volunteer civic militia to break the regular army's power. Enlisting the support of the lower classes, the radicals hoped to bring back the federal form of government (set forth in the 1824 constitution), believing that it would give Mexico the strength and unity to regain Texas.

Like the *puros*, the moderates, led by Manuel Gómez Pedraza, favored putting restraints on the regular army and the Church, though only gradually in the case of the latter. Wary of the lower classes, the *moderados* wanted only property owners to

army doubled in number to more than 14,000 pieces.

Reading materials—books and newspapers—were also in heavy demand and short supply. That many of the soldiers were exceptionally well-read was evident from the literary and historical allusions that filled their letters and diaries. European travelers to the United States had observed that the Americans were a “reading people,” and the volunteers confirmed this judgment. Soldiers carried books in their knapsacks, received books in the mail from their families (often asking for specific titles), and sought out booksellers in the Mexican towns they occupied. Still, there were never enough books available to satisfy the demand. Newspapers were even more scarce. Some of the eastern metropolitan

dailies established papers in the larger Mexican cities, the so-called “Anglo-Saxon press,” but this effort did not meet the needs of the troops.

The volunteer system was at the heart of America's vision of responsible republican government, the principal means of defense during times of national crisis. Although President Polk called for a modest increase in the size of the regular army and later authorized 10 additional regiments, he shared the popular bias against a large professional military force. A standing army, he declared, was “contrary to the genius of our free institutions, would impose heavy burdens on the people and be dangerous to public liberty.” Reliance, he insisted, must be on “our citizen soldiers.” From the beginning of the war,

serve in the civic militias. While preferring a constitutional monarchy, in 1845 they supported efforts to reform the centralist constitution of 1843. In foreign affairs, they stood almost alone in hoping to reach an amicable accord with the United States on the Texas question.

For their part, conservatives such as Lucas Alamán sought to salvage those elements of the Spanish colonial state that had benefited them. They wanted a strong centralized government, preferably a monarchy, built upon an alliance between the church and the regular army, and only limited citizenship for the lower classes. Finding it impossible to resist the prowar atmosphere, they reluctantly took up the jingoistic banner against the United States.

The episode that best illuminates Mexico's crippling political divisiveness is the February 1847 "rebellion of the *polkos*." On January 11 of that year, then-vice president Gómez Farías, the acting chief executive, issued a decree authorizing the government to raise 15 million pesos by mortgaging or selling ecclesiastical property. Designed to finance the war against the United States, the law set off a furor.

*Moderado* politicians, senior army chiefs, and high-ranking clerical leaders plotted to overthrow Farías, relying on civic militia battalions (known as the *polkos* because the polka had become the most popular dance of elite society) organized during the fall of 1846 by Mexico City's well-to-do. The revolt, which erupted just a few days before General Winfield Scott's expeditionary army landed in Veracruz, prevented the Mexican government from coming to the defense of the port city.

Eventual defeat in what Mexicans called the War of 1847 did not bring unity to the nation. A new generation of *puro* and *moderado* thinkers concluded that Mexico's main problem had been the failure to extirpate the Spanish colonial legacy, while conservatives argued that monarchy was the best means of restoring national well-being. Debate grew increasingly rancorous and turned to open conflict in 1854. Only in 1867, after overcoming yet another round of civil war and foreign intervention by Napoleon III, who in 1862 installed Maximilian of Hapsburg as emperor, did the *pueros* manage to establish a new republic and greater national consensus.

—Pedro Santoni

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there was no love lost between the regulars and the volunteers. To the volunteers, the regular soldier was a "drilled automaton," while the regulars, resentful of all the attention given to the volunteers, viewed them as little better than an untrained and undisciplined rabble, useless as fighting men and ignorant of even the basic rules of survival in the field.

General Winfield Scott, who commanded large numbers of volunteers, complained that they knew nothing of camp discipline, cleanliness, sanitation, and proper diet. Scott and his fellow officers had reason for concern. More than 6,000 volunteers died from exposure and disease, principally dysentery and chronic diarrhea, about 10 times the number killed in action, though regulars hardly

fared much better.

Although there were numerous examples of friendly relations between the soldiers and Mexican civilians, including instances of the U.S. Army's defense of Mexican towns against marauding Indians and bandits, breaches of discipline among the soldiers were not uncommon, especially during long periods of inactivity. Individual acts of violence against the lives and property of civilians, often retaliatory in nature, generally went unpunished. Only rarely did large bodies of men engage in such acts. Following the destruction by Mexican irregulars of a three-mile-long supply train bound for Taylor's army in which the teamsters were slaughtered, a passing

group of volunteers, said to be Texas Rangers whose thirst for vengeance against Mexicans was widely feared, avenged the massacre by murdering up to 40 inhabitants of a nearby village.

More widely publicized and condemned was the murder by Arkansas cavalry, “wild and reckless fellows” known as Rackensackers, of 30 Mexican men, women, and children who had sought safety in a mountain cave following the murder of one of the Arkansas officers. Taylor was outraged, and the incident was reported in gory detail in the American press, arousing an immediate popular reaction. The massacre was denounced as behavior inconsistent with “one of the most enlightened and civilized nations of the globe.” “Let us no longer complain of Mexican barbarity.”

In spite of what regulars said about them, the volunteers proved their mettle as combat soldiers, fighting with courage and tenacity. Their role in each of the three areas of military operation was crucial to the ultimate success of American arms. Victory owed much to the superior organization and efficiency of the regulars and to the high quality of training offered by West Point, but in many respects the Mexican War was a volunteers’ war.

Following his early victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Taylor moved his army into northern Mexico, his first target the “stronghold of northern Mexico,” the fortified city of Monterrey. Anticipated by the volunteers with exhilaration, the battle for Monterrey in late September 1846 proved to be a costly struggle, marked by bloody, desperate street and house-to-house fighting before the city was secured. Taylor’s campaign culminated the following February in the Battle of Buena Vista, fought in a narrow pass between mountain ranges south of the city of Saltillo against a larger force commanded by General Santa Anna. Except for about 200 dragoons and three batteries of artillery, Taylor’s men were volunteers, all but a few facing enemy fire for the first time. It was another hard-fought engagement, one the volunteers were not sure they could win.

Exhaustion turned to rejoicing when Santa Anna withdrew his army under cover of darkness and began a long retreat southward, his force diminished by heavy casualties and mounting desertions.

A second army, commanded by General Stephen Watts Kearny, moved westward from Missouri along the Santa Fe Trail, occupying New Mexico without a shot, and, in conjunction with naval forces, going on to take possession of California.

A third front was opened in March 1847, after months of planning that required the careful coordination of military and naval operations and the collection of vast amounts of ordnance and quartermaster stores. General Scott, in the greatest amphibious operation to that time, landed 9,000 men on the beach south of Veracruz in five hours without suffering a single casualty. In addition to regular troops transferred from Taylor’s command, Scott’s army included volunteer regiments from Pennsylvania, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Illinois. By the end of March, Veracruz had fallen to the Americans, and Scott began his march inland toward Mexico City, on the route followed by Cortés in the 16th century. Santa Anna’s army blocked his path in Cerro Gordo, a wild, mountainous region, but by unexpectedly following a treacherous mountain path and scaling peaks under fire, Scott’s force flanked an apparently impregnable Mexican position, sending the enemy’s soldiers into headlong retreat. After several sharp engagements in the vicinity of Mexico City—at Contreras, Churubusco, Molino del Rey, and Chapultepec—Scott occupied the Mexican capital in September 1847. With the occupation of Mexico City the fighting came to an end, except for sporadic guerrilla raids along the lines of supply.

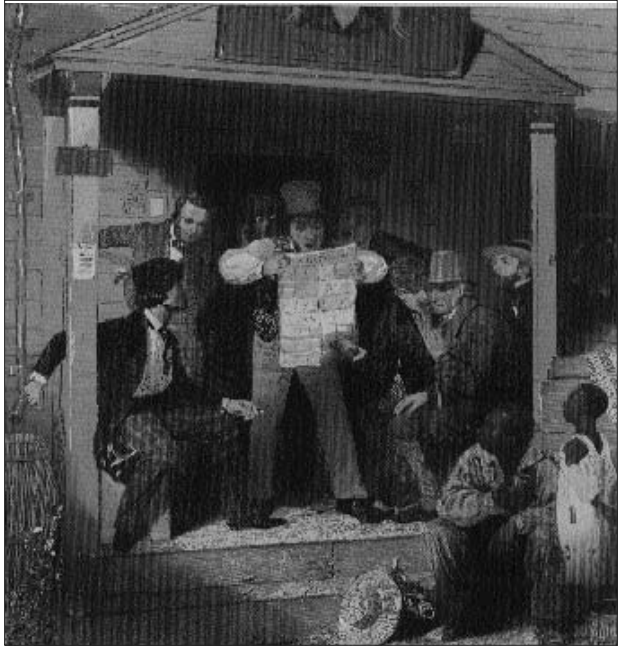
The logistical problems faced by Polk in directing the war were enormous and unprecedented. Large numbers of troops had to be raised in a short time, trained and equipped, and moved quickly over long distances to the scenes of the fighting. That the problems were met was a tribute to Polk’s single-minded dedica-

tion to what he conceived to be the responsibilities of presidential leadership in time of war.

Polk was the first president to give full definition to the role of commander in chief. “Polk gave the country its first demonstration of the *administrative* capacities of the presidency as a war agency,” historian Leonard D. White has written. “He proved that a president could run a war.” He not only placed the nation on a wartime footing almost overnight, but he also involved himself directly in all the countless details that sprang from prosecuting a war in a distant, and, to a large extent, unknown land. He took the initiative in securing war legislation and finance, made many of the tactical decisions that were conveyed to the armies by the War Department, appointed generals and drafted their instructions, and coordinated the work of the various bureaus and cabinet departments. Polk was, as one author has written, “the center on which all else depended.” Later, dealing with his own crisis, Abraham Lincoln devoted careful study to Polk’s management of the war.

Anticipating a short conflict, Polk undertook negotiations to end the war almost from the moment it began. The terms of the treaty that finally concluded the war were Polk’s terms from the beginning. Signed in early February 1848 in a suburb of Mexico City, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo recognized the Rio Grande boundary and provided for the cession of New Mexico and California to the United States. The United States canceled its long-standing claims against Mexico and agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million. The two countries further agreed to submit all future disputes to arbitration.

The Mexican War provided combat experience and valuable military lessons for many young officers who would later



War News from Mexico: An engraving after the painting by Richard Caton Woodville

become leaders in the Civil War. But the war had consequences far beyond the battlefield. It touched the lives of Americans more intimately and with greater immediacy than any major event to that time. Coinciding with the “print explosion” of the mid-19th century, of which the penny press was one manifestation, the war was reported in more detail than any previous conflict. Fast, steam-powered presses, innovative techniques in news gathering, the employment of war correspondents for the first time, the use of the new magnetic telegraph, and the rapid proliferation of books and periodicals all combined to carry the war into the lives of Americans on an unprecedented scale.

The first news of the war was greeted by an outburst of enthusiasm from one end of the country to the other: public demonstrations, bonfires, and illuminations, war rallies from Massachusetts to Illinois. “A military ardor pervades all ranks,” wrote Herman Melville from his New York home. “Nothing is talked of but the ‘Halls of the Montezuma.’”

How to explain the outburst of public support and the sudden rush of volunteers to the colors? How to account for what one newspaper called “this sublime



spectacle of military preparations”? One explanation was found in America’s commitment to a republican form of government. Where the people were the rulers, the security of the country in times of crisis was in the hands of its citizens.

There is no doubt that the war awakened a latent spirit of patriotism among Americans, but there were other, less lofty reasons for the rush of volunteers. It was a time when Americans were “reaching out” beyond their borders; the expansion of commerce, the increase in travel made possible by improvements in transportation, and the exploration by government-sponsored expeditions of remote areas in Africa, the Middle East, and South America all stimulated a romantic interest in other lands and other peoples. For the volunteers, the war offered a first exposure to a strange and ancient land they had only imagined before. “To revel among the intoxicating perfumes and flowery plains,” exulted an Ohio volunteer, “to gaze upon the magnificent scenery and wonderful exhibitions of Aztec civilization . . . to plant the flag of our young republic upon the capital reared centuries ago above the ruins of Montezuma’s palaces! What prospect more captivating to the youthful imagination?” Filled with the spirit of adventure, the volunteers shared their experiences with the folks back home in their letters, diaries, and the many published accounts of their campaigns, travel narratives in their own right.

The war entered the stream of American popular culture in a myriad of ways. It was celebrated in poetry and song, in paintings and lithographs, and in great “national dramas” performed on the stage in the nation’s theaters. Music publishers were quick to exploit the popular interest, and the chronology of the war could be told in the titles they issued. Piano arrangements in sheet music form, embellished with imaginative engravings depicting the war’s events, evoked the conflict in such pieces as *General Taylor’s Encampment Quickstep* and in the “elegant pianistic effects” of Stephen Foster’s *Santa Anna’s Retreat from Buena Vista*.

The Mexican War was dramatized even before the facts were known, but authentic-

ty of detail was never a concern for playwrights and producers who sought to re-enact the war’s events on the stage. Capacity audiences thrilled to such stage creations as *The Siege of Monterey, or, The Triumph of Rough and Ready*, which was so successful in New York that it went on tour, giving people the opportunity (according to its advertisement) “to exult in the triumph of American arms.”

Book publishers met the popular demand with a flood of romantic tales with Mexican War settings. Bound in bright yellow covers, illustrated with crude woodcuts, printed on rough paper in double columns, they became America’s first popular paperbacks. With such titles as *The Mexican Spy, or, The Bride of Buena Vista*, they combined all the popular Gothic elements—romance, intrigue, mystery, and suspense. The stories they told were strikingly similar—chivalric American volunteers displaying generosity to the vanquished foe, rescuing *senoritas* from the clutches of cruel Mexican guerrillas or corrupt priests, capturing these ladies’ hearts and not infrequently carrying them back to Kentucky or Illinois as war brides. Published in editions of as many as 100,000 copies, these books are almost impossible to find today. Passed around from hand to hand among soldiers as well as civilians, they were literally used up!

Not all the publications were such “catch-penny affairs.” James Fenimore Cooper, disappointed that the navy did not play a greater role in the war, made up for it by writing a novel of the Mexican War at sea, *Jack Tier, or, The Florida Reef* (1848), in which he imagined encounters between the United States and Mexican navies. For Cooper, America had embarked on a mission to break the “crust” that enclosed Mexico in bigotry and ignorance, and to bring the “blessings of real liberty” to the Mexican people. From his Brooklyn editorial office, Walt Whitman wrote eloquently of the victories in Mexico, viewing the war in terms of America’s great democratic mission to “elevate the *true* self-respect of the American people.”

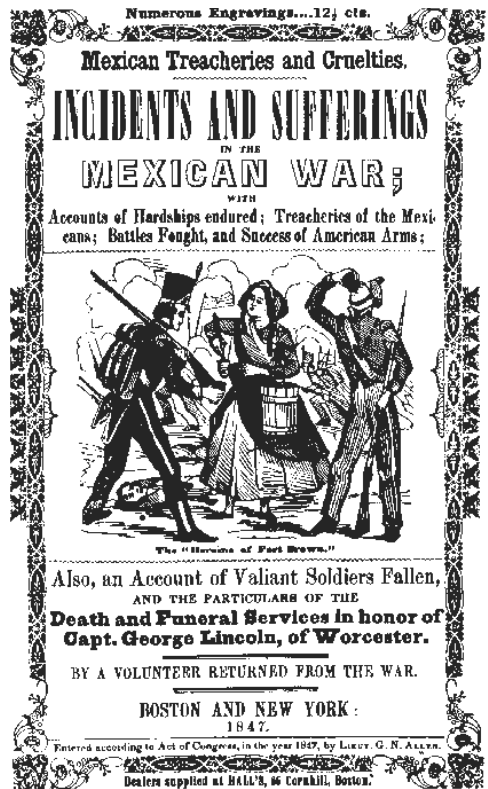
No single individual did as much to kindle the war-spirit as the prominent historian and chronicler of the 16th-century Spanish

conquest of Mexico, William Hickling Prescott. It was an ironic distinction, for Prescott was a dedicated antislavery New England Whig, strongly opposed to what he termed this “mad and unprincipled” war. The immense popularity of his *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), published just two and a half years before the war, turned public attention toward Mexico, familiarizing countless Americans with the titanic struggle between Cortés and Montezuma. Prescott deplored the “dare-devil war spirit” following the first battles in May 1846, but what he did not realize was that his own work had much to do with provoking that spirit. By describing “the past Conquest of Mexico” so vividly, it was said, Prescott had in fact “foretold the future one.”

The war heightened the popularity of Prescott’s *History*, and his publisher brought out new editions to meet the demand. Volunteers read and re-read it, and many of them carried copies of the book with them into Mexico. One Indiana volunteer was so captivated by Prescott’s history that he joined the war hoping to relive some of its episodes. For the soldiers in Winfield Scott’s army, the book served as a guidebook along the route to the Mexican capital.

In spite of his antiwar attitude, Prescott expressed an admiration for the nation’s citizen soldiers. Without conceding that the war was either just or necessary, he judged the American campaigns to be as brilliant as those of the great 16th-century Spaniard himself. To some, it was only logical that Prescott should become the historian of the Second Conquest of Mexico, as he had of the First, and a number of people, including General Scott, appealed to the historian to consider the task. Prescott was tempted but in the end rejected the proposal.

Prescott’s attitude toward the war reflected the ambivalence of many of those who opposed the conflict. Members of the American Peace Society, for example, deplored the outburst of war spirit yet seemed more concerned with averting war with Great Britain over the Oregon country than with denouncing the war with Mexico. When the crisis with the British was settled amicably, a leader of the movement declared 1846 to be “an era in the Peace cause,” in spite of the fact that the Mexican



War was already under way. Others believed that the prestige of victory over Mexico would prevent Europeans from complaining that American peace advocates supported the outlawing of war only because their country was too weak to fight one.

Although many members of the Whig Party defended the war and took an active part in it, others charged the war with being unjust, immoral, and unnecessary, and held President Polk and his Democratic Party responsible for provoking it. Very few, however, assumed the extreme position of Senator Thomas Corwin of Ohio, who characterized the war as organized thievery and counseled the Mexicans to greet the volunteers “with bloody hands” and to welcome them “to hospitable graves.” Whig officers in the field were furious, charging that Corwin’s words bordered on treason, while Ohio volunteers burned the senator in effigy. Even while opposing “Mr. Polk’s war,” however, Whigs were advised that patriotism as well as the discipline of an ordered society demanded that every citizen support it. The fact that both the commanding generals, Scott and Taylor, were Whigs was not

lost on the party.

Outspoken and uncompromising in their opposition to the Mexican War were the abolitionists, whose leader set the tone of their protest a few days after Polk sent his war message to Congress. The war, proclaimed William Lloyd Garrison, was one “of aggression, of invasion, of conquest, and rapine—marked by ruffianism, perfidy, and every other feature of national depravity.” To the abolitionists, the war was waged solely to extend and perpetuate the institution of slavery, a mistaken assumption but one that confirmed the charge that a slave-power plot was afoot to strengthen the hated institution. Some abolitionists were unwilling to follow Garrison’s lead. The editor of a Cincinnati antislavery paper announced that he would not print antiwar articles for fear they would endanger the safety of American soldiers in Mexico. There was strong feeling that the shrill condemnations by such men as Corwin and Garrison played a part in delaying the peace negotiations and prolonging the war.

Eighty-seven-year-old Albert Gallatin brought the perspective of five decades of public service, as a diplomat, fiscal expert, and presidential adviser, to bear on the Mexican War. His concern was two-sided. The founder, in 1842, of the American Ethnological Society, he had just published a scholarly study of Mexican and Central American antiquities. He recognized that the war would advance his own ethnological research, and to this end he maintained a correspondence with officers in the army, asking for information on the native peoples of New Mexico and Arizona and urging them to collect books and documents relating to Mexico’s ancient civilization. At the same time, he was profoundly disturbed by the war’s impact upon the integrity of America’s republican government.

The people, Gallatin believed, were blinded by the “romantic successes” of their armies in Mexico; their minds were captured by an “enthusiastic and exclusive love of military glory.” More important, they had forgotten the mission God had assigned them, the mission to improve the “state of the world” and to demonstrate that republican government was attended by the “high-

est standard of private and political virtue and morality.” Instead, he argued, Americans had abandoned the lofty position of their fathers and had carried patriotism to excess.

Gallatin’s statement had little effect on public opinion in spite of its sincerity and uplifting tone. Its publication coincided with the signing of the peace treaty; the war was over and Gallatin’s views seemed no longer relevant. Of more importance in shaping popular perceptions of the war were those who saw the conflict in terms of the duties and responsibilities of citizens in a republic. While they agreed that war was alien to the true purpose of a republic, they also maintained that there were some wars that even republics had to fight. “In what way,” asked New England reformer Nahum Capen, “could the evils of Mexico be reached, unless by the strong hand of war?” As the world’s leading republic, the United States had a duty to rescue its benighted neighbor and see that justice be done its people.

Through all the talk of American superiority, of America’s providential destiny, and of its republican mission, there ran this theme of regeneration, or renewal. While some scholars have doubted the sincerity of those who argued the reform character of the Mexican War, the belief that it was America’s duty to redeem the Mexican people was too widespread to be dismissed as nothing more than an attempt to mask ulterior desires for power and gain. People from all walks of life, including the soldiers in Mexico, echoed the belief that it was their mission to bring Mexico into the 19th century. Critics of the war such as Prescott and Gallatin might scoff at the exaggerated rhetoric of the war’s supporters, but they too shared the view that America’s role in Mexico was a regenerative one.

General Scott gave official sanction to the theme of regeneration in his first proclamation to the Mexican nation, issued from Jalapa on May 11, 1847, three weeks after the bloody engagement at Cerro Gordo. The war, he declared, was an evil. Nations, however, “have sacred duties to perform, from which they cannot swerve.” Mexican republicanism had become the “sport of private

ambition” and cried out for rescue. Scott admonished the Mexican people to throw off their old colonial habits and to “learn to be truly free—truly republican.” It is doubtful whether Scott’s proclamation reached many Mexicans, but it had a deep effect on the men in his army. When the troops moved into Puebla later in the summer, one of the Mexican residents noted that the soldiers “talk of nothing but fraternity between the two republics, and say they have only come to save the democratic principle.”

When President Polk reviewed the results of the Mexican War in his annual message to Congress in December 1848, he found its meaning in the nation’s demonstration that a democracy could successfully prosecute a foreign war “with all the vigor” normally associated with “more arbitrary forms of government.” Critics, he noted, had long charged republics with an inherent lack “of that unity, concentration of purpose, and vigor of execution” that characterized authoritarian governments. A popularly elected representative government with a volunteer army of citizen-soldiers had bested a military dictatorship. No more persuasive argument for the strength and superiority of the republican system, he felt, could be advanced.

Polk’s view was widely shared. The United States was yet a young and fragile nation, and its people were sensitive to the fact that in the eyes of the world theirs was still an unproven experiment in popular government. Europeans had scoffed at America’s national pretensions, its bluster and spread-eagle rhetoric, ridiculed its romantic faith in the popular voice, and magnified the weakness of its institutions. Their opinions had been confirmed by a host of travelers, including Charles Dickens, who had toured the country four years before the war and found the “model republic” wanting in almost every respect. As for waging an offensive war, it was said that the country would surely collapse into disunity and paralysis at the very thought.

Americans responded with a defensiveness that bordered on paranoia. The Mexican War, they were convinced, would

silence the scoffers, for they had shown the world that a people devoted to the “arts of peace” could vanquish a “military people, governed by military despots.” The prestige of victory, moreover, would not be without its influence overseas. When in the very month the treaty of peace was signed, on February 22 (the symbolism of the date, George Washington’s birthday, was not lost on the Americans), revolution broke out in France against the monarchy and in favor of constitutional government, the connection with the Mexican War seemed obvious. James Fenimore Cooper reflected popular opinion when he exulted that the guns that had filled “the valley of the Aztecs with their thunder” were heard “in echoes on the other side of the Atlantic.”

The victorious conclusion of the Mexican War and its repercussions in Europe seemed to herald the dawn of a new and golden age for the “model republic”—golden in fact, for gold was discovered in California at the very moment California became part of the United States. Expansion to the Pacific Ocean in California and Oregon (the latter by an 1846 treaty with Great Britain) was celebrated as the fulfillment of the nation’s manifest destiny. “The far-reaching, the boundless future,” John L. O’Sullivan proudly proclaimed, “will be the era of American greatness.”

Yet, for all the lofty rhetoric and soaring predictions, clouds had begun to gather in the bright morning skies of the republic (as one writer put it). Some Americans feared that the Mexican War would result in a militarism that was antithetical to the purposes of the republic. Others saw an even greater danger in the revival of the troublesome question of slavery’s expansion into new territories. Probably most Americans felt that the clouds would quickly dispel. Mutual concession and compromise had settled such questions before, and would surely do so again. With the new prestige and strength gained from victory over Mexico, the republic appeared indestructible. As well attempt to dissolve the solar system, declared Polk’s treasury secretary Robert J. Walker, as to sever the ties that “must forever bind together the American Union.”