



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

The War with Mexico, 1846-1848

On August 20, 1847, the San Mateo Convent at Churubusco was the scene of General Santa Anna's last desperate attempts to keep the invading United States Army from the gates of Mexico City. Today, the convent is surrounded by quiet residential neighborhoods, houses, and a unique historical museum, the Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones or "Interventionist Museum." While its emphasis is on the bravery of the Mexican soldier rather than the motivation of the aggressors, the Interventionist Museum is a mirror or "reverse" image of the Museum of Westward Expansion, for it portrays the history of the invasion of Mexico and its consequential loss of territory to the United States. It is one of the few museums where visitors can see displays of flags, uniforms and equipment captured from the United States on the field of battle.

The War with Mexico was the United States' most successful war of territorial aggrandizement. It was one of the few wars in history during which no defeats were suffered by one side and no victories were won by the other. An easy triumph for the United States was by no means certain in 1846, however. With an army four times larger than the United States, the Mexicans had spent a decade fighting "Texians" as well as their own countrymen. Mexico fully expected to win a war with the United States, a view shared by many European observers.

The origin of the hostility between the two nations can be traced back to the Texas revolution of 1835-1836. Mexico could not defeat the Texans,

but withheld recognition of Texas' independence under a strict interpretation of international law. While the term "Manifest Destiny" was not coined until 1845, its roots can be traced back to the era of President Jefferson, who never wavered from the belief that areas west of the Mississippi ought to be developed by the United States, an idea readily adopted by his successors. In 1844, the election of an expansionist president, James K. Polk, and a like-minded Congress, set the stage for war.

Mexico repeatedly stated that the annexation of Texas by the United States would be equivalent to a declaration of war, and after the annexation resolution in 1845, severed diplomatic relations with the U.S. The underlying U.S. motive for annexation, however, was that Mexico stood in the way of the dream of westward expansion. Polk did not necessarily want war, but he wanted California, as expansion to the Pacific would make the United States the dominant power on the North American continent. To this end, he dispatched envoy John Slidell to Mexico City to discuss the outstanding claims of American citizens against the Mexican Republic and the Texas boundary. Slidell was authorized to offer the Mexican government \$25 million for California, but the Mexicans declined to receive Slidell or permit him to present his "insulting" proposition.

With the failure of Slidell's mission, Polk dispatched General Zachary Taylor with a 4000 man "Corps of Observation" to the disputed Rio Grande border. Polk's counterpart, Mexican

President-General Mariano Paredes, took similar action, sending 3000 troops to reinforce the Mexican garrison at Matamoros, commanded by General Mariano Arista. The opposing forces glared at each other across the Rio Grande, until April 23, 1846, when Mexican cavalry crossed a few miles upriver from Taylor's army, and ambushed an American patrol sent to intercept them. "American blood has been shed on American soil," screamed U.S. newspapers, and Polk had his justification for war. On May 11, 1846, war with Mexico was declared, although two battles had already been fought at Palo Alto on May 8, and Resaca de la Palma on May 9. The Mexican army was forced to withdraw in disorder across the Rio Grande, its morale shattered. Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site, near Brownsville, Texas, commemorates one of the only two Mexican War battles fought on what is now U.S. soil.

Initially, President Polk prosecuted the war with limited military objectives, in the hopes of saving American lives and achieving a negotiated peace. To accomplish this, he hoped that an occupation of the northern provinces of Mexico, coupled with low Mexican morale, would bring the two nations to the peace table. Accordingly, Polk sent General Taylor from the Rio Grande toward Monterrey, Colonel Steven W. Kearny to Santa Fe, and Commodore Robert Stockton to California. Polk underestimated Mexican pride, determination and hatred for the invaders, whom they called "gringos." Polk also misunderstood the craftiness of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

Five times president of Mexico and five times ousted for betraying the national trust, in 1846 Santa Anna was in comfortable exile in Havana, Cuba, where he was playing a double game. While tendering his services to the Mexican government to end his exile, he simultaneously offered the United States most of Mexico's territories north of the Rio Grande, in exchange for \$30 million and U.S. aid in recovering his presidency. Polk was intrigued by Santa Anna's proposal, believing that it might end the war. Allowed to slip through the U.S. naval blockade in August of 1846, Santa Anna was handed the reins of the Mexican government

and immediately took command of the army, countering the American invasion force led by General Taylor, and ending dreams of a simple diplomatic solution to the war.

Ambition and partisan politics affected the United States' conduct of the war. Polk wanted a Democrat as field commander in Mexico, but the only qualified generals were members of the opposition Whig party. Throughout the war, the U.S. military effort was split by General Taylor's growing insubordination toward the politicians, personal disloyalty among the officers of General Winfield Scott's command, and Polk's distrust of both Taylor and Scott. Discord also surfaced between the small but disciplined and well-led professional army, and less restrained, undisciplined volunteers who joined it for "the duration."

In April 1846, the authorized regular army strength was 8,619 officers and men; wartime expansion increased its size to 42,374. Recently arrived immigrants swelled the ranks, some 47% percent of Taylor's regulars being foreign-born. The Mexicans, aware of anti-foreign and anti-Catholic attitudes in the U.S., offered free land to deserters; all told, 2,850 regulars and 3,900 volunteers deserted. The U.S. Army grew to over 100,000 before the war ended, with over 50% of the troops volunteers. The Mexican War consisted of five strategic thrusts, four into Mexico and one to California. The most important campaigns were those of Taylor in northern Mexico and Scott's assault on Vera Cruz and Mexico City. Zachary Taylor's army arrived at the city of Monterrey in September of 1846 as part of Polk's occupation strategy. In a tough three-day battle, climaxed by house-to-house fighting, Monterrey fell to the Americans; an armistice offered by General Pedro de Ampudia permitted the Mexican army to evacuate the city. Polk was furious about the armistice and the public acclaim accorded Taylor. With this victory, the threat of meeting a large Mexican force was remote, and Taylor set about occupying strong points in northern Mexico, taking Saltillo in November.

With the failure of Polk's strategy of occupying northern Mexico, half of Taylor's men were

transferred to Winfield Scott's army, which was assembling for an amphibious assault on Vera Cruz. The weakened Taylor had less than 5,000 men under his command when, on February 23, 1847, Santa Anna hurled 15,000 Mexican regulars against them at Buena Vista. The exhausted Mexicans went into combat after crossing a waterless 35-mile desert, with no pause for food or rest. Although close to victory several times, the Mexicans were defeated by Taylor.

With Taylor in firm control of northern Mexico, Winfield Scott commenced his attack on Mexico City. Landing at Vera Cruz in March of 1847, in what would become the first major amphibious assault in history (10,000 men were put ashore in less than four hours), Scott laid siege to the city and moved his army inland to escape the dreaded yellow fever. Ever the optimist, Santa Anna raised another army and occupied Cerro Gordo; if held there, the U.S. troops would be forced to remain in the disease-ridden coastal lowlands. Scott brushed the Mexicans aside at Cerro Gordo however, opening the route to Mexico City, and arrived on the outskirts of the capital in August of 1847. After a series of vicious battles around the city's periphery at Contreras, Churubusco, El Molina del Rey and Chapultepec, Mexico City surrendered to Scott on September 14, 1847. As the U.S. Army occupied the main square, Marines were dispatched to patrol "the Halls of Montezuma."

In military terms, prosecution of the war by the U.S. had been exemplary, and European nations were forced to revise their estimations of U.S. military prowess. Yet stormy political and military relationships off the battlefield continued during treaty negotiations. President Polk became angry with his chief negotiator, Nicholas P. Trist, and ordered his recall. Realizing that the Mexicans would never go to Washington to negotiate, and that the alternative would be years of American occupation, Trist remained in Mexico in defiance of his recall, and signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. The terms of the treaty confirmed the title of the United States to Texas, and ceded all Mexican lands north of the Rio Grande and Gila Rivers. All told, this encompassed about one half of Mexico, for which

the U.S. agreed to pay \$15 million, and to assume some \$3 million in claims owed by Mexico to American citizens.

The Mexicans fought bravely and skillfully, but in the end, poor leadership, lack of a coherent strategy, and inferior weapons negated the effect of the individual Mexican soldier. As for the United States, although the war brought vast new territories and fulfilled the dream of manifest destiny, it also increased anxieties about whether slavery would be extended into the new areas. These fears divided the United States, and were a contributing factor to the Civil War (1861-65). It is not often that most Americans think of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Santa Fe having once been part of Mexico. Hispanic-American contributions of language, culture and ideas to the history of the United States often go unrecognized. Today, the Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones stands as a reminder to all Americans of another side to the story of manifest destiny and westward expansion.

