

Mexican War

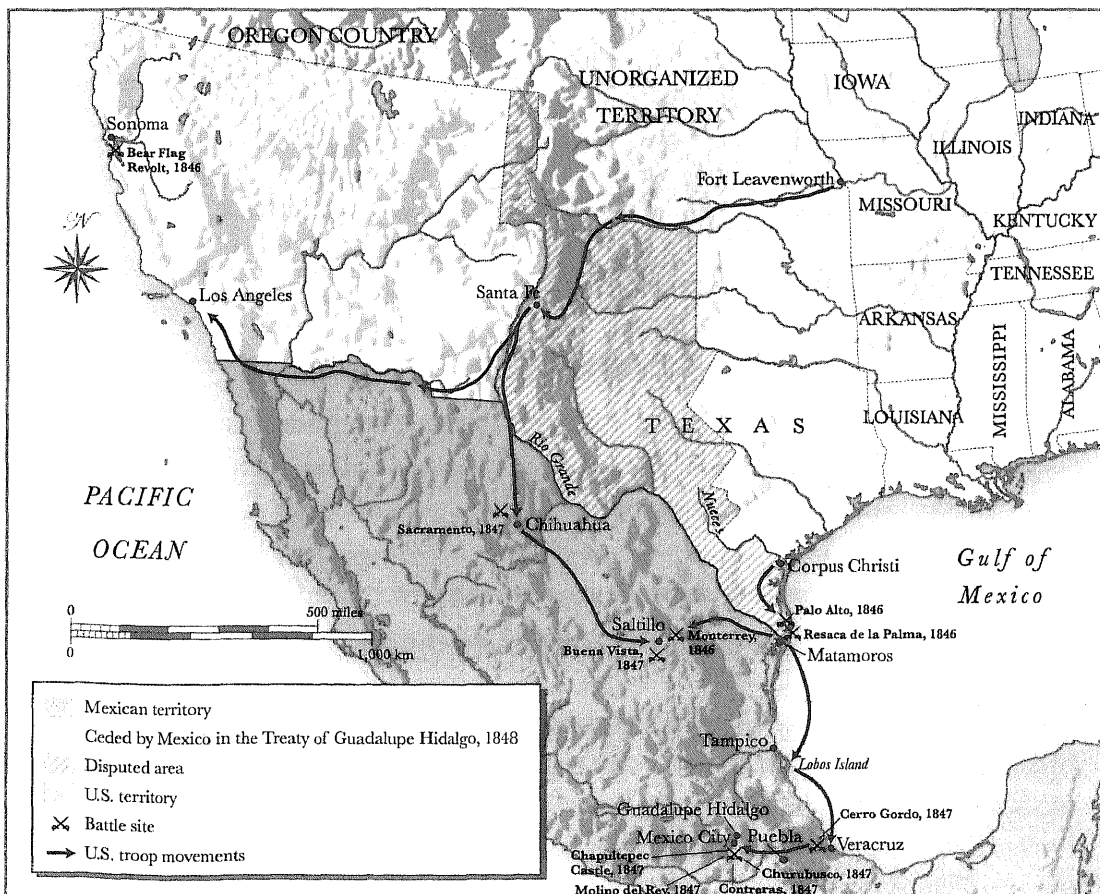
NO WAR IN AMERICAN HISTORY has been as controversial as the Mexican War. Resentment and bravado were present in large measure on both sides before hostilities began, and the war's aftereffects still color U.S.-Mexican relations.

After the Republic of Texas was allowed to join the Union on March 3, 1845, Mexico declared that the annexation of its renegade state amounted to a declaration of war and broke diplomatic relations with the United States. Three months later Texas asked President James K. Polk for military protection, and 3,550 troops, commanded by Brigadier General Zachary Taylor, were dispatched to Corpus Christi. This force eventually occupied the disputed territory between the Nueces River, which Mexico

claimed as its boundary, and the Rio Grande, which Texas defined as its border. Mexican cavalry attacked an American patrol in the contested area on April 25, 1846; with five of his men dead, eleven wounded, and forty-seven dragoons captured, Taylor informed Polk that hostilities had begun.

For and Against

Addressing Congress on May 11, President Polk proclaimed that "American blood has been shed on American soil" and called for



◀ This map shows the main battle sites and troop movements of the Mexican War (1846-1848).

a declaration of war. Congress complied two days later; by a vote of 173 to 14 in the House and 40 to 2 in the Senate, it authorized a volunteer army of 50,000 men and \$10 million for the military. The volunteers, young men in their late teens and early twenties, were issued flintlock muskets and paid a private's monthly salary of eight dollars.

Advocates of expansion and believers in Manifest Destiny favored war. Their opponents were mostly Whig politicians who feared that the acquisition of Mexican land would add new slave territory to the nation. The Wilmot Proviso, an amendment to a war appropriation bill prohibiting slavery in conquered territories, passed in the House in 1846 and 1847 but did not pass in the Senate. Representative Abraham Lincoln, an Illinois Whig, introduced the antiwar Spot Resolutions, as they came to be known, which questioned the whereabouts and sovereignty of the spot where American blood was shed; Congress never acted on them.

Taylor Advances

On May 8, 1846, General Taylor's artillery defeated a superior Mexican force commanded by General Mariano Arista at the Battle of Palo Alto, north of present-day Brownsville, Texas. The Mexicans retreated a few miles south to a stronger position in Resaca de la Palma, where the pursuing Americans dealt them another defeat the next day. Arista withdrew his troops to Monterrey while Taylor seized Matamoros.

The following month, Colonels Stephen Kearny and Alexander Doniphan left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, with 1,558 troops and marched nine hundred miles (1,448 km) to Santa Fe, now in New Mexico. The city

On March 25, 1846, the forward contingents of General Zachary Taylor's troops entered the Mexican town of Santa Isabel. They set aflame part of the town and most of the nearby fields. Residents who had not already fled for their lives were in terror. A little more than a year later (May 1847) an antiwar Whig congressman from Illinois expressed his opinion of this action.

It is a fact that the United States army in marching to the Rio Grande marched into a peaceful Mexican settlement, and frightened the inhabitants away from their homes and their growing crops. . . . Possibly you consider these acts too small for notice. Would you venture to so consider them had they been committed by any nation on earth against the humblest of our people?

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, LETTER RESPONDING TO A PRO-WAR PAMPHLETEER



A string of victories in the first year of the Mexican War made Zachary Taylor's name a household word in the United States. This unattributed photograph of the general was taken around 1848.

peacefully surrendered to them on August 18, 1846, after the Mexican governor fled. Kearny received reinforcements and the next month departed with 300 dragoons for California. Shortly afterward Doniphan headed for Chihuahua with 856 men.

The War in California

In California some thirty-three of the eight hundred American settlers in the Sacramento River valley, encouraged by Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont, had

CHRONOLOGY

March 3, 1845

Texas is invited to join the Union.

April 25, 1846

Hostilities begin with a Mexican attack on the forces of Zachary Taylor.

May 8, 1846

Battle of Palo Alto.

May 9, 1846

Battle of Resaca de la Palma.

May 13, 1846

Congress declares war on Mexico.

June 14, 1846

The Bear Flag Republic is proclaimed by American settlers in California.

August 18, 1846

The Mexican defenders of Santa Fe surrender to U.S. troops.

September 21–23, 1846

Battle of Monterrey.

January 13, 1847

The Treaty of Cahuenga ends the war in California.

February 22–23, 1847

Battle of Buena Vista.

March 9, 1847

American forces under Winfield Scott land at Veracruz.

April 17–18, 1847

Battle of Cerro Gordo.

August 19, 1847

Battle of Contreras.

August 20, 1847

Battle of Churubusco.

September 8, 1847

Battle of Molino del Rey.

September 12, 1847

Battle of Chapultepec Castle.

September 14, 1847

Mexico City surrenders.

February 2, 1848

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the war ends.

seized the Mexican garrison in Sonoma on June 14 and proclaimed California an independent republic. The Bear Flag Revolt, as the settlers' action is called, ended the following month, when the U.S. Navy occupied the major seaports in California and Commodore Robert Stockton declared himself governor of the territory. After a force of Mexican cavalry led by Andrés Pico was defeated near Los Angeles by Kearny's troops, the Treaty of Cahuenga ended the war in California on January 13, 1847.

More Victories and Surrenders

In Matamoros, General Taylor received eight thousand American volunteers, commanded by U.S. Army General William Worth, a veteran of the War of 1812, and Volunteer General John Quitman of Mississippi. Thousands of additional volunteers soon arrived, including the First Mississippi Rifles, led by Jefferson Davis, who resigned his seat in Congress to fight in the war. Taylor led his reinforced army to Monterrey, where Mexican forces were preparing to take their stand. Quitman's

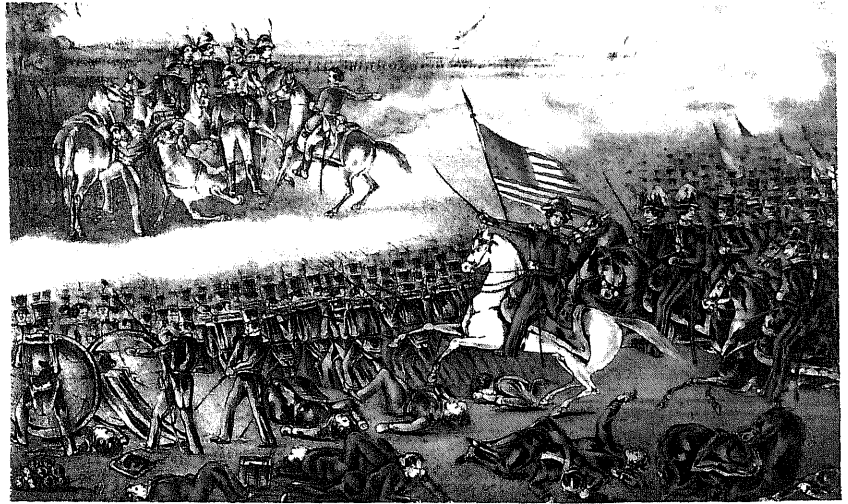
brigade overran the Teneria fortification on the east, while Worth laid an artillery siege from a hilltop against Mexican troops entrenched in the Bishop's Palace on the west and forced their submission. After house-to-house fighting in the city, the Mexican army, commanded by General Pedro de Ampudia, surrendered on September 23, 1846. There were 488 American casualties and 367 Mexican losses.

Major General Winfield Scott then prepared a naval invasion of Veracruz, to take the war to the seat of government in Mexico City. For this endeavor he withdrew 8,000 of Taylor's troops to the coast, and Taylor was left with 5,000 men in Saltillo. General Antonio López de Santa Anna, recently allowed to return from exile to defend his nation, learned of Scott's troop movements through documents captured from couriers. He raised a conscript army of 20,000 mostly landless peasants and Indians in San Luis Potosí to attack Taylor's smaller force. Santa Anna marched his army 280 miles (450 km) across the cold northern desert in three weeks. He lost 5,000 men to death and desertion.

Buena Vista

Taylor's forces advanced to engage their opponents at the Buena Vista mountain pass and occupied the high ground. On February 22, 1847, the Mexican army attempted encircling them but were halted by the Mississippi Rifles and Lieutenant Braxton Bragg's artillery. Taylor had 659 casualties, and hundreds of his men, mostly newly arrived Irish immigrants, deserted under fire. Santa Anna retreated from the battlefield the next day with 1,800 losses and a similar number of deserters. Taylor withdrew to Monterrey, having fought his last battle. Newspaper correspondents describing Taylor's exploits heralded him and Jefferson Davis as heroes back home. Many of the Irish deserters joined the Mexican army's San Patricio Battalion, led by Captain John O'Reilly, which had fought impressively against former comrades in Monterrey and Buena Vista.

A week after the Battle of Buena Vista, Alexander Doniphan's forces captured Chihuahua. His artillery inflicted more than six hundred casualties at the Battle of Sacramento, while American losses were only two killed and seven wounded. Three days later these troops marched to Monterrey, where Taylor discharged them



because their one-year term of volunteer enlistment had nearly expired. Doniphan, along with his men, returned to Missouri to a hero's welcome.

Veracruz

The U.S. Navy, which was blockading Mexican Gulf ports, assisted General Scott in coordinating the deployment of 8,600 American troops on Lobos Island, between Tampico and Veracruz. It was then the largest amphibious assault ever attempted in history. On March 9, 1847, the troops landed two miles south of Veracruz, bypassing the San Juan de Ulua harbor fortress. This force included Army Corps of Engineers officers Robert E. Lee and

▲ This undated hand-tinted lithograph of the Battle of Buena Vista depicts Taylor, with sword drawn, leading the American forces as the Mexicans retreat in disorder. Santa Anna (upper left) stands surrounded by his officers.

THE SAN PATRICIO BATTALION

The roughly eight hundred Irish immigrant deserters from the U.S. Army who made up the bulk of the San Patricio (Saint Patrick) Battalion are considered traitors by Americans but heroes by Mexicans, who honor the San Patricios every year on September 12, the anniversary of the day in 1847 when thirty of them were hanged within sight of Chapultepec Castle under barbarous and illegal conditions. Their captain, John O'Reilly (or Riley or Reilly), though not executed, was branded on both cheeks and tortured. Evidence indicates that O'Reilly and many of the other Irishmen deserted out of revulsion at seeing their Mexican fellow Catholics warred upon and otherwise degraded by Protestant Americans who treated the Irish Catholics among them as undesirables at best. Everything connected with the San Patricio Battalion remains sensitive—not least among Irish Americans, most of whom either know nothing of the battalion or consider it a matter best forgotten.

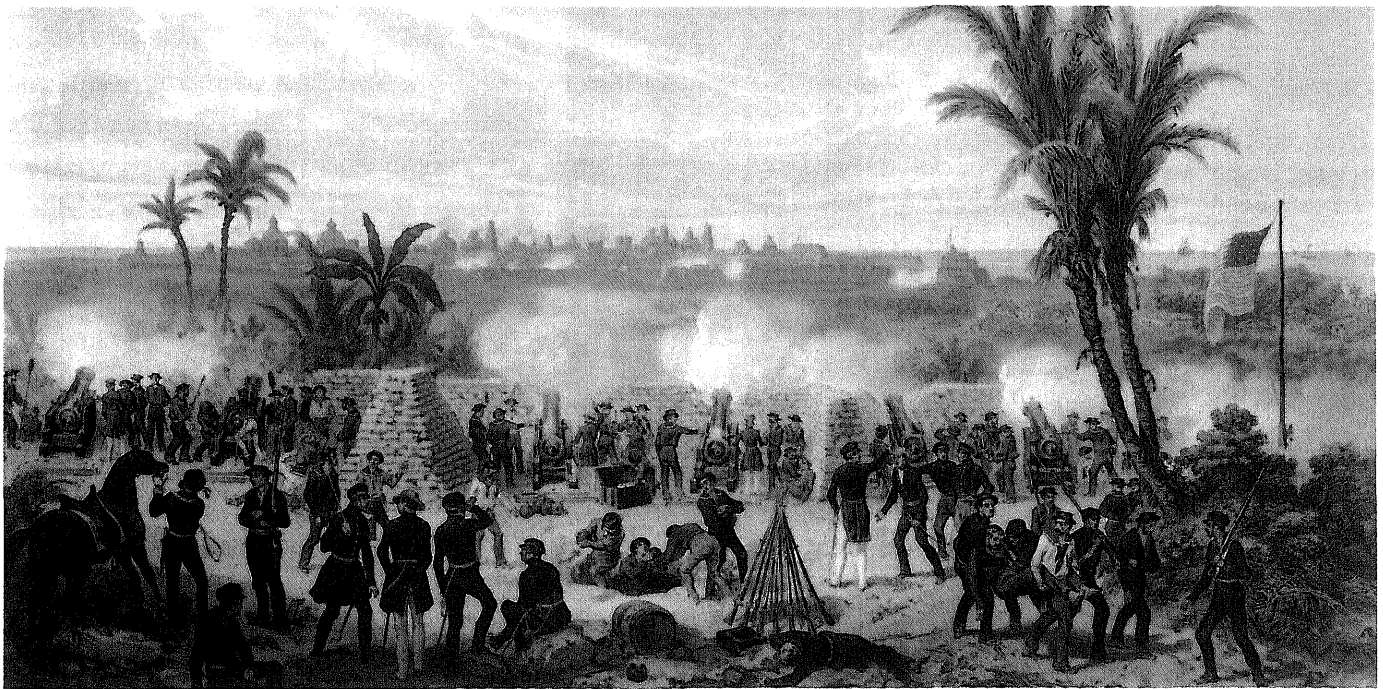
George Meade, who later commanded opposing armies at the Civil War battle of Gettysburg. The Americans laid siege to the walled city of 15,000 people with a bombardment from land and sea. Veracruz surrendered on March 29, along with 5,000 Mexican soldiers and 5 generals.

Scott left a garrison in Veracruz and marched 8,500 soldiers to Mexico City on the same 270-mile (435 km) route taken by Hernán Cortés when he conquered the Aztec Empire. Santa Anna, with more than 12,000 troops and artillery, prepared to stop Scott's men at the Cerro Gordo mountain pass 50 miles (80 km) west of Veracruz. However, Santa Anna disregarded the advice of his engineers to occupy the nearby La Atalaya hill, and so the Americans were able to encircle the rear left flank of the Mexican army and force its retreat on April 18, 1847. Santa Anna left behind his carriage with \$6,000 and a spare artificial leg. American casualties were 417, while the Mexicans lost more than 1,000 and had 3,000 soldiers taken prisoner. Scott, claim-

ing that he could not feed them, released the prisoners on parole.

During the summer of 1847, General Worth occupied Puebla and awaited reinforcements arriving in Veracruz. Worth and his men then proceeded to within a few miles of Mexico City, where, on August 19, they defeated a Mexican force in Contreras. The next day Worth spearheaded the attack on the convent of Churubusco, where Mexican troops, led by General Pedro Anaya, had established a stronghold with artillery manned by the San Patricio Battalion. Eight Mexican generals, including two former presidents, were captured along with three thousand soldiers and eighty Irish deserters; the deserters were subsequently hanged for treason. Mexican casualties were four thousand, compared with one thousand losses for the Americans. President Polk's special envoy, Nicholas Trist, then tried to negotiate a peace agreement but failed after the Mexican Congress passed a law making it an act of treason to negotiate surrender.

▼ *This colored lithograph by Adolphe-Jean-Baptiste Bayot, based on a drawing by Carl Nebel (1805–1855), depicts the Battle of Veracruz. American forces bombard the distant Mexican city.*



A WAR OF MANY FIRSTS

The Mexican War was the first in which the United States engaged in an overseas struggle involving the full use of its armed forces. In the attack on Veracruz, the United States mounted what was then the largest seaborne invasion in history. It was also the first war in which steamboats played an important role in combat and newspaper correspondents sent regular battle reports to their employers and readers.

Thanks to the work of such men as Louis Daguerre and William Fox Talbot, photography had advanced to the stage where, though still in its infancy, it could be effectively used in war for the first time. Many portrait photos of combatants (mostly American) still exist. It is likely that some of those photographed were graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point—this was the first war on foreign soil in which they had participated. Ironically, the Mexican War was also the first in which disease killed more American soldiers than did bullets.

Chapultepec Castle

The approach to Mexico City was blocked by Chapultepec Castle, located on a two-hundred-foot (61 m) hill, which served as the Mexican military academy. False rumors of a Mexican cannon foundry at nearby Molino del Rey prompted Scott to attack the foundry first on September 8; the attack resulted in one of the bloodiest fights of the war. Four days later Chapultepec Castle was scaled with ladders and taken in hand-to-hand combat within two hours. Six teenage Mexican cadets, the *Niños héroes* (“boy heroes”),

jumped to their death from the castle rather than surrender with the others. On September 14 Quitman’s division marched into the main plaza and at the National Palace, dubbed the Halls of Montezuma, raised the Stars and Stripes.

On February 2, 1848, the war officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but U.S. troops did not evacuate Mexico City until June 12, 1848. American casualties totaled 13,283 dead and 8,304 wounded. The effects of the war on U.S.-Mexican relations, including the matter of immigration, have lasted to the present day.

Antonio de la Cova

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This undated color lithograph depicts the American forces taking over Mexico City in the war's closing stages. The Americans remained in the Mexican capital for six months while the negotiations over the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo continued.

