

OVERSEAS WAR—IN 1846!

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I

The castle could not be taken by frontal assault, declared Winfield Scott, our general-in-chief. It would be necessary to land upon the beaches below the city. We should need one hundred and forty surf boats, capable of putting ashore five thousand men in the first minutes. Once upon the ground, our troops could invest the city from the rear. The castle of San Juan de Ulua, one of the hemisphere's strongest fortresses, could be taken later. For this great "combined operation," a huge convoy of not less than fifty good-sized vessels would be needed, carrying siege guns, shells and rockets, supplies of every sort, wagons, horses for the dragoons and "light" (field) artillery, and the initial army of 14,000—to be strengthened later. When city and castle had been taken, a direct advance could be made upon the capital, forcing the enemy to his knees.

So ran Major General Scott's memoranda of a plan of operations, submitted to the Secretary of War in October and November 1846. Its surprisingly modern features depict the greatest single operation of our war of 1846 to 1848 with the republic of Mexico. General Zachary Taylor, after defeating the enemy in two pitched battles, just east of the "Rio Grande del Norte" near its mouth, had lately occupied Monterey, roughly two hundred miles westward, after three days of costly fighting. Further advance from this quarter, across the near-desert country towards San Luis de Potosí, was scarcely possible, "Old Zach" admitted it himself. Hence came the new movement, as outlined in Scott's memoranda and already virtually decided upon by President Polk and his admirers. It would be the most sweeping military enterprise that the country had ever seen.

II

The fact is that the Mexican War, although fought with the rather limited and old-fashioned matériel of a century ago, posed many of the problems of the present war. Hard as it is to realize, this was our first overseas struggle. Unlike the contests that had begun in 1775 and 1812, it was fought upon foreign territory, and at a great distance as well. Messages from the seat of government and supplies from our northeastern manufacturing towns had to travel two thousand miles even to get to the Rio Grande area. Nor does one play upon words in calling it an "overseas" war. Men and supplies, alike for the cam-

paigns in northern and central Mexico, were carried by water. Shipping had to be provided not only for crossing the Gulf and skirting our eastern coast, but also for transit around Cape Horn to California.

III

As on the eve of World War II, our army in 1846 was distressingly small. It was also, to today's layman somewhat overwhelmed by the specialization of 1944, rather charmingly lacking in complexity. With men hardened by long service on the Indian frontiers, and with officers trained at "the Point," the 1846 army was an efficient little outfit. Yet there were only fourteen regiments in all, and these did not come up to the legal *maximum* of forty-two privates per company. There were only four batteries of field artillery, although these men had the skill that comes from ample target practice.

The army had neither signal corps nor intelligence section, and the quartermaster and engineer officers had no enlisted men under them. Serious as was the absence of quartermaster companies, it was the lack of "sappers, miners, and pontoniers," or, to use our simpler term, "engineers," that the army particularly held against an over-thrifty congress. Indeed, General Taylor afterwards tried to blame upon this factor his failure completely to destroy the enemy after his victories east of the Rio Grande. After hostilities began, our armed forces were raised from about eight thousand men to some fifty or sixty thousand, unfortunately chiefly by forming volunteer units led by officers of their own choosing. A particularly serious blunder lay in the setting of a twelve-months' term for the first fifty thousand of these volunteers, which in practice meant that commanders at times had to release men badly needed. All in all, the volunteers did better than the regulars were willing to admit. At Buena Vista, for example, although the volunteer companies did sometimes break and run in a manner reminiscent of the Bladensburg "races" of 1814, it was a preponderantly volunteer army that, outnumbered four to one, beat Santa Anna's great host. The other chief change made in the army was the establishment of an engineer company.

In 1846, the great changes in military technology that the next hundred years were to bring happily lay beyond the threshold. Some could be imagined, but none had been applied. Utterly unmechanized, our forces advanced by muscle power, the muscle of men, mule, and horse. The blue-clad troops plodded on afoot into the arid Mexican highlands, bragging their dream of an early revel in the Halls of Mon-

tezuma. Behind, long trains of wagons and pack mules carried the bacon ("side pieces or middlings," Scott had said) and hard bread and all of the other necessaries. Despatches, written *en clair* rather than in code, were carried by mounted courier. On the sea, our vessels were mainly sailing ships.

Flintlock muskets were the rule, rather than rifles, and the celebrated, new "repeating firearms" or "revolvers" of Samuel Colt were carried only by the cavalry (and not by the dragoons). Late in 1846 the War Department was trying to purchase the right to make "Colt's" in our arsenals, and was finding the inventor a hard bargainer. The new German explosive, gun-cotton, was just being tested by our ordnance officers. It was the same with communications. Railways, veteran carriers of some fifteen or sixteen years' standing, had no real part in this war. The little line that connected Vera Cruz and Jalapa, for example, played no part in Scott's advance. Presumably it had been stripped of rolling stock. The electric telegraph had been in operation in the United States for two years, and was rapidly being extended along the eastern seaboard in the war years. It was not until well into 1848, however, that New Orleans was connected with the East. Important tidings from the battlefield were rushed towards Washington by an impromptu pony express. Military employment of photography was, of course, still more remote. A few daguerreotypes were taken of our troops in Mexico, for souvenir purposes only, and one participant, Captain Robert Anderson, later the defender of Fort Sumter in 1861, remarked in one of his nightly letters to his wife his regret that he didn't have "a good daguerreotype apparatus" with which to picture the country for her.

Aside from these foreshadowings of change, there were a few instances of the actual application of new technology. Among our vessels in the Gulf, for example, there were not only paddle-wheel steamers but also "propellers." And most interesting was the use of rubber pontoons, for military bridges. Trains of well designed rubber pontoons were hastily manufactured and rushed to the field for use by the new engineer company.

IV

The United States entered its Mexican War, as it has many others, not only unprepared but also ignorant of the need to prepare. Winfield Scott, distinguished and cosmopolitan soldier that he was, understood both the need and the ignorance. He was courageous enough to

tell Secretary of War Marcy that a good four months would be required to enlist, train, equip, and transport the men for a real offensive. The administration was horrified. So too was the public, when the news of Scott's attitude began to leak out. Scott was dubbed a dotard, and people expected that Taylor would be at Mexico City within a few weeks—certainly by the Fourth of July! Polk and Marcy, able as they were, were inclined to take the popular view. Polk noted in his diary that the general-in-chief was "scientific and visionary," *i.e.*, a textbook general. A tiff occurred, and Scott was kept at home, leaving the less able Taylor in command of the first big push. It was the same afterwards, at the end of the winter, when Scott had left to complete arrangements for the Vera Cruz move. Polk thought that he was "wasting himself in the most extravagant preparations."

Yet the "scientific and visionary" Scott was eminently right. Volunteering was quick enough, in fact embarrassingly so, and very little time was needed for training. The men could shoot well, and the infantry drill was mastered in the days or weeks spent waiting for the steamers to take them down river and for vessels to transport them to the enemy coast. In other words, the chief delays in mounting the two big drives arose out of transportation problems. For Taylor, in the north, the plan was to advance up the Rio Grande. Light-draught river steamers were essential. Taylor was at fault in failing to anticipate the need, but even after requisitions were made there was difficulty in getting the craft speedily. They had to be brought from the upper Mississippi valley, and several were lost in the rough waters of the Gulf. In consequence, Taylor was delayed for upwards of three months. Then arose the wagon bottleneck, for the move overland to Monterey. Here again, the field commander lacked foresight. He could have gathered pack mules, but was content instead to blame Washington for not having guessed his alleged needs months earlier. The wagons were made hastily, but in far off Cincinnati and Philadelphia. Eventually Taylor went ahead without them, using pack mules after all and cutting his advance force to a dangerous level.

In order to cope personally with these problems, Quartermaster General T. S. Jesup early went to New Orleans and the Rio Grande. He may well have been rather disgruntled, privately, because on the eve of the war he had sought in vain for funds with which to stock up the Government warehouses with necessary materiel. Once at New Orleans he hurriedly chartered or purchased vessels at ports up and

down the Gulf and Atlantic coasts and all over the Mississippi basin. A great variety of goods was rushed to the war zone. Extensive warehouses and workshops were built at the mouth of the Rio Grande, and to that area Jesup sent hundreds, even thousands, of hired teamsters and laborers. There was considerable trouble with these men, who would not contract for more than six months' work at best, despite the high wages paid.

For the drive into central Mexico, the Quartermaster General made similar preparations, ultimately using Vera Cruz as his advance base. Careful plans which Scott drew up were of great assistance. On the other hand, Scott's requests for the numerous surf boats and for a great number of siege cannon—well justified as the orders were—strained our shipping and manufacturing facilities greatly. The young metals industry was considerably embarrassed by the order for heavy guns. Scott's expedition, held up by the slow arrival of transports, reached Vera Cruz many weeks behind schedule, and in fact near the start of the usual season for the dread *vomito* or yellow fever. Even then, few of the landing craft or siege guns were present. It was fortunately possible to get partial substitutes from the Home Squadron, which was convoying the army.

V

By November of 1847, fifty-four steamers, and four ships, two barks, eight brigs, thirty-four schooners, and two hundred and one surf boats and scows had been purchased or constructed. In addition, "several hundred" sailing and steam-driven vessels had been hired. By contrast with today, there was no danger from hostile men of war, although for a time, in truth, privateers were a potential worry. The greatest threat lay in the violent northers on the Gulf. As mentioned before, the river steamers had particular trouble upon the rough waters. Perhaps fifty vessels were lost in all.

Despite Polk's insistence upon economy, and the sincere exertions of the general staff, costs were exorbitant. Quartermasters did try to insist upon horses "sound in wind and limb, and free from faults and blemishes," to name one example, but vendors knew that the Government must employ the twelve-month term of the volunteers to the best advantage and also that it was anxious to avoid the *vómito*. Prices were raised in a twinkling. For a steamer not worth above \$100,000, for instance, \$180,000 was asked. Jesup and his subordinates were

wise enough, however, to avoid long haggling, knowing the truth of the adage that there can be no economy in war. As usual, the nation paid for its lack of preparation.

Postwar liquidation showed well enough the premiums that had been charged. Jesup reported in 1848 that the transports, for example, could not be sold "at even half their value." Most spectacular bit of selling was the auction at Vera Cruz in the last days of July 1848. The affair had been advertised, and it had as master of ceremonies the energetic and patriotic Mr. Freamer of New Orleans. None the less, because of yellow fever, the rapid departure of our troops, and a desire to avoid the cost of shipment, the Government took substantial losses. Storehouse after storehouse was sold complete with contents, so hastily that often no examination was made of the nature or condition of the goods inside. Some damaged surf boats went at no more than five dollars apiece. Vessels not fit to brave the journey homewards were sold as well as might be. While the steamer *Mary Summers* brought \$14,000 ("every cent she was worth"), the case of the ship *St. Louis*, at least, was notorious. After removal of a few fittings, she was sold for \$500. Major Cross, who was in charge, claimed that the vessel was in atrocious condition and that the local harbormasters declared her to be worth not above \$400. Yet the sale of a *ship*—no mere bark or schooner—at such a price revealed all too well the wear, wastage, and loss endemic in war.

VI

In the cacophony of public sentiment we find some features all too familiar today. People played politics with the war effort. Sentiment shifted readily from hearty-support to ill-mannered backbiting. Politicians jockeyed for advantage. And the public, eager, irrepressible, typically American, wanted to have a say itself in matters of high strategy. This was well revealed in the press.

Unlike World War II, the Mexican War was not "total" war, indeed. There was no draft. There were no war taxes, although the administration asked Congress to enact some. As usual, Congress was unwilling to go so far as the executive branch in this matter. Despite the war's light incidence upon the people, there was much controversy and ill will. Explanations are to be found, of course, in the well known anti-expansionist feelings of the abolitionists and in the less publicized conservatism of Calhoun and many other planters of the Southeast.

The Whigs, who in part represented these conflicting groups, criticized the war and all of its works. But the men of the Piedmont, the middle states, and the Mississippi valley, who were generally behind the war and were usually in the administration party, were far too unpredictable in their loyalty. Their captiousness reminds one of the present war's ups and downs of morale, although the problem was much worse in the earlier war.

At first, as after Pearl Harbor, there was a flood tide of enthusiasm, more reflex than reflective. Afterwards, naturally enough, came a let-down, which was strong enough to defeat the administration in the congressional elections of 1846. This may be compared, by and large, to the switchback in 1942. Then, as the greatest push of all—the movement upon the heart of the enemy's country—got under way, there was a new intensity of feeling. Between October of 1847 and February of 1848 this strong feeling was translated in many quarters into unbounded jingoism. Numerous editors and politicians were demanding the annexation of all of Mexico, to say nothing of shrill cries for overrunning the entire hemisphere. We may congratulate ourselves that the movement was warded off by the timely receipt of the peace of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by which the United States took New Mexico and Upper California.

The public's avid interest in the war was well shown in the newspapers. This was all the more true because there was no censor. The "thousand prying eyes and brazen tongues" of the press, to use the words of a contemporary, led to premature divulging of war plans. This was true of the Vera Cruz move, in fact. Newspaper strategists were as abundant as today, causing Secretary Marcy to note with much feeling that every journal had its own "cut and dried" plan of victory. Yet the press did well, everything considered. Led by the New Orleans printers, many papers sent their men into Mexico as correspondents. It was our first "war correspondents' war." There were scores of reporters on hand. Some went as soldiers, doing their writing on the side. Others, such as G. W. Kendall of the *Picayune*, were full-time newspapermen. Kendall, for example, arranged a pony express from Monterey to the Gulf and managed to rush news of the capture of that city to New Orleans in eight days. Copeland, his recent biographer, has termed him "the first modern war correspondent." As with later wars, a number of books about the struggle were afterwards written by the reporters and the participants.

VII

There is no space here in which to discuss the verve and gallantry of our troops, to tell of Colonel Jefferson Davis' cry ("Great God, if I had fifty men with knives, I could take that fort") or of Lieutenant U. S. Grant's planting of the howitzer atop the church roof near the San Cosme garita. Nor is there room to tell of Scott's bold generalship, which led the distant Duke of Wellington to comment that "Scott is lost. He has been carried away by successes. He can't take the city (Mexico), and he can't fall back upon his base." We are limiting ourselves to certain analogies between the warfare of the 1840's and of the 1940's.

The war of 1846-1848 was fought against a country weak in numbers and resources, poorly organized, and worse led. In response to a supposed "manifest destiny," it was the United States that was doing the conquering. The war seems petty in size and quite properly obsolete in technology, after a century. Yet in its analogies to the present struggle, as an overseas contest with trying problems of logistics and as illustrative of the traditional American attitude towards war, it had its lessons. Not, indeed, that we have learned the lessons! Our position with respect to war has continued to be vicarious, slapdash. We take our wars as we find them.

This was safer in 1846. Even Mexico was far away, then.