

**MR. POLK'S WAR**

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On April 24, 1846, American soldiers under the command of General Zachary Taylor were camped in disputed territory on the North Side of the Rio Grande River near its mouth on the Gulf of Mexico. Posted on the opposite side at Matamoros were 3,000 Mexican troops. A year earlier, in 1845, Texas had broken away from Mexico, established a republic, and been admitted as the 28<sup>th</sup> state, leading Mexico to sever diplomatic relations with the United States. The Texas Republic had claimed all the lands North of the Rio Grande, a claim supported by President James K. Polk but denied by Mexico. Polk had sent troops led by General Taylor to the Rio Grande to defend against a possible Mexican invasion. But Polk also had larger ambitions: to acquire from Mexico all of the lands now comprising California and New Mexico. To that end Polk had sent a representative to Mexico to negotiate a purchase for \$25 million. But the Mexican government was unwilling to sell any of its territory. Annoyed at the lack of progress in the negotiations, the President was considering a war message.

That night a squadron of Mexican cavalry crossed to the North bank of the river and attacked a 63 man American patrol on a reconnaissance mission. In the skirmish eleven US soldiers were killed and six were wounded. When word of the

encounter reached Washington, newspapers trumpeted the event in inflammatory headlines. The President promptly discarded his earlier draft and sent a war message to Congress, stating in part:

The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens for a long period of years remains unredressed; and solemn treaties have been disregarded. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance has been exhausted, even before Mexico passed the boundary of the United States, invaded our territory, and shed American blood on American soil.

On May 13, 1846, after only thirty minutes debate, the House, enraged over American blood having been shed on American soil, voted 173 to 14 to declare war on Mexico and the Senate followed by a vote of 40 to 2, foreshadowing future Congressional actions taking the country into war on questionable pretexts, such as the alleged attack on the USS Maddox in the Tonkin Gulf and Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction.

What had led to the events of May 1846?

In 1819 Spain and the United States had settled their border disputes by entering into the Adams-Onís treaty. By that treaty Spain sought to secure its possessions in North America against encroachment by its expansionist neighbor to the North. The treaty ceded East Florida (now Alabama) to the US in return for US renunciation of any claim to Texas (then New Spain). Spain thought that its

Mexican colony was now secure. But only two years later the map of North America changed again when Mexicans overthrew Spanish rule and established their own republic.

To retain control of its borderlands, Mexico continued the colonization program begun by Spain that allowed settlers from the US to colonize Texas if they agreed to become Mexican citizens. Throughout the 1820s and the 1830s, Anglo settlers in increasing numbers carried out colonization contracts. Their success in establishing vibrant communities surprised Mexican officials who soon realized that the Anglo immigrants had become more numerous than native Texans, i.e. Mexicans. Fearful of losing control of the Texas population, Mexico banned further immigration and also cracked down on smuggling and tax evasion.

In 1834, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna became president of Mexico. He centralized the government of Mexico, abolishing the Constitution and taking control of the Mexican states, including Texas which had enjoyed considerable autonomy. Perhaps most important, a law prohibiting slavery was now for the first time being enforced; there were then some 5,000 slaves in Texas in a population of 40,000. Texas rebelled and on November 3, 1835, declared its independence. In retaliation Santa Anna led his army into Texas to punish the rebels. His troops stormed the Alamo and massacred all of its defenders. But in April 1836, Santa

Anna's army met the Texas forces led by Sam Houston in the battle of San Jacinto and was defeated. Taken prisoner, Santa Anna was forced to sign the treaty of Velasco which recognized Texas independence and the Rio Grande boundary. Santa Anna then returned to Mexico but Mexico never recognized this treaty.

The defeat at San Jacinto did not end hostilities. The Texas war for independence continued, marked by killings and atrocities on both sides and stirring up strong feelings. Mexico charged that the US had instigated the revolt while in the United States, annexation of Texas became a major but divisive issue. Whigs, including Abraham Lincoln, newly elected to Congress, preferred industrialization over expansion on the land while Jeffersonian Democrats favored expansion of land to support an agricultural economy. Then there were some in Congress who called for reannexation of Texas, blaming the 1819 Adams-Onis treaty for the loss of the region. And overhanging the Texas debate was the question whether slavery should be permitted in new territories.

Eventually, in 1845, Congress passed and outgoing President John Tyler signed a joint resolution, inviting Texas to join the Union. While popular sentiment in the country favored annexation, opposition in Congress had led the President to opt for a joint resolution to avoid the constitutional requirement of a two thirds vote in the Senate to pass a treaty.

Mexico regarded the annexation of Texas as a casus belli. When the resolution passed it broke off diplomatic relations with the US. The controversy over annexation was complicated by a dispute over the location of the boundary between Mexico and the US. Mexico had recognized the Nueces River, at the site of Corpus Christi, as the historic border of New Spain. Texas, and later the US, considered the Rio Grande to be the boundary, 150 miles to the South. This claim was supported by Santa Anna's concession after the battle of San Jacinto but was never recognized by the Mexican government.

Another complicating factor was the opposition of Great Britain. Britain looked for possible allies in North America as a counterweight to the expansion of the US. For sometime it had maintained territorial claims on Oregon which were finally resolved by treaty only in 1846. An independent Texas would have offered Britain a tempting opportunity for a profitable alliance and a potential base on the continent. And to Texas the prospect of an alliance with England represented a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Washington. England proposed a treaty by which Mexico would recognize Texas independence in return for which Texas would promise to remain independent. But the Texas Congress rejected it and on July 4, 1845, voted unanimously for annexation.

Meanwhile, in March 1845, James K. Polk had succeeded John Tyler as

President of the United States. Born in North Carolina in 1795, Polk became a member of the Tennessee bar. A devoted follower of Andrew Jackson known as Young Hickory, he believed in Manifest Destiny and was committed to the country's westward expansion, even if it meant war. He served in Congress for fourteen years, becoming Speaker of the House. After later serving one term as governor of Tennessee, he lost reelection and would have faded into obscurity had he not been chosen as presidential candidate to break a deadlock at the 1844 Democratic convention. He was the first dark horse candidate to be elected President. He took office with a commitment to serve only one term and never wavered from that commitment.

Most Americans accepted Polk's May 1846 war message and believed that by sending troops across the Rio Grande and rejecting negotiations, Mexico had started the war. But as the war dragged on and American troops became engaged in bitter and costly fighting in Northern Mexico, enthusiasm waned. The Democrats lost heavily in the fall 1846 Congressional elections. Antiwar sentiment grew. Henry David Thoreau for one was jailed for refusing to pay his poll tax and wrote his famous essay on Civil Disobedience. Whigs believed that Polk had forced an unjust war on Mexico and the American people. They argued that the war resolution had been steamrolled through the Congress before the

situation on the Rio Grande could be fully understood. Former president John Quincy Adams in Congress maintained that Polk's real purpose was to extend slavery to the Pacific coast and questioned whether war actually existed and if it did, whether Polk not Mexico was at fault. And Whigs ridiculed Polk's justification that the war would bring democratic institutions to the Mexican people. Yet concerned that General Taylor's troops faced real danger and inspired by patriotic motives, they voted to support the troops.

The US had entered the war expecting to achieve a quick negotiated peace. But patriotic fervor fed by early victories in the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista turned into growing public impatience as the war dragged on, forcing Polk to confront waning public support. His strategy had been to try to save American lives while avoiding unnecessarily injuring Mexican pride by pursuing limited military objectives. To that end, he had sent three armies into Mexico: General Zachary Taylor to Monterrey, General John Wool to Chihuahua, and Colonel Stephen Kearny to Santa Fe and on to California. Occupation of those territories, Polk figured, might be enough to lead to a negotiated peace. The plan failed, however. In California, the Mexican leadership fled, leaving only the Spanish settlers to wage a brief fight against the American forces. But resistance in the North of Mexico proved stubborn, fueled by Mexican pride and hatred of the



gringo. This forced Polk to try to bring an end to the war by embarking on an ambitious venture, an expedition to seize Mexico City by way of an amphibious landing at the Mexican port of Vera Cruz.

On March 12, 1847, an American army under the command of General Winfield Scott came ashore at Vera Cruz. More than twelve thousand men arrived in fifty sea transports under sail with 140 flat bottom boats for the landing. It was the largest amphibious invasion in history. After a brief fight, the Mexican garrison surrendered and Vera Cruz fell to Scott.

From Vera Cruz, Scott's army headed for Mexico City, some three hundred miles West. Its first encounter with the Mexican forces was in the battle at Cerro Gordo where Scott defeated the Mexicans led again by Santa Anna. Yet though victorious on the battle field, the American army faced serious obstacles. One was the toll taken by wounds and disease. The other was the expiration of enlistments of many volunteers. As a result Scott's army had shrunk to only seven thousand men.

This forced Scott to rest for three months in the city of Puebla before the final push to Mexico City. His army was reinforced to eleven thousand men, facing a Mexican army estimated at 36,000. On August 7, 1847, the leading elements of the army marched out of Puebla. On August 20, the army met Santa

Anna at Churubusco on the outskirts of Mexico City. In the ensuing battle Santa Anna lost four thousand killed or wounded and three thousand captured including eight generals and two former presidents of Mexico. Scott lost 1,000 men of whom 139 were killed.

Santa Anna now asked for a truce and he and Scott negotiated elaborate terms. This was consistent with Scott's objective, who had considered stopping short of the city to secure peace without completely humiliating the Mexicans. But persistent violations led to collapse of the truce and put an end to peace negotiations. On September 7, the battle for Mexico City began. Standing in the path of the American attack was the fortress of Chapultepec. The Americans launched a heavy bombardment of the fortress. On September 13, American soldiers scaled the walls and in bitter hand to hand fighting some two hundred Mexican soldiers, including the renowned company of young cadets, perished. With the fall of Chapultepec—immortalized as the halls of Montezuma in the Marine hymn-- six months after the landing at Vera Cruz, the city lay defenseless. Santa Anna, who had lost 1,800 men that morning, withdrew; Scott, who the next day rode in a victory parade to the cheers of his troops, had lost four hundred. On Polk's instruction, Scott issued a general order levying an annual assessment on Mexico of \$3,000,000 to pay for the occupation.

Meanwhile Nicholas Trist, Polk's peace envoy, was conducting peace negotiations with the Mexican government, now headed by Manuel Pena y Pena who had succeeded Santa Anna. On February 2, 1848, Trist and the Mexican commissioners met at the sacred shrine of Guadalupe Hidalgo outside Mexico City and signed the peace treaty. The treaty fixed the boundary between the two countries to run along the Rio Grande to the southern boundary of New Mexico, then west along the Gila River to the Gulf of California, then west along a line just South of San Diego to the Pacific Ocean. The US would assume Mexico's debts to its citizens and pay Mexico \$15 million for the land it acquired which was nearly half of Mexico's territory. When he later urged the Senate to ratify the treaty, President Polk described it as adding to the United States "an immense empire the value of which twenty years hence would be difficult to calculate." If anything, this was an understatement, considering that for \$15million, the US acquired Texas, New Mexico, and California and what later became Arizona and Nevada. Still the treaty encountered opposition in the Senate; some Whigs opposed it on the ground asserted by Daniel Webster, that California and New Mexico, together were not worth a dollar, while expansionist Democrats wanted the three northern states of Mexico to be included. Because Whigs and Democrats could not unite in opposition, various amendments failed and the treaty (which might have lost) was

ratified on March 10, 1848, by a vote of 38 to 14.

Polk died within three months of leaving office. Zachary Taylor had become a popular hero for his victories at Buena Vista and Monterrey, modest though they were, and though he had fought under a democratic administration, he was nominated and elected President on the 1848 Whig ticket. Scott also returned a hero from the war; he was nominated on the Whig ticket in 1852 but lost.

The Mexican war ended in a decisive victory for the United States. It acquired half a million square miles of new territory—55% of Mexico's national territory. It experienced a burst of patriotism as the acquisition of territory extending to the Pacific Coast confirmed its commitment to Manifest Destiny. In a message announcing the end of the war, Polk observed that the war had given the United States a national character which our country never before enjoyed.

Considering the outcome, the war in dollars and cents was a bargain, costing some \$140 million—but that was far more than the government had been willing to settle for before war, and critics maintained that the territories could have been purchased for less and the human cost avoided. And the human cost was high for both sides. Of the 116,000 Americans under arms, 1,700 were killed in action, 11,000 died of disease or accident, the highest death rate of any war in our history, 125 men per thousand compared to 65 per thousand in the Civil War. Mexico lost

an estimated 14,700 men and over a thousand civilians.

The American victory was an extraordinary military achievement. In six months, the American army fought from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, across high mountains and forbidding terrain, to conquer a nation of 8 million inhabitants. It succeeded because it was able to control Mexico City, the country's nerve center, and Vera Cruz, its gateway to the world, and to maintain its supply line with only 24,000 men. It did so in the face of staggering difficulties. To carry a message from Washington to Mexico City and back, for example, took two months. Moving the army overland required thousands of horses and oxen for which water and forage had to be provided. And the greatest enemy was disease brought on by lack of sanitation, insects and rudimentary medical care. The suffering of individual soldiers defies today's imagination. Brutal discipline and desertion were common, but so was individual heroism. It was remarkable that the army reached the scene of its battles, let alone defeat the Mexicans.

In spite of its outcome the war continued to have its critics. US Grant, who served as a lieutenant in the war, minced no words in his memoirs when he called it the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. "We had no claim beyond the Nueces river," he complained, "yet we pushed on to the Rio Grande and crossed it. I am ashamed of my country for that invasion." Similar

sentiments were shared by many in the North East.

With the accession of vast new territories, the war gave fresh impetus to the national debate over slavery and its extension into new territories. Charles Sumner feared the coming of the Civil War was hastened by the Mexican war and Grant believed that the Civil War was the nation's punishment for an unjust war.

The war also left its scars on relations between the two countries. As one historian summarized it:

The Mexican War cast a pall over the relations between the United States and Mexico, a pall that lasts to this day because the Mexicans have never become reconciled to it. Their history since 1848 has not been happy [marked by foreign subjugation, dictatorship, and chronic poverty and corruption] Throughout their tribulations the Mexicans have found it convenient to blame the Colossus of the North for their misfortunes. Indeed the United States has hardly been blameless, as shown for example by the 1916 Pershing expedition in pursuit of Pancho Villa. Though its actions in recent decades have generally been honorable, resentment continues to smolder and the war is often cited as a major cause of Mexico's woes.

President Porfirio Diaz summed it up when he said: Alas, poor Mexico! So far from Heaven. So close to the United States.

How did President Polk fare in the judgment of history? Though he was the central figure in the war, it was his fate for better or for worse to have served during a period bookended by Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. The shadows cast by these two giants left Polk in near obscurity. How many school

children would be able to place Polk in the spectrum of American History? Yet in surveys of leading American historians, Polk was rated ninth for his performance in the White House, in the company of Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, Wilson and Truman. Polk entered the presidency with clearly defined goals: to resolve the dispute with Britain over Oregon, acquire California, reduce the tariff and establish an independent treasury. By the end of his term he had accomplished all of them. Harry Truman said of him: "He said exactly what he was going to do and he did it."

But the historical judgment of Polk is clouded by the slavery issue. In single mindedly pursuing the Mexican war, he was confronted by the growing hostility of proslavery and antislavery forces. He opposed the Wilmot Proviso in a war appropriation bill which would have barred slavery from any new territories acquired during the Mexican war, not out of solicitude for slavery but because he considered the issue to be abstract since slavery was not likely to exist in California or New Mexico. "I put my face alike," he said, "against southern agitators and Northern fanatics." His steadfast refusal to permit himself to be distracted by the slavery issue enabled his administration to achieve its political objectives but at the cost of being charged with moral obtuseness.

To place the war in the context of American history, its end coincided with

the discovery of gold. California was quickly overrun by Americans. Nothing could have blocked statehood when it was granted in 1850. Gold, it would seem with the benefit of hindsight, rendered Mr. Polk's war unnecessary.

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