

WAR WITH MEXICO

CHAPTER EIGHT

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the brutal march westward. But in December 1838, President Martin Van Buren told Congress about "the entire removal of the Cherokee Nation of Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi." Congress's decision to remove the Cherokees, Van Buren said, had had "the happiest effects."

"I HAVE SCARCELY SLEPT A WINK," Ethan Allen Hitchcock wrote in his diary on June 30, 1845. Hitchcock was a colonel in the U.S. Army, stationed in Louisiana. His commander General Zachary Taylor had just been ordered to lead his men to the banks of the Rio Grande, a river on the southwest side of Texas. Hitchcock knew that this would bring trouble.

"Violence leads to violence," he wrote, "and if this movement of ours does not lead to others and to bloodshed, I am much mistaken." Hitchcock was not mistaken. Taylor's march to the Rio Grande started a bloody war—a war that gave Americans a huge new western territory taken from a defeated Mexico.

AS LONG AS GRASS GROWS OR WATER RUNS

Manifest Destiny

EVEN THOUGH THOMAS JEFFERSON'S Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had doubled the size of the United States, the country was a lot smaller in 1845 than it is today. Its western border was the Rocky Mountains. To the southwest was Mexico, which had won its independence from Spain in 1821.

Mexico was originally much larger than it is now. It included Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Then, with help from the United States, Texas broke away from Mexico in 1835, calling itself the "Lone Star Republic." In 1845, the U.S. Congress added Texas to the United States.

By that time, many Americans believed that their country should expand, or grow larger, toward the west. One of these expansionists was President James Polk. He told his secretary that one of his main goals as president was to get California into the United States. A newspaper called the *Washington Union* supported Polk's idea with these words: "The road to California will be open to us. Who will stay in waiting half, or stop the march of our western people?"

Soon afterward, in the summer of 1845,

another newspaper editor, John O'Sullivan, wrote, "Our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."

O'Sullivan was saying that Americans should be free to occupy all of North America because God meant for them to. His words "manifest destiny"—a fate or purpose that was clear to see—became a slogan for expansionists.

For a long time, Mexico and the United States had agreed that the border between them was the Nueces River, about 150 miles north of the Rio Grande. But during Texas's fight for independence from Mexico, Texans had captured the Mexican general Santa Anna and forced him to say that the border was the Rio Grande. This made Texas bigger. Afterward, President Polk promised the Texans that he would consider the Rio Grande the border, even though Mexicans still lived in the area between the two rivers.

So when Polk ordered General Taylor to move troops to the Rio Grande, he was challenging Mexico. Sending the army into territory inhabited by Mexicans was sure to cause conflict. But when

the soldiers reached the Rio Grande they found empty villages. The local Mexicans had fled across the river to the city of Matamoros. Taylor started building a fort with canons pointed at Matamoros.

By the spring of 1846, the army was ready to start the war that Polk wanted. All it needed was an excuse. Then one of Taylor's officers disappeared while riding along the river. He was later found with a smashed skull. Everyone figured that Mexican guerrilla fighters had crossed the river and killed him. The very next day, Mexicans attacked a patrol, killing sixteen soldiers. Taylor sent a message to Polk that the fighting had begun.

The Mexicans had fired the first shot. But they had done what the American government wanted. Colonel Ethan Allan Hitchcock knew that. Even before the attacks, he wrote in his diary:

I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors. . . . We have not one particle of right to be here. . . . It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext [excuse] for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses. . . . My heart is not in this business. . . . but as a military man, I am bound to execute orders.

(19th
Mexican War Cartoon, 1846



For and Against the War

PRESIDENT POLK HAD BEEN URGING Congress to declare war even before he received word of the attacks from General Taylor. As soon as Taylor's messages arrived, Polk told Congress, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. . . ."

Congress declared war. Only a handful of congressmen voted against it. They were strongly opposed to slavery, and they believed that the war was an excuse to gain territory that would be made into new slave states. Joshua Ciddings of Ohio called it "an aggressive, unholy, and unjust war."

Many Americans cheered the news of war. They held rallies to support it in cities across the land, and they volunteered for the army by the thousands. The poet Walt Whitman wrote proudly in a newspaper that "America knows how to crush as well as how to expand!"

Another poet, James Russell Lowell, took a different view of the war. He wrote a poem saying that the only reason for it was "to lug new slave states in." Massachusetts writer Henry David Thoreau criticized the war. He was also jailed for

refusing to pay a poll tax, but he only spent one night there. He was released because his friends paid the tax for him, without his permission.

Two years later, Thoreau wrote an essay called "Civil Disobedience." It talks about the difference between law and justice, and about how soldiers sometimes know that the orders they are following are wrong:

Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-deployed arts of address and intrigue in a judicial court have steadily resulted in the undue respect for law is that you may see a file of soldiers marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep ascending indeed. . . .

Many members and leaders of churches spoke out against the war. As the months passed, other voices joined in. Newspaperman Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune* that the war was unnecessary. Antislavery activist Frederick Douglass, who had once been a slave, called the war "disgraceful" and "cruel." The antislavery paper *The Liberator* went even further, wishing "the most triumphant success" to the Mexicans.

What about ordinary people? It's impossible to know how many of them supported the war but there is evidence that some workers were against it. Many Irish workers showed up at an anniversary meeting in New York City. They called the war a plot by slave owners. The New England Workmen's Association also spoke out against the war.

The flood of army volunteers slowed down after the first rush of excitement. To get enough soldiers, the army was forced to pay for new recruits. It also offered land to volunteers if they served for the entire war.

Some of the men who did enlist were shocked by the bloody horror of war. After a battle outside Matamoros, for example, fifty Americans and five hundred Mexicans lay dead or wounded on the field. The screaming and groaning from both sides was terrible to hear. Other new soldiers sickened and died in miserable, unhygienic conditions, such as the crowded ships that carried them to the front. And still others deserted to the Mexican side for better pay.

(6th
Irene Baughn, 1872



The Conquest of California

A SEPARATE WAR WENT ON IN CALIFORNIA.

Soldiers moved into California by land and sea. One of them was a young naval officer who imagined what would happen when the United States owned this western territory. "Population will flow into the fertile regions of California," he wrote in his diary.

Americans in California raided Mexican settlements that had been founded by the Spanish. They stole horses. And they declared the territory independent, calling it the "Bear Flag Republic."

An American naval officer gathered chiefs from the Indian tribes in California and told them

The country you inhabit no longer belongs to Mexico. The country you inhabit extends from
but to a mighty nation whose territory extends from
the great ocean you have all seen or heard of [the
Pacific], to another great ocean thousands of miles
beyond the rising sun [the Atlantic] . . . Our armies
are now in Mexico, and will soon conquer the whole
country. But you have nothing to fear from us. If you
do what is right . . . if you are faithful to your new
rulers . . . We shall watch over you and give you our
liberty; but beware of sedition [rebellion], lawlessness,
and all other crimes, for the army which shields can

reassuredly punish, and it will reach you in your most
remotest hiding places.

Meanwhile, American soldiers advanced westward through New Mexico. They captured the city of Santa Fe without a battle. A few months later, though, Mexicans in the nearby city of Taos revolted against American rule. The revolt was stopped, but some of the rebels escaped to the hills. They carried out occasional attacks, killing Americans, until the U.S. Army killed 150 of them in a final battle.

In Los Angeles, too, there was a revolt. Mexicans forced the American troops to surrender in September 1846. The U.S. military did not recapture Los Angeles until December after a bloody battle.

Victory over Mexico

BY THIS TIME GENERAL TAYLOR HAD MOVED across the Rio Grande and taken Monterrey. His army was marching southward through Mexico.

The men were becoming hard to control. Soldiers got drunk and looted Mexican villages. Cases of rape increased.

At the same time, sickness and heat were killing the soldiers. A thousand of them died on the march. At Monterey they fought another battle with the Mexicans. So many men and horses died in agony that one U.S. officer said that the ground was slippery with foam and blood.

The U.S. Navy fired shells on the Mexican coastal city of Veracruz, killing many civilians. One shell hit a post office. Another hit a hospital. After two days and 1300 shells, the city surrendered. An American reporter wrote, "The Mexicans variously estimate their losses at from 500 to 1000 killed and wounded, but all agree that the loss among the soldiery is comparatively small and the destruction among the women and children is very great."

General Winfield Scott now moved an army of ten thousand soldiers into the heart of Mexico. A series of battles that had little point killed thousands of people on both sides. Finally, the armies of the two nations met to fight for control of Mexico City. A Mexican merchant wrote to a

friend about the American conquest of the city. "In some cases whole blocks were destroyed and a great number of men, women and children killed and wounded."

In spite of their victories, the American soldiers were getting tired of marching, fighting, and risking death. Desertions were a problem. In March 1847 the army reported over a thousand deserters. More than nine thousand deserted over the course of the war.

In northern Mexico, volunteers from Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina rebelled against their commander. He killed one of the mutineers, but two of his lieutenants refused to help him stop the mutiny. The army later forgave the rebellious soldiers in order to keep the peace.

The glory of victory was for the president and the generals, not for the deserters, the dead, and the wounded. Many men felt anger toward those who had led them into deadly conditions and battles where so many had died. One group, the Massachusetts Volunteers, had started with 630 men. They came home with three hundred dead, mostly from disease. At a celebration dinner on their return, the men hissed at their commander.

Some volunteers who made it home ended up with little to show for their soldiering. The government had promised them land, but speculators immediately showed up to buy the land from them. Many of the men, desperate for money, sold their 160 acres for less than fifty dollars.

When Mexico surrendered, some Americans thought that the United States should take the whole country. Instead, it took just half.

In February 1848 Mexico and the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In the treaty, Mexico gave the entire Southwest and California to the United States. It also agreed that the border between the two nations was the Rio Grande. The United States, in turn, agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million. This let people say that the nation's new territories were bought, not seized by force. One American newspaper claimed that "we take nothing by conquest . . . Thank God."

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED slavery. As the economy of the South grew, so did the number of enslaved people. Between 1790 and 1860, the amount of cotton that the South produced rose from one thousand tons a year to 1 million tons a year. In that same period, the number of slaves rose from half a million to 4 million. Slavery was so well established that only something enormous—something like a full-scale war—could end it.