

# THE MEXICAN WAR AND AFTER

**R**eceiving by the new telegraph the news that James K. Polk had been elected to the Presidency in November 1844, President John Tyler interpreted the verdict as a mandate from the people for the annexation of Texas, since Polk had come out strongly in favor of annexation. On March 1, 1845, Congress jointly resolved to admit Texas into the Union and the Mexican Government promptly broke off diplomatic relations. President Polk continued to hope that he could settle by negotiation Mexico's claim to Texas and acquire Upper California by purchase as well. In mid-June, nevertheless, anticipating Texas' Fourth of July acceptance of annexation, he ordered Bvt. Brig. Gen. Zachary Taylor to move his forces from Fort Jesup on the Louisiana border to a point "on or near" the Rio Grande to repel any invasion from Mexico.

## The Period of Watchful Waiting

General Taylor selected a wide sandy plain at the mouth of the Nueces River near the hamlet of Corpus Christi and beginning July 23 sent most of his 1,500-man force by steamboat from New Orleans. Only his dragoons moved overland, via San Antonio. By mid-October, as shipments of regulars continued to come in from all over the country, his forces had swollen to nearly 4,000, including some volunteers from New Orleans. This force constituted nearly 50 percent of the 7,365-strong Regular Army. A company of Texas Rangers served as the eyes and ears of the Army. For the next six months tactical drilling, horse breaking, and parades, interspersed with boredom and dissipation, went on at the big camp on the Nueces. Then in February Taylor received orders from Washington to advance into disputed territory to the Rio Grande. Negotiations with the Mexican government had broken down.

## BRAGG, LEE, GRANT, AND DAVIS IN THE MEXICAN WAR

For the first time in the Mexican War, graduates of the U.S. Military Academy held a majority of field and staff officer positions. General Scott later commented that without these officers the war would have lasted longer and been much more costly. The West Pointers vindicated themselves and the academy in the eyes of many average Americans. The Mexican War also proved to be a training ground for men like Braxton Bragg, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and Jefferson Davis, who thirteen years after the conflict in Mexico led large armies during the American Civil War.

The march of more than a hundred miles down the coast to the Rio Grande was led by Bvt. Maj. Samuel Ringgold's battery of "flying artillery," organized in late 1838 on orders from Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett. It was the last word in mobility, for the cannoners rode on horseback rather than on limbers and caissons. Taylor's supply train of 300 ox-drawn wagons brought up the rear. On March 23 the columns came to a road that forked left to Point Isabel, ten miles away on the coast, where Taylor's supply ships were waiting, and led on the right to his destination on the Rio Grande, eighteen miles southwest, opposite the Mexican town of Matamoros. Sending the bulk of his army ahead, Taylor went to Point Isabel to set up his supply base, fill his wagons, and bring forward four 18-lb. siege guns from his ships.

At the boiling brown waters of the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros, Taylor built a strong fort, which he called Fort Texas, and mounted his siege guns. At the same time he sent messages of peace to the Mexican commander on the opposite bank. These were countered by threats and warnings and on April 25, the day after the arrival at Matamoros of General Mariano Arista with two or three thousand additional troops, by open hostilities. The Mexicans crossed the river in some force and attacked a reconnoitering detachment of sixty dragoons under Capt. Seth B. Thornton. They killed eleven men and captured Thornton and the rest, many of whom were wounded.

Taylor reported to President Polk that hostilities had commenced and called on Texas and Louisiana for about 5,000 militiamen. His immediate concern was that his supply base might be captured. Leaving an infantry regiment and a small detachment of artillery at Fort Texas under Maj. Jacob Brown, he set off May 1 with the bulk of his forces for Point Isabel, where he stayed nearly a week strengthening his fortifications. After loading two hundred supply wagons and acquiring two more ox-drawn 18-pounders, he began the return march to Fort Texas with his army of about 2,300 men on the afternoon of May 7. About noon the next day, near a clump of tall trees at a spot called Palo Alto, he saw across the open prairie a long dark line with bayonets and lances glistening in the sun. It was the Mexican Army.

### The Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma

Containing some of the best regular units in the Mexican Army, General Arista's forces barring the road to Fort Texas stretched out on a

front a mile long and were about 4,000 strong. Taylor, who had placed part of his force in the rear to guard the supply wagons, was outnumbered at least two to one; and in terrain that favored cavalry, Arista's cavalry overwhelmingly outnumbered Taylor's dragoons. On the plus side for the Americans, their artillery was superior. Also, among Taylor's junior officers were a number of capable West Point graduates, notably 2d Lt. George C. Meade and 2d Lt. Ulysses S. Grant, who were to become famous in the Civil War.

On the advice of the young West Pointers on his staff, Taylor emplaced his two 18-lb. iron siege guns in the center of his line and blasted the advancing Mexicans with canister. His field artillery—bronze 6-lb. guns firing solid shot and 12-lb. howitzers firing shell, in quick-moving attacks threw back Arista's flanks. The Mexicans were using old-fashioned bronze 4-pounders and 8-pounders that fired solid shot and had such short ranges that their fire did little damage. During the battle Lieutenant Grant saw their cannon balls striking the ground before they reached the American troops and ricocheting so slowly that the men could dodge them.

During the afternoon a gun wad set the dry grass afire, causing the battle to be suspended for nearly an hour. After it resumed, the Mexicans fell back rapidly. By nightfall, when both armies went into bivouac, Mexican casualties, caused mostly by cannon fire, numbered 320 killed and 380 wounded. Taylor lost only 9 men killed and 47 wounded. One of the mortally wounded was his brilliant artilleryman, Major Ringgold.

At daybreak the Americans saw the Mexicans in full retreat. Taylor decided to pursue but did not begin his advance until afternoon, spending the morning erecting defenses around his wagon train, which he intended to leave behind. About two o'clock he reached Resaca de la Palma, a dry riverbed about five miles from Palo Alto. There, his scouts reported that the Mexicans had taken advantage of his delay to entrench themselves strongly a short distance down the road in a similar shallow ravine known as Resaca de la Guerra, whose banks formed a natural breastwork. Narrow ponds and thick chaparral protected their flanks.

Taylor sent forward his flying artillery, now commanded by Lt. Randolph Ridgely. Stopped by a Mexican battery, Ridgely sent back for help; Taylor ordered in a detachment of dragoons under Capt. Charles A. May. The dragoons overran the Mexican guns but on their return were caught in infantry crossfire from the thickets and could not prevent the enemy from recapturing the guns. American infantrymen later captured the pieces. Dense chaparral prevented Taylor from making full use of his artillery. The battle of Resaca de la Palma was an infantry battle of small-unit actions and close-in, hand-to-hand fighting.

The Mexicans, still demoralized by their defeat at Palo Alto and lacking effective leadership, gave up the fight and fled toward Matamoros. Their losses at Resaca de la Palma were later officially reported as 547 but may have been greater. The Americans lost 33 killed and 89 wounded. In the meantime, Fort Texas had been attacked by the Mexicans on May 3 and had withstood a two-day siege with the loss of only two men, one of them its commander for whom the fort was later renamed Fort Brown.

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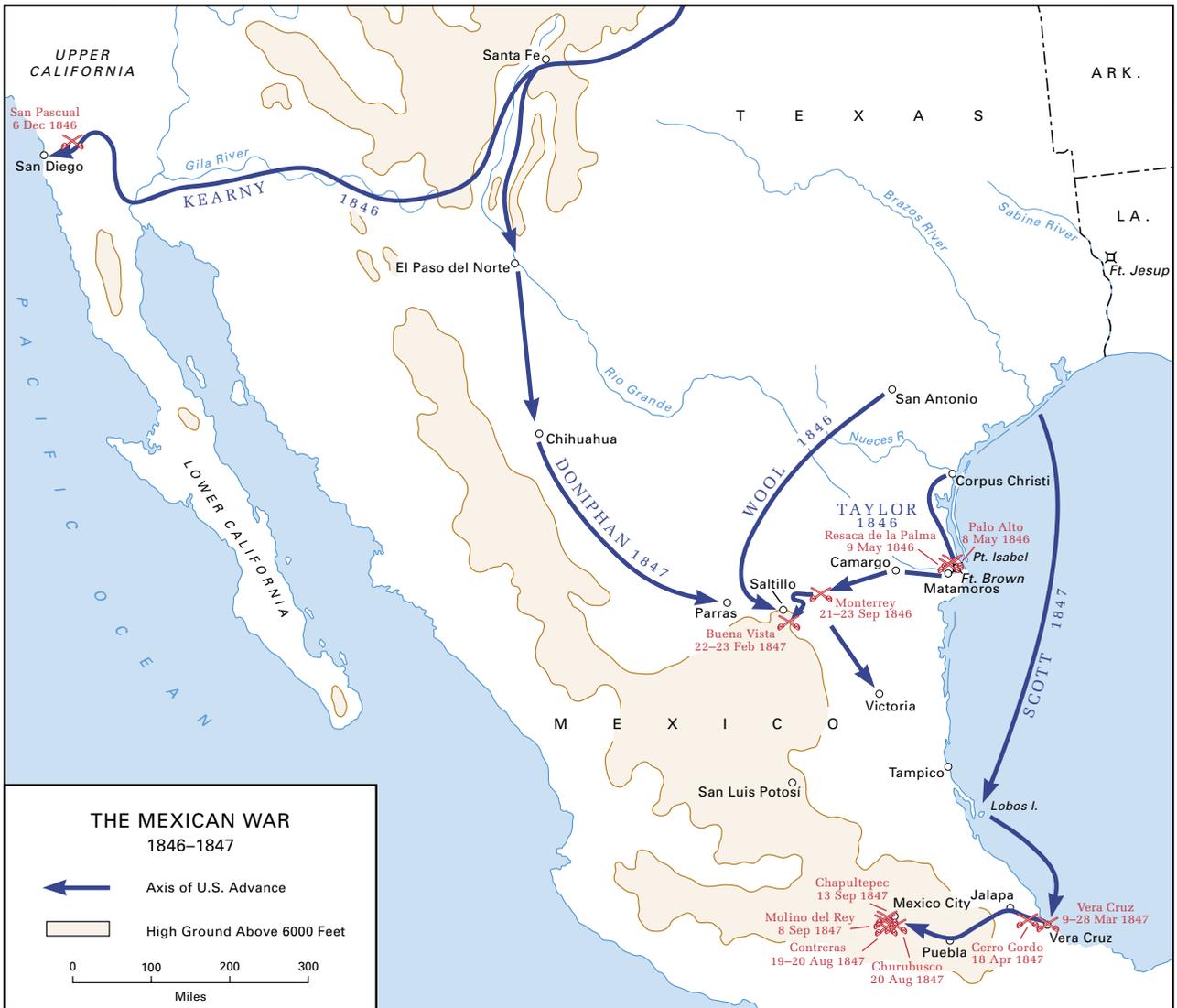
The panic-stricken Mexicans fleeing to Matamoros crossed the Rio Grande as best they could, some by boats, some by swimming. Many drowned; others were killed by the guns of Fort Texas. If Taylor's regulars, flush with victory and yelling as they pursued the enemy, had been able to catch up with Arista, they could probably have taken his demoralized army, complete with guns and ammunition. But Taylor had failed to make any provision for crossing the Rio Grande. He blamed the War Department's failure to provide him with pontoon equipment (developed during the Second Seminole War), which he had requested while he was still at Corpus Christi. Since that time, however, he had done nothing to acquire bridge materials or boats, although the West Pointers had urged him to do so. Lieutenant Meade reported that "the old gentleman would never listen or give it a moment's attention." Not until May 18, after Taylor had brought up some boats from Point Isabel, was he able to cross into Matamoros. By that time Arista's army had pulled back into the interior to rest, recoup, and fight another day.

## War Is Declared

On the evening of May 9, the day of the battle of Resaca de la Palma, President Polk received a message from the War Department that informed him of the attack on Captain Thornton's detachment on April 25. Polk, already convinced by the breakdown in negotiations with Mexico that war was justified, immediately drafted a message declaring that a state of war existed between the United States and Mexico. Congress passed the declaration, and Polk signed it on May 13. Congress then appropriated \$10 million and substantially increased the strength of the Army. (After the Second Seminole War the authorized strength had been cut from 12,500 to 8,500. This had been done by reducing the rank and file strength of the regiments, instead of eliminating units, thus firmly establishing the principle of an expansible Army.) Congress raised the authorized enlisted strength of a company from 64 to 100 men, bringing the rank and file up to 15,540, and added a regiment of mounted riflemen and a company of sappers, miners, and pontoniers (engineers for pontoon bridges). Also, the President was authorized to call for 50,000 volunteers for a term of one year or the duration of the war.

The President went into the war with one object clearly in view—to seize all of Mexico north of the Rio Grande and the Gila River and westward to the Pacific. After his discussions with Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott, the outlines of a three-pronged thrust emerged. (*Map 20*) General Taylor was to advance westward from Matamoros to the city of Monterrey, the key to further progress in northern Mexico. A second expedition under Brig. Gen. John E. Wool was to move from San Antonio to the remote city of Chihuahua in the west, an expedition later directed southward to Saltillo near Monterrey. A third prong under Col. Stephen W. Kearny was to start at Fort Leavenworth, capture Santa Fe and ultimately continue to San Diego on the coast of California. Part of Kearny's forces under volunteer Col. Alexander W. Doniphan later marched south through El Paso to Chihuahua. Although small in numbers, only 1,600 strong, Kearny's and Doniphan's forces posed strategic threats to Mexico's northern states.

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Map 20

Polk was counting on “a brisk and a short war”; not until July did he and his Secretary of War, William L. Marcy, even begin to consider the possibility of an advance on Mexico City by landing a force on the Gulf of Mexico near Vera Cruz. General Scott was not so optimistic. He was more aware of the problems of supply, transportation, communications, and mobilization involved in operations against Mexico, a country with a population of 7 million and an army of about 30,000, many with experience gained by twenty years of intermittent revolution. Scott’s preparations seemed too slow to Polk. Ostensibly for that reason, but also because success in the field might make the politically motivated Scott a powerful contender for the Presidency, Polk decided not to give him command of the forces in the field. When news came of the victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Polk promoted Zachary Taylor to the brevet rank of major general and gave him command

of the army in Mexico, risking the possibility that Taylor might also use a victory to vault into high political office.

## The Monterrey Campaign

Taylor's plan was to move on Monterrey with about 6,000 men via Camargo, a small town on the San Juan River, a tributary of the Rio Grande about 130 miles upriver. From Camargo, where he intended to set up a supply base, a road led southwest about 125 miles to Monterrey in the foothills of the Sierra Madres. His troops were to march overland to Camargo, his supplies to come by steamboat up the Rio Grande. But he could not move immediately because he lacked transportation—partly because of his failure to requisition in time and partly because of the effort required to build more wagons in the United States and to collect shallow-draft steamboats at river towns on the Mississippi and the Ohio and send them across the Gulf of Mexico. Ten steamboats were in operation at the end of July, but wagons did not begin arriving until November, after the campaign was over. To supplement his wagon train, reduced to 175, Taylor had to rely on 1,500 Mexican pack mules and a few native oxcarts.

In manpower Taylor had an embarrassment of riches. May saw the arrival of the first of the three-month militia he had requested on April 26 from the governors of Texas and Louisiana. With them came thousands of additional six-month volunteers from neighboring states recruited by Bvt. Maj. Gen. Edmund P. Gaines, commander of the Department of the West, on his own initiative—a repetition of his impulsive actions during the Second Seminole War. More than 8,000 of these short-term volunteers were sent before Gaines was censured by a court-martial for his unauthorized and illegal recruiting practices and transferred to New York to command the Department of the East. Very few of his recruits had agreed to serve for twelve months. All the rest were sent home without performing any service; in the meantime they had to be fed, sheltered, and transported. In June the volunteers authorized by Congress began pouring into Point Isabel and were quartered in a string of camps along the Rio Grande as far as Matamoros.

By August Taylor had a force of about 15,000 men at Camargo, an unhealthy town deep in mud from recent heavy rains and sweltering under heat that rose as high as 112 degrees. Many of the volunteers became ill, and more than half were left behind when Taylor advanced toward Monterrey at the end of August with 3,080 regulars and 3,150 volunteers. The regulars with a few volunteers were organized into the First and Second Divisions, the volunteers mainly into a Field Division, though two regiments of mounted Texans were thought of as the Texas Division. More than a fourth of the troops were mounted, among them the First Mississippi Rifle Regiment under a West Point graduate recently elected to Congress, Col. Jefferson Davis. The mounted riflemen had percussion rifles; the infantrymen were armed with flintlock smoothbore muskets. Taylor placed great reliance on the bayonet. He had a low opinion of artillery, and though warned that field pieces were not effective against the stone houses of Mexican towns, he had in addition to his four field batteries only two 24-lb. howitzers and one 10-inch mortar, the latter his only real siege piece.

By September 19 Taylor's army reached Monterrey, a well-fortified city in a pass of the Sierra Madres leading to the city of Saltillo. Monterrey was strongly defended by more than 7,000 Mexicans with better artillery than the Mexicans had had at Palo Alto—new British 9- and 12-lb. guns. Taylor, encamped on the outskirts of Monterrey, sent out reconnoitering parties accompanied by engineers and on September 20 began his attack. On the north the city was protected by a formidable citadel, on the south by a river; and it was ringed with forts. Taylor sent one of his regular divisions, with 400 Texas Rangers in advance, around to the west to cut off the road to Saltillo; and after a miserable night of drenching rain it accomplished its mission the next day, September 21, though at a cost of 394 dead or wounded, a high proportion of them officers. Taylor placed his heavy howitzers and one mortar in position to fire on the citadel and sent the remainder of his forces to close in from the eastern outskirts of the town. By the third day both attacks were driving into the city proper, the men battering down doors of the stone and adobe houses with planks, tossing lighted shells through apertures, and advancing from house to house rather than from street to street—tactics that were to be used a century later by American troops in Italian and German towns.

The climax came when the 10-inch mortar was brought up to lob shells on the great plaza into which the Mexican troops had been driven. On September 24 the Mexican commander offered to surrender on condition that his troops be allowed to withdraw unimpeded and that an eight-week armistice go into effect. Taylor agreed to the proposal. He had lost some 800 men to battle casualties and sickness, besides quantities of arms and ammunition, and he was about 125 miles from his base. Moreover, he believed that magnanimity would advance the negotiations for peace that had begun when President Polk allowed General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to return to Mexico from exile in Havana to exert his influence in favor of a treaty.

When Polk received the news from Monterrey by courier October 11, he condemned Taylor for allowing the Mexican Army to escape and ordered the armistice terminated. On November 13 Taylor sent a thousand men 68 miles southwest to occupy Saltillo, an important road center commanding the only road to Mexico City from the north that was practicable for wagons and guns. Saltillo also commanded the road west to Chihuahua and east to Victoria, capital of Tamaulipas, the province that contained Tampico, the second largest Mexican port on the gulf. The U.S. Navy captured Tampico November 15. On the road to Chihuahua was the town of Parras, where General Wool's expedition of about 2,500 men arrived early in December after a remarkable march from San Antonio. On the way Wool had learned that the Mexican troops holding Chihuahua had abandoned it; accordingly, he joined Taylor's main army. Taylor thus acquired a valuable West Point-trained engineer officer who had been scouting with Wool, Capt. Robert E. Lee.

Taylor was planning to establish a strong defensive line, Parras-Saltillo-Monterrey-Victoria, when he learned that most of his troops would have to be dispatched to join General Scott's invasion of Mexico at Vera Cruz, an operation that had been decided upon in Washington in mid-November. Scott arrived in Mexico in late December. He pro-

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Gen' Scott's Entrance into Mexico, *C. Nebel, ca. 1855*

ceeded to Camargo and detached almost all of Taylor's regulars, about 4,000, and an equal number of volunteers, ordering them to rendezvous at Tampico and at the mouth of the Brazos River in Texas. Taylor, left with fewer than 7,000 men, all volunteers except two squadrons of dragoons and a small force of artillery, was ordered to evacuate Saltillo and go on the defensive at Monterrey.

Enraged, Taylor attributed Scott's motive to politics. Hurrying back to Monterrey from Victoria, he decided to interpret Scott's orders as "advice" rather than as an order. Instead of retiring his forces to Monterrey, he moved 4,650 of his troops (leaving garrisons at Monterrey and Saltillo) to a point eighteen miles south of Saltillo, near the hacienda of Agua Nueva. This move brought him almost eleven miles closer to San Luis Potosi, 200 miles to the south, where General Santa Anna was assembling an army of 20,000. Most of the 200 miles were desert, which Taylor considered impassable by any army; moreover, both he and Scott believed that Santa Anna would make his main effort against Scott's landing at Vera Cruz, the news of which had leaked to the newspapers. On February 8, 1847, Taylor wrote a friend, "I have no fears."

At the time he wrote, Santa Anna was already on the march north toward Saltillo. Stung by newspaper reports that he had sold out to the Americans, Santa Anna risked a daring strategic move. He was determined to win a quick victory, and he thought he saw his opportunity when his troops brought him a copy of Scott's order depleting Taylor's forces, found on the body of a messenger they had ambushed and killed. Leading his army across barren country through heat, snow, and rain, by February 19 Santa Anna had 15,000 men at a hacienda at the edge of the desert, only thirty-five miles from Agua Nueva. One of the hardest fought battles of the Mexican War was about to begin.

### The Battle of Buena Vista

On the morning of February 21 scouts brought word to General Taylor that a great Mexican army was advancing, preceded by a large

body of cavalry swinging east to block the road between Agua Nueva and Saltillo. That afternoon Taylor withdrew his forces up the Saltillo road about 15 miles to a better defensive position near the hacienda Buena Vista, a few miles south of Saltillo. There, a mile south of the clay-roofed ranch buildings, mountain spurs came down to the road on the east, the longest and highest known as La Angostura; between them was a wide plateau cut by two deep ravines. West of the road was a network of gullies backed by a line of high hills. Leaving General Wool to deploy the troops, Taylor rode off to Saltillo to look after his defenses there.

By next morning, Washington's Birthday (the password was "Honor to Washington"), the little American army of fewer than 5,000 troops, most of them green volunteers, was in position to meet a Mexican army more than three times its size. The American main body was east of the road near La Angostura, where artillery had been emplaced, commanding the road. West of the road, the gullies were thought to be sufficient protection.

Santa Anna arrived with his vanguard around eleven o'clock. Disliking the terrain, which by no means favored cavalry (the best units in his army), he sent a demand for surrender to Taylor, who had returned from Saltillo. Taylor refused. Then Santa Anna planted artillery on the road and the high ground east of it and sent a force of light infantry around the foot of the mountains south of the plateau. About three o'clock a shell from a Mexican howitzer on the road gave the signal for combat; but the rest of the day was consumed mainly in jockeying for position on the mountain spurs, a competition in which the Mexicans came off best, and the placing of American infantry and artillery well forward on the plateau. After a threatening movement on the Mexican left, Taylor sent a Kentucky regiment with two guns of Maj. Braxton Bragg's Regular Army battery to the high hills west of the road, but no attack occurred there. Toward evening Taylor returned to Saltillo, accompanied by the First Mississippi Rifles and a detachment of dragoons. At nightfall his soldiers, shaken by the size and splendid appearance of the Mexican army, got what sleep they could.

The next day, February 23, the battle opened in earnest at dawn. Santa Anna sent a division up the road toward La Angostura, at the head of the defile; but American artillery and infantrymen quickly broke it, and no further action occurred in that sector. The strongest assault took place on the plateau, well to the east, where Santa Anna launched two divisions, backed by a strong battery at the head of the southernmost ravine. The Americans farthest forward, part of an Indiana regiment supported by three cannons, held off the assault for half an hour; then their commander gave them an order to retreat. They broke and ran and were joined in their flight by adjoining regiments. Some of the men ran all the way back to Buena Vista, where they fired at pursuing Mexican cavalrymen from behind the hacienda walls.

About nine o'clock that morning, when the battle had become almost a rout, General Taylor arrived from Saltillo with his dragoons, Colonel Davis' Mississippi Rifles, and some men of the Indiana regiment whom he had rallied on the way. They fell upon the Mexican cavalry that had been trying to outflank the Americans north of the plateau. In the meantime Bragg's artillery had come over from the hills

west of the road, and the Kentucky regiment also crossed the road to join in the fight. A deafening thunderstorm of rain and hail broke early in the afternoon, but the Americans in the north field continued to force the Mexicans back.

Just when victory for the Americans seemed in sight, Santa Anna threw an entire division of fresh troops, his reserves, against the plateau. Rising from the broad ravine where they had been hidden, the Mexicans of the left column fell upon three regiments—two Illinois and one Kentucky—and forced them back to the road with withering fire, while the right stormed the weak American center. They seemed about to turn the tide of battle when down from the north field galloped two batteries, followed by the Mississippians and Indianans led by Jefferson Davis, wounded but still in the saddle. They fell upon the Mexicans' right and rear and forced them back into the ravine. The Mexicans' left, pursuing the Illinois and Kentucky regiments up the road, was cut to pieces by the American battery at La Angostura.

That night Santa Anna, having lost 1,500 to 2,000 men killed and wounded, retreated toward San Luis Potosi. The Americans, with 264 men killed, 450 wounded, and 26 missing, had won the battle. A great share of the credit belonged to the artillery; without it, as General Wool said in his report, the army could not have stood "for a single hour." Moving with almost the speed of cavalry, the batteries served as rallying points for the infantry. The fighting spirit of the volunteers and the able and courageous leadership of the officers were beyond praise. Perhaps the greatest contribution to the victory had been Zachary Taylor himself. Stationed all day conspicuously in the center of the battle, hunched on his horse "Old Whitey" with one leg hooked over the pommel of his saddle, disregarding two Mexican bullets that ripped through his coat, and occasionally rising in his stirrups to shout encouragement, he was an inspiration to his men, who swore by him. Under such a leader they felt that defeat was impossible.

Taylor knew little of the art of war. He was careless in preparing for battle and neglected intelligence; he often misunderstood the intention of the enemy and underestimated the enemy's strength. But he possessed a high degree of physical and moral courage, which according to Jomini are the most essential qualities for a general. He constantly sought to regain the initiative by attacking the enemy. He and his subordinates used the principle of the offensive to turn the tide of the battle several times by the end of the long day.

Buena Vista ended any further Mexican threat against the lower Rio Grande. On the Pacific coast, Colonel Kearny led one of the most extraordinary marches in American history, across deserts and rugged mountains. His force left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, on June 2, 1846, and headed for California via the Santa Fe Trail. After capturing Santa Fe without firing a shot on August 18, he continued his march to the west. Convinced through an erroneous intelligence report from "Kit" Carson that California had already fallen to U.S. forces, Kearny left most of his forces in Santa Fe and continued on to California with a single dragoon company. He marched his men nearly 1,000 miles over snow-capped mountains and through desolate, snake-infested deserts. After finally reaching California on December 4, the exhausted dragoons were reinforced by thirty-five marines. Learning that the Californios, or

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native Mexican population, were in revolt, Kearny attacked a force of seventy-five Californios at San Pascual two days later to assist the beleaguered American garrison at San Diego. Kearny's dragoons took heavy losses against the skilled Californio lancers, but they withdrew before crushing Kearny's force. After relieving the garrison at San Diego, Kearny joined other U.S. forces in the region to recapture Los Angeles. On January 8, 1847, a joint force of sailors, marines, and dragoons under Kearny engaged 350 Californios at the San Gabriel River, south of Los Angeles. After a brief but hard-fought battle, the Californios withdrew and formally capitulated on January 13.

Early in February 1847 a force of Missouri volunteers detached from Kearny's command and led by Colonel Doniphan had set out from Santa Fe to pacify the region of the upper Rio Grande. Crossing the river at El Paso, they defeated a large force of Mexicans, mostly militia, at Chihuahua, less than a week after Taylor's victory at Buena Vista. Thus by March 1847, America's hold on Mexico's northern provinces was secure. All that remained to complete the victory was the capture of Mexico City.

### The Landing at Vera Cruz

From a rendezvous at Lobos Island almost fifty miles south of Tampico, General Scott's force of 13,660 men, of whom 5,741 were regulars, set sail on March 2, 1847, for the landing near Vera Cruz—the first major amphibious landing in the history of the U.S. Army. On March 5 the transports were off the coast of their target, where they met a U.S. naval squadron blockading the city. In a small boat, Scott, his commanders, and a party of officers including Lee, Meade, Joseph E. Johnston, and Pierre G. T. Beauregard ran close inshore to reconnoiter and were almost hit by a shell fired from the island fortress of San Juan de Ulua opposite Vera Cruz. That shell might have changed the course of the Mexican War and the Civil War as well.

Scott chose for the landing a beach nearly three miles south of the city, beyond the range of the Mexican guns. On the evening of March 9, in four hours more than 10,000 men went ashore in landing craft, sixty-five heavy surf boats that had been towed to the spot by steamers. The troops proceeded inland over the sand hills with little opposition from the Mexican force of 4,300 behind the city's walls. The landing of artillery, stores, and horses, the last thrown overboard and forced to swim for shore, was slowed by a norther that sprang up on March 12 and blew violently for four days, but by March 22 seven 10-inch mortars had been dragged inland and emplaced about half a mile south of Vera Cruz. That afternoon the bombardment began.

Town and fort replied, and it was soon apparent that the mortars were ineffective. Scott found himself compelled to ask for naval guns from the commander of the naval force, Commodore Matthew C. Perry. The six naval guns—three 32-pounders firing shot and three 8-inch shell guns—soon breached the walls and demoralized the defenders. On March 27, 1847, Vera Cruz capitulated.

Scott's next objective was Jalapa, a city in the highlands about seventy-four miles from Vera Cruz on the national highway leading to Mexico City. Because on the coast the yellow fever season was approach-

ing, Scott was anxious to move forward to the uplands at once, but not until April 8 was he able to collect enough pack mules and wagons for the advance. The first elements, under Bvt. Maj. Gen. David E. Twiggs, set out with two batteries. One was equipped with 24-lb. guns, 8-inch howitzers, and 10-inch mortars. The other was a new type of battery equipped with mountain howitzers and rockets, officered and manned by the Ordnance Corps. The rocket section, mainly armed with the Congreve, carried for service tests a new rocket, the Hale, which depended for stability not on a stick but on vents in the rear, which also gave it a spin like that of an artillery projectile. The rockets were fired from troughs mounted on portable stands. In addition to his two batteries, General Twiggs had a squadron of dragoons, in all about 2,600 men. He advanced confidently, though Scott had warned him that a substantial army commanded by Santa Anna lay somewhere ahead. On April 11, after Twiggs had gone about thirty miles, his scouts brought word that Mexican guns commanded a pass near the hamlet of Cerro Gordo.

### **The Battle of Cerro Gordo**

Near Cerro Gordo, the national highway ran through a rocky defile. On the left of the approaching Americans, Santa Anna with about 12,000 men had emplaced batteries on mountain spurs; and on the right of the Americans, farther down the road, his guns were emplaced on a high hill, El Telegrafo. He thus had firm command of the national highway, the only means he thought Scott had of bringing up his artillery.

Fortunately for Twiggs, advancing on the morning of April 12, the Mexican gunners opened fire before he was within range and he was able to pull his forces back. Two days later Scott arrived with reinforcements, bringing his army up to 8,500. A reconnaissance by Captain Lee showed that the rough country to the right of El Telegrafo, which Santa Anna had considered impassable, could be traversed to enable the Americans to cut in on the Mexican rear. The troops hewed a path through forest and brush; when they came to ravines, they lowered the heavy siege artillery by ropes to the bottom then hoisted it up the other side. By April 17 they were able to occupy a hill to the right of El Telegrafo, where they sited the rocket battery. Early on the morning of April 18 the battle began.

Though Santa Anna, by then forewarned, had been able to plant guns to protect his flank, he could not withstand the American onslaught. The Mexicans broke and fled into the mountains. By noon Scott's army had won a smashing victory at a cost of only 417 casualties, including 64 dead. Santa Anna's losses were estimated at more than a thousand.

Scott moved next morning to Jalapa. The way seemed open to Mexico City, only 170 miles away. But now he faced a serious loss in manpower. The term of enlistment of seven of his volunteer regiments was about to expire, and only a handful agreed to reenlist. The men had to be sent home at once to minimize the danger of yellow fever when they passed through Vera Cruz. The departure of the volunteers, along with wounds and sickness among the men remaining, reduced the army to 5,820 effectives.

In May Scott pushed forward cautiously to Puebla, then the second largest city in Mexico. Its citizens were hostile to Santa Anna and had lost hope of winning the war. It capitulated without resistance on May 15 to an advance party under General Worth. Scott stayed there until the beginning of August, awaiting reinforcements from Vera Cruz (which by mid-July more than doubled his forces) and awaiting the outcome of peace negotiations then under way. A State Department emissary, Nicholas P. Trist, had arrived on the scene and made contact with Santa Anna through a British agent in Mexico City. Trist learned that Santa Anna, elected President of Mexico for the second time, would discuss peace terms for \$10,000 down and \$1 million to be paid when a treaty was ratified. After receiving the down payment through the intermediary, however, Santa Anna made it known that he could not prevail upon the Mexican Congress to repeal a law it had passed after the battle of Cerro Gordo that made it high treason for any official to treat with the Americans. It was clear that Scott would have to move closer to the capital of Mexico before Santa Anna would seriously consider peace terms.

### Contreras, Churubusco, Chapultepec

For the advance on Mexico City, Scott had about 10,000 men. He had none to spare to protect the road from Vera Cruz to Puebla; therefore, his decision to move forward was daring. It meant that he



Pillow's Attack Advancing through the Woods of Chapultepec, *James Walker, 1848*

## CHAPULTEPEC AND “LOS NIÑOS”

Chapultepec, an imposing castle nearly 200 feet above the Valley of Mexico, housed a military academy for young men. Nearly fifty cadets stayed to oppose an American advance. U.S. troops used scaling ladders to assault the castle and captured the garrison of 1,000 after a sharp fight. During the battle, five cadets were killed and a sixth wrapped himself in the Mexican flag and jumped to his death in the valley below. Simply known as “los niños” (the children), the cadets’ heroic actions proved a powerful image of Mexican resistance, pride, and nationalistic spirit.

had abandoned his line of communications or, as he phrased it, “thrown away the scabbard.” On August 7 Scott moved off with the lead division, followed at a day’s march by three divisions with a three-mile-long train of white-topped supply wagons bringing up the rear. Meeting no opposition—a sign that Santa Anna had withdrawn to defend Mexico City—Scott by August 10 was at Ayolta on a high plateau fourteen miles from the city.

The direct road ahead, entering the capital on the east, was barred by strongly fortified positions. Scott therefore decided to take the city from the west by a wide flanking movement to the south, using a narrow muddy road that passed between the southern shores of two lakes and the mountains and skirted a fifteen-mile-wide lava bed, the Pedregal, before it turned north and went over a bridge at Churubusco to the western gates of Mexico City.

The Pedregal, like the terrain around El Telegrafo, had been considered impassable; but Captain Lee again made a way through. He found a mule path across its southwestern tip that came out at the village of Contreras. Scott sent a force under Bvt. Maj. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow to work on the road, supported by Twiggs’ division and some light artillery. They came under heavy fire from a Mexican force under General Gabriel Valencia. Pillow, manhandling his guns to a high position, attacked on August 19; but his light artillery was no match for Valencia’s 68-lb. howitzer, nor his men for the reinforcements Santa Anna brought to the scene. American reinforcements made a night march in pouring rain through a gully the engineers had found through the Pedregal to fall upon the Mexicans’ rear on the morning of August 20 simultaneously with an attack from the front. In seventeen minutes the battle of Contreras was won, with a loss to Scott of only 60 killed or wounded; the Mexicans lost 700 dead and 800 captured, including 4 generals.

Scott ordered an immediate pursuit, but Santa Anna was able to gather his forces for a stand at Churubusco, where he placed a strong fortification before the town at the bridge and converted a thick-walled stone church and a massive stone convent into fortresses. When the first American troops rode up around noon, they were met by heavy musket and cannon fire. The Mexicans fought as never before; not until midafternoon could Scott’s troops make any progress. At last the fire of the Mexicans slackened, partly because they were running out of ammunition; and the Americans won the day, a day that Santa Anna admitted had cost him one third of his forces. About 4,000 Mexicans had been

killed or wounded, not counting the many missing and captured. The battle had also been costly for Scott, who had 155 men killed and 876 wounded, approximately 12 percent of his effective force.

The victory at Churubusco brought an offer from Santa Anna to reopen negotiations. Scott proposed a short armistice, and Santa Anna quickly agreed. For two weeks Trist and representatives of the Mexican government discussed terms until it became clear that the Mexicans would not accept what Trist had to offer and were merely using the armistice as a breathing spell. On September 6 Scott halted the discussions and prepared to assault Mexico City.

Though refreshed by two weeks of rest, his forces now numbered only about 8,000. Santa Anna was reputed to have more than 15,000 and had taken advantage of the respite to strengthen the defenses of the city. And ahead on a high hill above the plain was the Castle of Chapultepec guarding the western approaches.

Scott's first objective, about half a mile west of Chapultepec, was a range of low stone buildings, containing a cannon foundry, known as El Molino del Rey. It was seized on September 8, though at heavy cost from unexpected resistance. At eight o'clock on the morning of September 13, after a barrage from the 24-lb. guns, Scott launched a three-pronged attack over the causeways leading to Chapultepec and up the rugged slopes. Against a hail of Mexican projectiles from above, his determined troops rapidly gained the summit, though they were delayed at the moat waiting for scaling ladders to come up. By half past nine o'clock the Americans were overrunning the castle despite a valiant but doomed defense by brave young Mexican cadets. Scarcely pausing, they pressed on to Mexico City by the two routes available and by nightfall held two gates to the city. Exhausted and depleted by the 800 casualties suffered that day, the troops still had to face house-to-house fighting; but at dawn the next day, September 14, the city surrendered.

Throughout the campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, General Scott had displayed not only dauntless personal courage and fine qualities of leadership but great skill in applying the principles of war. In preparing for battle he would order his engineers to make a thorough reconnaissance of the enemy's position and the surrounding terrain. He was thus able to execute brilliant flanking movements over terrain that the enemy had considered impassable, notably at Cerro Gordo and the Pedregal, the latter a fine illustration of the principle of surprise. Scott also knew when to violate the principles of warfare, as he had done at Puebla when he deliberately severed his line of communications. Able to think beyond mere tactical maneuver, Scott was perhaps the finest strategic thinker in the American Army in the first half of the nineteenth century.

"He sees everything and counts the cost of every measure," said Captain Lee. Scott for his part ascribed his quick victory over Mexico, won without the loss of any battle, to the West Pointers in his army, Lee, Grant, and many others. As for the troops, the trained and disciplined regulars had come off somewhat better than the volunteers; but all the army on the whole had fought well. Scott had seen to it that the men fought at the right time and place. Grant summed it up: "Credit is due to the troops engaged, it is true, but the plans and strategy were the general's."

## Occupation and Negotiation in Mexico City

**The collection of revenues, suppression of disorder, administration of justice, all the details of governing the country were in the hands of the Army.**

For two months the only responsible administration in Mexico was the American military government under Scott. The collection of revenues, suppression of disorder, administration of justice, all the details of governing the country were in the hands of the Army. It has been said that some Mexicans believed that Scott's administration of their city was more efficient and respectful of Mexican property than their own government's. It was an instructive lesson in the value of a careful and relatively enlightened occupation policy. When the Mexicans finally organized a government with which Commissioner Trist could negotiate a peace treaty, dispatches arrived from Washington instructing Trist to return to the United States and ordering Scott to resume the war. Knowing that the Mexicans were now sincerely desirous of ending the war and realizing that the government in Washington was unaware of the situation, both Trist and Scott decided to continue the negotiations.

On February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. The U.S. Senate ratified it on March 10, but powerful opposition developed in Mexico. Not until May 30 were ratifications exchanged by the two governments. Preparations began immediately to evacuate American troops from Mexico. On June 12 the occupation troops marched out of Mexico City; on August 1, 1848, the last American soldiers stepped aboard their transports at Vera Cruz and quitted Mexican soil.

By the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the United States agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million and to assume the unpaid claims by Americans against Mexico. In return, Mexico recognized the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas and ceded New Mexico (including the present states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Nevada, a small corner of present-day Wyoming, and the western and southern portions of Colorado) and Upper California (the present state of California) to the United States. Mexico lost almost half of its land area to the United States by the terms of the treaty.

## The Army on the New Frontier

The victory over Mexico, as well as the settlement of the Oregon boundary frontier in June 1846, added to the United States a vast territory that was to occupy the Army almost exclusively in the postwar years. For generations, the Army was to be the only force for law and order throughout thousands of square miles. First, the Army needed to explore this vast new conquest. In this task the Corps of Topographical Engineers played the leading role. Some knowledge of the new region had been gained by expeditions such as those of Capt. Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, Kearny, and 2d Lt. John C. Fremont; more had been gained during the Mexican War by "topogs" attached to Kearny's march to California and Wool's to Saltillo and after the war by Maj. William H. Emory's work with the Mexican Boundary Commission. But much still remained to be done.

The most significant and far-reaching explorations were those to locate routes for transcontinental railroads. The first effort was directed toward the southwest, seeking an "ice-free, mountain-free" route. In



*Topographical Engineers Exploring the Colorado River near Chimney Peak*

that area, the necessity for defense against Comanches, Apaches, and Navahos meant that most of the Army had to be stationed between San Antonio and Fort Yuma. Forts had to be constructed, roads built, rivers sought as avenues of supply, and Indian trails mapped. In 1853 Congress authorized similar explorations on a northern route to the Pacific from Chicago and a central route from St. Louis.

Railroad construction did not begin until after the Civil War. Emigrants setting out for the West, in increasing numbers after the discovery of gold in California in 1849, used wagon trains across plains populated by warlike Indian tribes. The Army guarded the several transcontinental wagon routes and managed to keep the tribes in check. During the decade of the fifties there were no fewer than twenty-two distinct Indian “wars,” as well as the unusual task of controlling some particularly troublesome settlers.

In 1857 reports filtered back to the east from Utah that the settlement of Mormons there had deliberately massacred a party of Arkansas pioneers at a place called Mountain Meadow. The settlers, having been attacked by a party of Indians, surrendered to a Mormon militia contingent posing as rescuers and allowed themselves to be disarmed. On September 11, 1857, the Mormons summarily executed 120 of the survivors: men, women, and all children over the age of ten. Seventeen children were “adopted” by the Mormons but were later returned east to their relatives. This and other instances of defiance of federal authority prompted the dispatch of two sizable military expeditions from Fort Leavenworth. However, despite some tensions, a full-scale “Mormon War” never became a reality.

Army expeditions such as those from Fort Leavenworth, marching through primitive country where no local procurement was possible, had to carry all requirements, from horseshoe nails to artillery. Supplying the frontier posts, some as far as a thousand miles from inland waterways, entailed great effort. All goods had to be hauled in wagons or carried by pack train. The difficulty of supplying posts in the arid regions of the Southwest led in 1855 to an interesting experiment, strongly backed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, in the use of cam-

## JEFFERSON DAVIS AND THE CAMELS

As Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis (1808–1889) believed that the deserts of the American southwest were ideally suited for the use of camels. At his urging, Congress in 1855 authorized money to purchase camels from North Africa and ship them to Texas. Despite the hardiness of the animals and their ability to carry heavy loads over difficult terrain, the camel experiment was not a success. The beasts smelled horrible, frightened mules and horses, and were apparently even more ornery than mules. Despite several successful uses, most were eventually sold at public auction or released into the wild to slowly die out.

els as pack animals. Seventy-five were imported from the Middle East and sent to Texas. They showed that they could carry heavy loads, walk sure-footedly over ground no wagon could traverse, and subsist by grazing and on little water; but their appearance on the roads stampeded wagon and pack trains, and teamsters hated and feared them. The public and the Army turned against them, and the camel experiment ended in failure.

### Increasing the Peacetime Army

By the end of 1848 the Army had reverted to a peacetime strength somewhat smaller than the 10,000 authorized in 1815. It was stretched very thin by its manifold duties on the vast new frontier. On the recommendations of General Scott and Secretary of War George W. Crawford, Congress in June 1850 approved enlarging the companies serving on the frontier to 74 privates, a considerable increase over the 50 in the dragoons, 64 in the mounted rifles, and 42 in the artillery and infantry authorized at the end of 1848. Thereafter 90 of the 158 companies were enlarged; by the end of 1850 the Army was authorized 12,927 officers and men.

When Jefferson Davis became Secretary of War in 1853, he strongly urged a larger Army, one that could expand to 27,818 men in time of war by enlarging the company to 128 men. Davis desired new mounted regiments for frontier service, because only highly mobile units could hope to handle the Indians. In March 1855 Congress added 4 new regiments to the existing 15 (2 of dragoons, 1 of mounted rifles, 4 of artillery, and 8 of infantry). They were the 1st and 2d Cavalry Regiments and the 9th and 10th Infantry Regiments. The mounted arm thus consisted of dragoons, mounted rifles, and cavalry until the Civil War, when all mounted regiments were called cavalry.

### Weapons and Tactics on the Eve of the Civil War

At Davis' insistence the new infantry units were armed with percussion-cap, single shot, muzzleloading rifled muskets instead of smoothbore muskets. Nineteenth century technological developments had made possible an accurate, dependable muzzleloading rifle with at least as fast a rate of fire as the smoothbore musket. This was partly due to

the application of the percussion-cap principle to the rifle and partly to the adoption in 1855 of the Minié ball or bullet, a lead projectile tapering forward from its hollow base. To load and fire, the soldier bit open the paper cartridge, poured the powder down the barrel, rammed in the paper to seat the charge, and then rammed the bullet home. He then put the cap in place, full-cocked the piece, aimed, and fired. Sparks from the cap fired the powder. The force of the explosion expanded the hollow base of the bullet to fit the rifling, and the bullet left the barrel spinning and thus with considerable accuracy. Its effective range was 400 to 600 yards as compared with only around 100 yards for smooth-bore muskets. The rate of fire was a theoretical three rounds per minute, though this was seldom attained in practice.

In 1855 the national armories began making only rifles and started converting smoothbores into rifles, but the work took time. By the end of 1858 the Springfield and Harpers Ferry Armories had manufactured only 4,000 of the new type of rifle, the Springfield .58, a muzzleloader. Breechloading, permitting a much more rapid rate of fire, had to await the development of a tight-fitting, but easy-moving bolt and a cartridge that would effectively seal the breech. Many breechloaders were on the market in the 1850s; and the Army began testing all available models but did not complete its tests before 1861. Effective breechloading rifles required metallic rather than paper cartridges to prevent escape of gases at the breech. Metallic cartridges were invented in 1856 but were not produced in large numbers until after 1861.

The introduction of rifling into field and coast artillery increased the accuracy and more than doubled the effective range; but rifled guns, which had to await the development of advanced manufacturing techniques, did not immediately supplant the smoothbores. During this period an important smoothbore piece was introduced for the light batteries, the 12-lb. bronze cannon called the Napoleon for Napoleon III. Capt. Robert P. Parrott's rifled cannon was developed in 1851 but did not come into use on an appreciable scale until the Civil War. The application of the Minié principle to artillery did much to further the use of rifled artillery; though grape and canister, shell (high explosive

## BREECHLOADERS VERSUS MUZZLELOADERS

By the nineteenth century the theoretical advantages of breechloading firearms—faster firing and easier loading while concealed or mounted—had long been known. The U.S. Army adopted breechloaders, in the form of the Hall rifles and carbines, during much of the first half of the nineteenth century; but practical difficulties, in the form of a complicated mechanism and an inadequate gas seal at the breech, outweighed the benefits. By the Civil War technical advances would make breechloading more feasible, but the enormous industrial problem of equipping the armies with new weapons and ammunition would make existing muzzleloaders the mainstay of both Union and Confederate forces. Private purchase and political influence within the Union Army, however, allowed the successful fielding of some breechloading rifles and carbines, notably the Sharps, Spencer, and Henry designs. Just after the Civil War the Army, faced simultaneously with the need to acquire a modern rifle and a peacetime budget, adopted the Allin “trap-door” action as a means to convert its enormous wartime stock of rifled muskets.

## DENNIS HART MAHAN (1802–1871)

After graduating at the top of West Point's Class of 1824, under the leadership of Sylvanus Thayer, Dennis Hart Mahan remained at the Academy as a professor of engineering, mathematics, and military science, 1824–1871. Mahan's 1847 *Elementary Treatise on Advance-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops* became the first major American work on strategy and tactics. Derived from Antoine-Henri de Jomini's analysis of Napoleonic warfare, Mahan's emphasis on rules and principles and failure to address technological change or innovation would play a significant role in the Civil War. Most of the academy graduates on both sides of the conflict had studied under Mahan, and many other officers used his book as a field manual. Mahan's thought had an enduring impact on U.S. Army doctrine, just as his oldest son, Alfred Thayer Mahan, would later shape naval strategy.

and shrapnel), and solid shot, all used in the Mexican War, were still standard.

Rockets declined in favor. The brief experience with them in the Mexican War had not been impressive. After the war, continued experimentation failed to remove faults of eccentricity in flight and instability. The rockets often exploded prematurely, so troops were reluctant to use them; moreover, they tended to deteriorate in storage. More important than any of these considerations was the fact that the new rifled artillery was decidedly superior to rockets in range, accuracy, and reliability.

Tactical doctrine did not entirely keep pace with the development of weapons. In an effort in that direction, Secretary Davis prescribed light infantry tactics for all infantry units. In general, this meant reducing the line of the infantry from three to two ranks and placing increased emphasis on skirmishers. Formations, however, were still rigid: Men stood shoulder to shoulder (it was almost impossible to load a muzzleloader lying down), and intervals between units were small. These relatively dense formations would in the early days of the Civil War offer inviting targets, but it was perhaps the most effective way to mass small-arms fire until the early twentieth century development of the machine gun.

At the U.S. Military Academy during this period, such great names as Robert E. Lee and Dennis Mahan, author of many works on engineering and fortification, appeared on the roster of staff and faculty. The Artillery School of Practice was reopened; and, with the appearance in 1849 of Bvt. Maj. Alfred Mordecai's *Artillery for the United States Land Service*, the Army had for the first time a full, accurate description of its system of artillery. Secretary Davis sent Mordecai, along with Maj. Richard Delafield and Capt. George B. McClellan, to Europe to study all aspects of the Crimean War in particular and European military institutions and development in general. The study of American military theory was stimulated by the publication in 1846 of Henry Wager Halleck's *Elements of Military Art and Science*. Such volumes as Scott's *Instructions for Field Artillery*, the *General Regulations for the Army of the United States*, Hardee's *Tactics*, and the new volume on infantry tactics sponsored by Davis were made available to Army officers and a few others; though not enough were obtained to furnish copies to the militia. A number of military schools had been founded throughout the

country, with the South having a slight edge, an advantage that was to provide numerous capable officers to the Confederacy when the Civil War broke out.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How risky was the strategy of a three-pronged attack on Mexico? What could have gone wrong?
2. What were President Polk's diplomatic and political objectives during the Mexican War? What methods did he use to obtain them?
3. Why did the mix of volunteer and Regular Army units work well in the Mexican War? What could have gone wrong?
4. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Generals Scott and Taylor. Under whom would you rather have served, and why?
5. How would you characterize the occupation of Mexico City? What lessons could be drawn from this experience?
6. Discuss the role of technological advances in weaponry on the verge of the Civil War. What tactical options changed for commanders on the battlefield as a result of those advances?

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