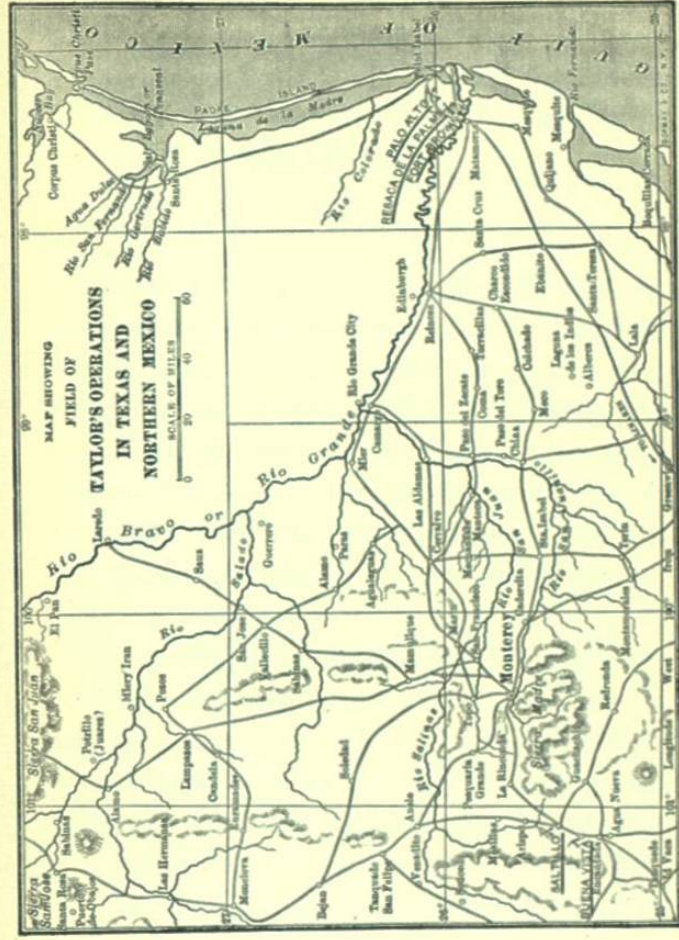


CHAPTER X  
THE MEXICAN WAR—GENERAL  
TAYLOR





## CHAPTER X

### THE MEXICAN WAR—GENERAL TAYLOR

As this is intended to be an inquiry into its political aspects rather than a military history of the Mexican War, I shall not go into the details of the military and naval operations, interesting as they are, but shall simply present such a conspectus of the war as will serve to render intelligible its diplomatic features, and the final settlement whereby the great spoliation was completed.

In population, in wealth, in intelligence, in stability, in organization, in all that goes to make a nation powerful, there was no parity at that time between the United States and Mexico. We were so far superior to the struggling republic to the south of us, that any comparison would be impossible. This should have made us more scrupulous not to

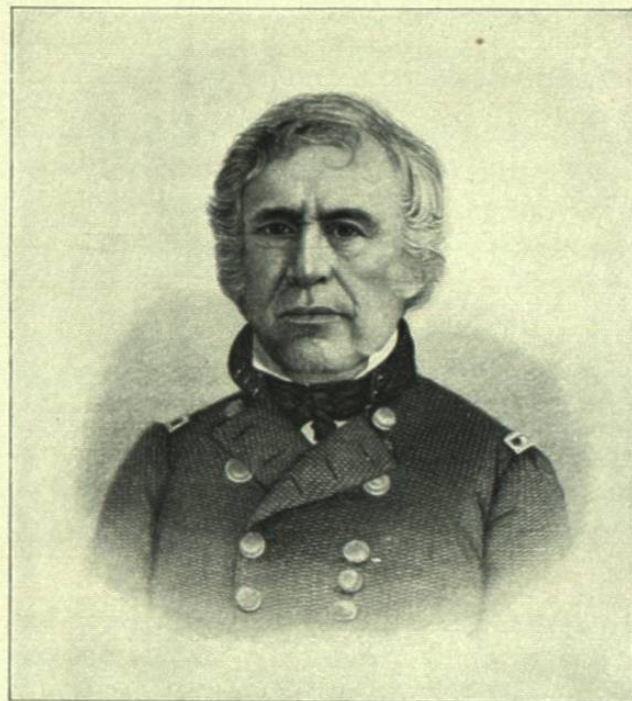


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take advantage of our weaker neighbor. Unfortunately, it did not.

During a large part of the period under discussion, we had been engaged in an acrimonious dispute with Great Britain over the northwest boundary of the United States, known at the time as the "Oregon Question." Public feeling ran high. "Fifty-four forty or fight!" became a very catchy slogan. We had, we fancied, as much justice on our side, as many wrongs against us, and as valid claims for damages in the case of England as in the case of Mexico. Indeed, the situation in the Northwest was for a long time much more acute than in the Southwest. Yet the question in the Northwest eventually was settled by compromise and treaty.

I do not say for a moment that we were cowardly or recreant to our duty, or that we jeopardized our honor in making that settlement. Quite the contrary. It was a judicious and a righteous thing to do, but it emphasizes the point that we should have done the same



GENERAL ZACHARY TAYLOR.



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thing in the Southwest. How far the fact that Great Britain was a strong country and Mexico a weak one, brought about different methods of settlement, I shall not presume to say. Perhaps if the question of slavery had not obtruded itself, as, although it has been modified in form by the Emancipation Proclamation, it still obtrudes, we might have been as calm, as equable and as just in the Southwest as in the Northwest. I recall a famous Old World motto which runs this way: "Mild with the lowly, rough with the strong." Whatever the causes, we reversed the clauses, for we were gentle with England, harsh with Mexico. Perhaps we coveted the territory to the southwest as being more valuable than that to the northwest.

In June, 1845, Brevet Brigadier-General Zachary Taylor, an elderly colonel in the United States Army, who had distinguished himself in a minor command during the War of 1812, and had done good, if not notable, service in the succeeding period, was ordered



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to Corpus Christi, at the mouth of the Nueces River, with a small body of regular troops, the number of which was gradually increased during the ensuing summer and fall. The American Congress, having formally constituted Texas a state in December, 1845, General Taylor, in January, 1846, was ordered to advance to the Rio Grande, which he reached late in March.

As I see it, this was an invasion of Mexican territory by an armed force of the United States. An act such as this has always been tantamount to a declaration of war, and this act was so regarded by Mexico. Four regiments of the regular army of the United States, with a small quota of cavalry and artillery, had been ordered to report to General Taylor. At the same time he was authorized by the President to call for volunteers from Texas and Louisiana to defend our frontier. In March, 1846, Taylor established a supply depot at Point Isabel, on the Gulf of Mexico, a few miles north of the mouth of the Rio

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Grande. Thence he moved southward to the river and threw up, near its mouth, an entrenchment, afterward called Fort Brown, opposite the Mexican town of Matamoras.

General Pedro de Ampudia, in command of the Mexican forces at Matamoras, remonstrated with Taylor, calling attention to the flagrant violation of international law involved in the presence of the American army in the territory of Mexico, in the following proclamation:

“ To explain to you the many grounds for the just grievances felt by the Mexican nation, caused by the United States Government, would be a loss of time and an insult to your good sense. I therefore, pass at once to such explanations as I consider of absolute necessity. Your government in an incredible manner—you will even permit me to say an extravagant one, if the usages or general rules established and received among all civilized nations are regarded—has not only insulted but exasperated the Mexican nation, bearing its conquering banner to the left bank of the Rio Bravo del Norte; and in this case, by express and definitive orders of my government, which neither can, will,



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nor should receive new outrages, I require you in all form, and at latest in the peremptory term of twenty-four hours, to break up your camp and return to the east bank of the Nueces River while our governments are regulating the pending question in relation to Texas. If you insist upon remaining upon the soil of the Department of Tamaulipas, it will certainly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question; and in that case I advise you that we accept the war to which, with so much injustice on your part, you provoke us, and that on our part it shall be conducted conformably to the principles established by the most civilized nations—that is to say, that the law of nations and war shall be the guide of our operations, trusting that on your part the same will be observed. With this view, I tender you the consideration due to your person and respectable office.

“ God and Liberty!

“ Two o'clock P. M., April 12, 1846.”<sup>1</sup>

Taylor, of course, refused to abandon his post. On April 14, Ampudia was superseded by General Mariano Arista, who determined to cross the river and force the Americans out of Mexico so soon as he could assemble a suffi-

<sup>1</sup> History of the Mexican War, by General Cadmus M. Wilcox.

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cient force at Matamoras. No conflict between the armed forces had yet taken place, although several American stragglers had been cut off and killed by guerrillas.

On the 24th of April, Captain Thornton, with sixty dragoons, met in a skirmish a much larger Mexican force, by which sixteen Americans were killed and the remainder captured. Each side has claimed that the other was the aggressor, and that upon the aggressor must lie the responsibility for the war. The decision of the question is not important. The first act of aggression consisted in the invasion of Mexico by the American army and no quibbling about Thornton's party can rid us of the blame of armed invasion, to say nothing of what went before.

Learning that Arista was being reenforced, and realizing that he would soon be attacked, Taylor left an adequate garrison in Fort Brown, and on May 1st marched the remainder of his little army back to Point Isabel in order to make safe his base of supplies. Arista



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conceived this to be a retreat. With some five thousand men he promptly crossed to the north bank of the Rio Grande to pursue Taylor. On the 3d of May he ordered the force at Matamoros to bombard Fort Brown.

Taylor hastened his preparations at Point Isabel and on May 7th marched back toward the sound of cannon. He was in some anxiety as to whether the fort could hold out until he relieved it. On the 8th, about three o'clock in the afternoon, Arista attacked him at a place called Palo Alto. The ensuing affair, which can hardly be dignified by the name of a battle, was fought mainly by artillery, in which, as in every other battle of the war, the Americans were greatly superior, not so much from weight of metal, or number of pieces, as from accuracy of aim, mobility, and rapidity of fire. The fighting ceased at dark and Taylor's men remained in possession of the field. Arista retired a few miles to the south and reformed his lines behind an extensive ravine, partially filled with water, called Resaca de la Palma.

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The loss on either side had not been serious. Technically, it was a victory for General Taylor. The enemy had attacked him, and he had driven him off, inflicting a much greater loss than he had received, and had remained on the field. Yet the Mexican army still greatly outnumbered his. Its effectiveness had not been appreciably diminished. The issue of the campaign therefore still remained to be decided.

The next morning General Taylor held a council of war in which the usual conservative opinions were put forth. He listened to all that was said and closed the deliberations by ordering the officers to go to their commands, stating that in thirty minutes he intended to advance. He marched after Arista and attacked him at three o'clock in the afternoon. The battle was short, sharp and decisive. In spite of the shelter of the ravine, Taylor drove Arista from his carefully selected and highly defensible position. Such was the impetuosity of the American charges, especially on the part



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of the cavalry, which actually pierced the Mexican center, sabering the cannoneers of the battery in place there, and capturing the guns, that Arista lost control of his army, which finally fled in utter panic. The battle was a complete rout. The seizure of Matamoras followed a few days after. General Taylor had successfully won a foothold south of the Rio Grande.

A comparison of force is interesting. In these two battles General Taylor's forces amounted to two thousand two hundred and eighty-eight. His losses were forty-eight killed and one hundred and twenty-nine wounded. General Arista's forces approximated five thousand. His loss in killed and wounded and missing was over one thousand. The tale of lost men, however, did not measure the extent of Arista's disaster, for his baggage, public and private, his camp equipage, eight pieces of artillery and many small arms, were captured and the morale of his troops was greatly shattered. There were many who fled

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in terror before the American advance, and never returned to their colors.<sup>1</sup>

As an earnest of future success, the campaign was important. President Polk sent a special message to Congress on May 11th in which, after a specious attempt at a justification of the course of the United States, he had the unblushing effrontery to declare that "after reiterated menaces Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood on American soil,"<sup>2</sup> and further, that "war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself."<sup>3</sup>

Congress, artfully dodging a formal declaration of war by making use of Polk's ingenious

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics of numbers engaged, losses, etc., in this and the next chapter are taken from the summaries in vol. x of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln serving his first term in Congress in the next fall, introduced a series of resolutions requesting the President to state the exact spot where Mexico had shed the blood of our citizens on our own soil. These under the nickname of "*The Spot Resolutions*" attracted some little attention.

<sup>3</sup> Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. iv.



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phrase, "war exists in Mexico," by a practically unanimous vote—two hundred and twenty-four to sixteen, as the total for both houses—authorized the President to call for fifty thousand volunteers and placed a fund of ten million dollars at his disposal for the national defense and other expenses of this war brought about by the Mexican "invasion" !

Concerning this action, Henry Clay said in a speech at Lexington, Ky., that "no earthly consideration would ever have tempted or provoked him to vote for a bill with a palpable falsehood stamped upon its face." . . . "All the nations, I apprehend," he added, solemnly, "look upon us, in the prosecution of the present war, as being actuated by a spirit of rapacity, and an inordinate desire for territorial aggrandizement."<sup>1</sup> Never were truer words spoken.

I do not for a moment suppose that Polk

<sup>1</sup> American Statesmen, xx: Henry Clay, vol. ii, by Carl Schurz.

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thought he was doing anything wrong, or that he believed that his conduct had not been all that the conduct of a high-minded Christian statesman should be, which shows how easy it is for a man to find excuse and justification for whatever he wants to do.

" In religion,  
What damned error, but some sober brow  
Will bless it and approve it with a text."

In the truth of that assertion lies one of the few resemblances between religion and politics. Certainly, it may be pointed out that many who helped to make up that great majority in Congress for the prosecution of the war, were not in favor of it. Yet, now that hostilities had actually begun, it was very hard not to espouse the cause of the United States, no matter whose the fault. "My country, may she ever be right; but right or wrong, my country," Stephen Decatur's famous phrase, has an appeal which it is difficult for the sternest patriot, the most inexorably righteous man, to



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disregard in favor of a sentiment like this: "Our country, may she always be right, but if she be not, let us make her so at all costs."

All parties being now united, the war was prosecuted vigorously. Some of the opponents thereto may have salved their conscience by a feeling that, possibly, in an energetic campaign lay the surest hope of a speedy settlement and so they made the best of a bad business.

The majority of the people, carried away by the news of the fighting, became enthusiastic for the war. They always are in similar circumstances. Taylor's victories were hailed with loud acclaim. The Democrats, who now made no effort to conceal their determination to seize all the Mexican territory between Texas and the Pacific, and whose course was entirely consistent, taunted the Whigs for supporting and voting supplies for a war which they did not believe justifiable. The taunt, which was unanswerable, rankled.

To go back to our fighting—always the



THE CAPTURE OF MONTEREY.  
From the original by Nebel.



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easier task—reenforcements were hurried to General Taylor and on August 19th, with six thousand six hundred and fifty men, he left Camargo, four hundred miles up the river, where he had established a new base of supplies, and marched down to capture Monterey, then as now, the most important city in northern Mexico, which was held by General Ampudia and ten thousand men, of whom seven thousand were regulars. After the hardest kind of fighting the Americans had yet encountered, lasting for two days, in a series of brilliant operations, in which many formidable positions were carried by storm, and after a desperate defense by the Mexicans, Taylor, who was nobly seconded by General Worth, captured the town on the 24th of September. Taylor lost one hundred and twenty killed and three hundred and thirty-seven wounded. The Mexican loss was much greater.

General Taylor was a Whig. Personally, he was not in sympathy with the policy of Polk and the Democratic party. He was a soldier,



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however, whose business it was to carry out the orders of his superiors to the best of his ability, and his ability was certainly of a high order. His personality, plain, simple and honest—so much so that his soldiers called him “Old Rough and Ready”—was attractive to the people. His victories exalted him to the status of a national hero and people began to talk of him for the Presidency. This was sufficiently disquieting to Polk and his friends at Washington, although Taylor attended strictly to his business and did not meddle with politics.

### CHAPTER XI

#### THE MEXICAN WAR—GENERAL SCOTT