The California Campaigns of the U.S.–Mexican War, 1846–1848

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The combination of forces employed in the conquest of California and New Mexico were of various organization [*sic*], both military and naval, and were launched forth, by sea and land, at different periods. The points of their distinct embodiment were almost as many thousands of miles apart as their destined points of concentration on the soil of Mexico. It will therefore be impossible in the circumscribed limits of this work, to follow each detachment on their separate marches, voyages, and exploits.

—James Madison Cutts
The Conquest of California and New Mexico, by the Forces of the United States, in the years 1846 & 1847
(published in 1847)

Table of Contents

Preface

This book is a far-ranging introductory survey of the California campaigns of U.S.–Mexican War of 1846–1848—a war which, taken as a whole, remains controversial even today. It focuses not only on military and naval operations *per se*, but also on the cultures and social classes before, during, and after the war. Perhaps most importantly, it introduces some of the contemporary men and women who were directly or indirectly caught up in the war, especially the *Californios*.

"*Californios*" is a term used in historic and regional Spanish to designate any Spanish-speaking Roman Catholic of non–Indian descent who was born in Alta California between 1769 and 1848.[1] The province of Alta, or Upper, California was formed in 1804 out of the northern part of the former province of *Las Californias*. It included the modern states, or parts thereof, of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, western Colorado, and southwestern Wyoming. Baja, or Lower, California, is the long, narrow peninsula extending south from Alta California.

Although the war lasted only two years, it had a long prologue and a longer afterlife. To help keep the complicated chronological record of the California campaigns straight, the chapters in this book focus chiefly on the *highlights* of these campaigns. The first paragraph of most chapters is usually a short summary printed in italics. For further clarity, the dates mentioned in this book include the year as well as the month and the day. Chapters vary in length.

Some specialized operations related to the California campaigns were more complicated than others: they began earlier and went on longer. American naval and amphibious operations along the Pacific coast, for example, began as early as 1821 and continued for several

weeks after the end of the war because of the delay in receiving news of the war's end. These operations are almost never treated in depth by modern books on the war, but they receive full coverage in this work. Due to their complexity, however, they are not discussed here in the same step-by-step chronological order used for other chapters, but are condensed and studied in their entirety in two chapters (chapters 11 and 12) of about equal length.

Wars do not occur in an ideological vacuum. In this case, although some prominent Americans of the era rejected the simplistic but very popular notion of Manifest Destiny, this conviction was inherent in the genesis and conduct of the war. It was the belief that the American people were somehow "destined"—divinely or otherwise—to expand all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific. American control of California by the United States was to be the keystone in the arch of Manifest Destiny.

One of the most prominent Americans not enamored of Manifest Destiny was Ulysses S. Grant, initially of U.S. Civil War fame and later the 18th president of the United States. He was only a junior officer during the U.S.–Mexican War, but it made a life-long impression on him. He later wrote of the 1845 annexation of Texas, which was a precursor to the war itself:

> I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war which resulted as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory.[2]

The issue of slavery, which was also deeply implicit in the war, inflamed New England in the 1840s and 1850s. Grant was convinced that the U.S.–Mexican War was one of the root causes of the American Civil War. He stated that "the occupation, separation and annexation [of Texas] were ... a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union."[3]

The results of the war are still evident today. Having lost the war, Mexico was forced to surrender to the United States more than half a million square miles of its territory, i.e., the lands which now constitute California, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Colorado. The war also left a lasting—and continuing—residue

of bitterness in the minds of many Mexicans, who felt that their honor had been trampled under foot by their aggressive, more powerful, self-centered, and racist northern neighbor.

The U.S.–Mexican War featured both land and sea campaigns in and along the Pacific Coast, but these have not received a great deal of detailed attention when compared to other theaters of the war. There is one notable exception: Neal Harlow's exhaustively thorough 499-page book (with 68 pages of endnotes), entitled *California Conquered: The Annexation of a Mexican Province, 1846–1850*. This work, first begun in the 1930s, was published in part in 1950 and finally appeared in its present form in 1982.

The California campaigns have been treated only very briefly, if at all, in many other books. To take one example, Philip Katcher's short but useful *Men-at-Arms* monograph on the uniforms, equipment, and organization of the U.S.–Mexican War has been reprinted thirteen times since it was first published in 1976, but it still contains only one brief paragraph on these campaigns.[4]

The bottom line here is, as Richard W. Amero, an award-winning historian of the war, put it succinctly in 1984, "most historians of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) spend *hours* describing the invasion of Mexico and *minutes* summarizing events in Alta California."[5]

Two closely related components of the Pacific campaigns were the deployments of U.S. Navy ships and of amphibious Marine Corps forces. Some nautical definitions may be helpful now:

- In 19th century nautical terminology, a ship was a large vessel with three masts, with tops and yards on each. To keep matters as simple as possible, however, in this book "ship" is often used in general terms to mean any vessel that could carry sizeable numbers of men and supplies for a considerable distance.
- The prefix "USS" stands for "United States ship," as in "the USS *Portsmouth*."
- The Pacific Squadron was a unit of the U.S. Navy and will be discussed in several places in this book.
- A ship's boat could be any one of a number of relatively light small craft carried aboard a ship, powered by oars or sails,

and used to transport personnel and goods between ship and shore.

Although very few historians have written at any length about naval operations in the Pacific theater of the Mexican-American War, there are at least two useful monographs (see the bibliography): K. Jack Bauer's book *Surfboats and Horse Marines*, published by the United States Naval Institute in 1969, and Gabrielle M. Neufeld Santelli's "Marines in the Mexican War," published as an Occasional Paper in 1991 by the History and Museums Division of the Marine Corps.

Despite the great controversy the war generated at the time, it has since then been overshadowed by the American Civil War for so long that today many readers will know very little, if anything at all, about it. Indeed, it has even been labeled by one scholar as "America's Forgotten War."[6]

This is especially true of the "conquest of California," as contemporaries put it. The use of this phrase in a public document dates at least from 1847, when Carey & Hart, a Philadelphia publisher, printed a book by James Madison Cutts entitled *The Conquest of California and New Mexico, by the Forces of the United States, in the Years 1846 & 1847.* In his Introduction, Cutts modestly explained why he wrote this historically useful book:

> The purpose here is to sketch the geographical and historical outlines with equal impartiality and with such fidelity as the records now admit of; so that the Public may have before them an unpretending, yet useful *compendium*. At least, such is the Author's only design, and this he hopes to accomplish satisfactorily, the more so that he makes no literary pretensions.[7]

It is clear today that the "conquest of California" differs fundamentally in scale and in character from clashes in other theaters of the U.S.–Mexican War. It takes place on a more intimate and geographically more constricted stage. It does not have many dramatic death-or-glory scenes, being characterized instead by a series of small-scale, low-level incidents. Nevertheless, as the U.S. Navy chaplain and *alcalde* (mayor) of Monterey Walter Colton (1797–1851) would remark (he is such an excellent contemporary source that he will be quoted frequently in this book simply as "Colton"),

> The war here is not on a great scale, but it impinges, at certain points with terrific energy. It is not always the magnitude of the field and of the interests at issue, which most severely test the resources of the general. This California war has to be carried on by means which requires consummate tact, coolness, and courage.
>
> It is an idle dream to suppose the Californians will not fight; give them faithful and competent leaders, and they evince a dashing bravery which lifts them immeasurably above contempt. He who presumes on their timidity will learn his error when it may be too late.[8]

A total of 17,435 Americans died during the U.S.–Mexican War, about two-thirds (11,550) from illness or other non-combat causes.[9] There are no firm figures on total Mexican losses, but about 25,000 Mexicans are thought to have been killed or wounded in the war.[10] Remarkably, however, there were very few American or Mexican casualties during the California campaigns themselves. Many towns in the Californias immediately surrendered without a shot being fired by either side. The modest amount of fighting that did occur involved only small groups of *Californios* who were opposed to the American invasion, and equally small groups of American soldiers, Marines, militiamen, and sailors who supported it.

There was in fact only one "real" battle in the California campaigns—the bloody battle of San Pascual on 6 December 1846. Historical accounts vary slightly but it appears that in that fight, out of a total of 153 Americans involved, only 18 were killed and 13 were wounded; on the other side, out of 75 *Californios*, none was killed, 12 were wounded, and one was captured. In fact, much of the "action" in the California campaigns simply boils down to verbal, political, and military posturing.

These were skills practiced by Mexican and American leaders alike but in which the Mexicans often had the upper hand. For example, upon learning of the Bear Flag Revolt in northern California, which will be discussed later, Pío Pico (1801–1894), the last Mexican governor of California, exhorted his fellow citizens—from the safety of his own home base in southern California—with these ringing words:

> Fly, Mexicans, in all haste in pursuit of the treacherous foe; follow him to the farthest wilderness; punish his audacity; and in case we fail, let us form a cemetery where posterity may remember to the glory of Mexican history the heroism of her sons, as is remembered the glory won by

the death of that little band of citizens posted at the Pass of Thermopylae under General Leonidas.[11]

In this book, the Introduction outlines, very briefly and as an essential first step, the causes and conduct of the war considered as a whole. The text itself is buttressed by extensive quotations from contemporary sources. In the opinion of the authors, these quotations are of great importance because they give not only local color but also invaluable "I-was-there" personal insights into the war. The text provides background information on the region and, in chapters of varying lengths, then looks at the two now-nearly-forgotten Pacific Coast campaigns of the war, namely, the California campaigns ashore and the operations of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Squadron at sea and on land.

One of the goals of this book is to introduce the reader to a wide range of contemporary men and women. Biographical sketches, often by using flashbacks to elucidate the past and flash-forwards to see what the future will hold for them, appear when or shortly after a person's name is mentioned for the first time.

A great deal of biographical material is available on the men of this era, but much less on the women. When in the early 1870s the celebrated historian, compiler, and editor Hubert Howe Bancroft (1832–1918),[12] who will be quoted here frequently, sent out his interviewers to collect oral histories from the remaining pre-statehood gentry of California, the interviewers usually wanted to meet with the men of a household. If the men were not available, however, the interviewers would then talk with the women instead. The long-delayed but eventual result of their labors was a remarkable 2006 study *Testimonios: Early California Through the Eyes of Women, 1851–1848*, by Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz.

In a few cases, modern punctuation has been substituted within 19th century quotations to improve readability, but this never affects the meaning of the quotations themselves. Lengthy quotations have often been subdivided or lightly edited for ease of reading. Endnotes have been used very generously here, both for attribution and to elaborate on little-known points which are relevant but which might otherwise detract from the flow of the text. The selected chronology will help keep dates, personalities, and events in their proper order.

It now remains for the authors of this book to extend their sincere thanks for the advice and encouragement so kindly provided by Professor Richard Griswold del Castillo of San Diego State University; by Ken Sullivan, Director of Library and Instructional Technology at Western Nevada College in Carson City, Nevada; by Pat Regains, Business and Government Librarian at the University of Nevada in Reno; and by Professor Linda Arnold of Virginia Tech. However, any oversights or errors in this book are of course the authors' own responsibility alone.

Introduction
Causes and Conduct of the U.S.–Mexican War

In the United States, this conflict is variously known as the U.S.–Mexican War, the Mexican-American War, the Mexican War, the Invasion of Mexico, the U.S. Intervention, or the U.S. War Against Mexico. In Mexico, names for the conflict include *La Interevención Norteamericana* (The North American Intervention), *La Guerra de Defensa* (The Defensive War), *La Invasión Estadounidense* (The United States Invasion), and *La Guerra del 47* (The War of '47).

These sharply differing names reflect the fact that the United States saw the war as an inevitable conflict between different national perceptions. From the American point of view, the United States was clearly in the right. Mexico, on the other hand, was convinced that it had been attacked unjustly and without provocation. For better or for worse, Mexico's acute sense of honor ruled out the possibility of any surrender of its "national heritage," i.e., of Mexican territory, to the United States. The upshot was that Mexico felt that it had no choice but to go to war against its hostile and far more powerful northern neighbor.

Some Mexican army officers did in fact realize that, given the many weaknesses of Mexico and the many strengths of the United States, Mexico was virtually certain to be defeated in such a conflict. However, these men were not recruited for their analytical abilities and were not expected to engage in deep geopolitical thinking. Most of them had joined the army purely for social and political reasons. When war broke out, there were as many as 24,000 officers, many of them on half-pay

and therefore not on active duty, plus some 20,000 illiterate, poorly-trained, badly-treated, and ill-armed enlisted men.

Nor did Mexico have any small-arms factories of its own. It had to equip its troops with obsolescent, discarded European firearms, almost all of them flintlock muskets, which were not very reliable.[1] A few words on firearms and artillery may be useful here:

- In flintlock firearms, a piece of flint flies forward when the trigger is pressed and, upon striking an angled piece of steel, sends a shower of sparks which ignite the priming powder in the priming pan. This burns fiercely and ignites the main gunpowder charge in the barrel. If the priming powder does not ignite the main charge, however, the result is a "flash in the pan" and in this case the weapon will not fire.
- The bore (i.e., the inside) of a barrel of a musket is smooth, not rifled. A musket is much easier and faster to load than a rifle, but much less accurate because the lead ball, i.e., the bullet, is not forced to spin in flight and thus to stabilize itself.
- In percussion firearms, when the trigger is pulled a small explosive device known as a "cap" is struck by the falling hammer and ignites the charge of gunpowder in the barrel of the weapon. A percussion firearm is inherently more reliable and more accurate than a flintlock.
- The cannons of the American artillery arm had a longer range than Mexican artillery pieces and fired deadlier projectiles. The Mexican guns used such inferior gunpowder that their cannonballs traveled slowly enough for American troops to see them in the air and dodge them. Thanks to rigorous training and frequent practice, American artillerymen could set up, fire, and move their cannons much more quickly than the Mexicans could handle theirs. Indeed, American gunners were so fast that their artillery units became known as the "flying artillery." The net result was that, as the military writer John S.D. Eisenhower put it, "in the artillery arm, at least, the American army was the peer of any army in the world."[2]

In contrast to the inferior weapons in the hands of Mexican troops, the U.S. Army's Model 1841 percussion rifle was the most reliable and accurate firearm of its time. Shipments of this new rifle reached New Orleans in time to supply a regiment of volunteers who would subsequently be known as the "Mississippi Rifles."

The profound weaknesses of the Mexican army, its poorly-trained and poorly-equipped troops, and its concomitant feeble fire power were exacerbated by the lack of a separate and competent navy. From 1821 until 1939, the navy coexisted, together with the Mexican army, in the Ministry of War, but apparently did not engage in any major actions. It was ineffective and in fact played no role whatsoever in the California campaigns.

As the writer David Nevin (1927–2011) put it in *The Mexican War* (1978), which is arguably the best short treatment of the war and probably the best-illustrated book on it,

> Independent from Spain for barely two decades, Mexico had already lost Texas. With that territory about to join the Union, Mexicans sensed that their expansionist neighbors to the north hungered for New Mexico and California as well. Mexican newspapers cried out for a preventive war, predicting that American conquerors would wipe out the Catholic religion and turn Mexicans into slaves.
>
> But Mexico was ill-prepared for war. Her generals fought each other for the presidency: her army bulged with untrained officers commanding underfed, underequipped Indian conscripts. Yet war fever forced one president out of office when he attempted to negotiate with Washington.[3]

A contemporary American army officer had a very low opinion of his Mexican counterparts, dismissing them simply as "young men of corrupt morals, dissipated habits, and with little courage or enterprise ... they never LEAD their men."[4]

In much the same vein, the British minister (a senior diplomatic official) in Washington, D.C., wrote home in April 1846: "The officers ... are, as a Corps, the worst perhaps to be found in any part of the world. They are totally ignorant of their duty."[5]

Nevertheless, Mexico's senior politicians and military leaders were not stupid. They realized full well that any surrender of Mexican territory to the United States—that is, before Mexico was actually defeated in combat by the Americans—would be a political death sentence for