

Chapter 9

War with Mexico

Sixty-two mounted soldiers accompanied Captain Thornton on a scouting expedition on the evening of April 25, 1846. The men were just north of the Rio Grande River deep inside of territory claimed by both Mexico and the United States. Their orders were to investigate a report that Mexican forces had crossed the river. Thornton rode to within three miles of the enemy's camp when his Mexican guide refused to go any further claiming that there were too many Mexican troops in the area. Proceeding another two miles, Thornton approached a ranch house surrounded on two sides by a thicket and on a third by the Rio Grande itself. This was a perfect spot for an ambush. Suddenly shots rang out and several soldiers dropped from their saddles. Thornton's party had blundered into a force of 1,600 Mexican soldiers and were quickly surrounded. With eleven dead and no hope of escape, Thornton surrendered to the superior Mexican force. Learning of these events on the next day, Thornton's commander, General Zachary Taylor, reported to Washington that hostilities had commenced.

On May 6th, President James Polk received a batch of dispatches from General Taylor containing news only to April 15th. That night the President confided to his diary that no actual collision between Mexican and American forces had taken place, though the probabilities were that hostilities might take place soon. On the 7th of May, unbeknownst to the President, General Taylor attacked the Mexican troops north of the Rio Grande, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. Taylor resumed battle two days later at Palo Alto, and again forced the Mexicans to retreat. That night the General reported to his commander-in-chief, the enemy had re-crossed the river, and would not molest U.S. troops again.

President Polk Consults With His Cabinet

On the same day, Saturday, May 9th, 1846, President Polk met with his cabinet. The main item on the agenda: should Congress be asked to declare war against Mexico? Polk had pondered this issue for some time, and, in spite of the absence of news from Texas, was prepared to request a declaration of war for the following reasons:

1. Immediately after the United States annexed Texas in March 1845, Mexico recalled her ambassador and broke off relations.
2. Mexican officials made warlike and threatening statements against the United States
3. Mexico owed American citizens over 3 million dollars for property damaged during several revolutions and uprisings. Pleading bankruptcy, Mexico stopped payments on these debts.
4. Mexican officials refused to receive the American envoy, John Slidell, after word of his instructions leaked out. Slidell had been sent to Mexico in order to settle the boundary dispute, and to purchase New Mexico and California. He had been authorized to offer 25 million dollars for California, 5 million dollars for New Mexico, and U.S. assumption of Mexico's debts to America in exchange for recognition of the Rio Grande boundary.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

With one exception, members of Polk's cabinet agreed that the above were ample reasons for a declaration of war. Only Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, wanted evidence of a specific act of aggression before waging war. Not deterred by this single objection, Polk adjourned the cabinet meeting to prepare a war message for Congress.

At six o'clock that evening, news of the April 25th ambush, but not the subsequent battles, arrived in Washington. Armed with this information, Polk retired for the evening. The next day was Sunday, May 10th. Except for two hours in church, the President spent the entire day drafting a message constructed around the attack upon Thornton's men.

Polk's War Message

. . . Texas, by the final action of our Congress, had become an integral part of our Union. The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio [Grande]de Norte to be the boundary of that Republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended and exercised beyond the Nueces. The country between that river and the Del Norte had been represented in the Congress and in the convention of Texas, had thus taken part in the act of annexation itself, and is now included within one of our Congressional districts. Our own Congress had, moreover, with great unanimity, by the act approved December 31, 1845, recognized the country beyond the Nueces as a part of our territory by including it within our own revenue system, and a revenue officer to reside within that district has been appointed by and with the advice of the Senate. It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country. Accordingly, on the 13th of January last instructions were issued to the general in command of these troops to occupy the left bank of the Del Norte. This river, which is the southwestern boundary of the state of Texas, is an exposed frontier. . .

The movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made by the commanding general under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive Acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens and to regard the relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful.

. . . .

Response by Congressman Davis

Sir, if the bill contained any recitation upon that point in truth and justice it should be that this war was begun by the President. The river Nueces is the true western boundary of Texas. The country between that stream and the Del Norte [Rio Grande] is part of Mexico; and that Power had people and establishments in it. Months ago the President, of his own will, orders General Taylor and his army to take post at Corpus Christi, on the west bank of the Nueces, where they remained until a considerable time after the beginning of this session of Congress. In March last, under the positive orders of the President, he moves through the disputed country upon the Del Norte. The Mexican authorities meet him at several points with the declaration that he has invaded their country, and with protests against the aggression. They warn him that unless he retires east of the Nueces, he will be deemed to be making war upon Mexico, and they will resort to force. He refers to the positive orders of the Executive, and the execution of them he presses on to Matamoras; strongly fortifies a position overlooking the city; and mounts a battery of canon within 300 yards of it, bearing upon its public square, and from whence he could, in a few hours, batter it down. He then blockades the port of Matamoras, orders off English and American vessels, and directs the capture of a Spanish schooner. The Mexican

. . . On [the 24th of April] General Arista . . . communicated to General Taylor that “he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them.” A party of dragoons of 63 men and officers were on the same day dispatched from the American camp up the Rio Del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, “became engaged with a large body of the troops, and after a short affair, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender. . . .

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood on American soil.

As war exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself. we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate . . . the honor, the rights and the interests of our country. . . .

commander treats all these as acts of war; and on the 25th of April, General Taylor is informed, by a messenger from the Mexican camp, that hostilities exist, that the Mexicans will prosecute them according to the usages of civilized nations. That night a detachment of the Mexican army crosses the Rio Grande, Grande, General Taylor sends out a scouting party to reconnoiter, which attacks the Mexicans and is defeated and captured by the Mexicans, and thus war is raging in bloody earnestness. It is our own President who began this war.⁴⁴

45

The Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo

The war with Mexico lasted for nearly three years. In several bloody battles, Taylor beat back Mexico's attempts to recapture her northern provinces. In the meantime, Colonel Stephen Kearney captured Sante Fe and then proceeded overland to California. He arrived to find that American settlers had already overthrown their Mexican rulers. Thus by January 1847, the United States had gained control of New Mexico and California. It took an invasion of Mexico itself by General Winfred Scott, however, to impress the hopelessness of its cause upon the Mexican government. General Scott fought his way from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, and the enemy capital fell on September 14th. Four months later, Nicholas B. Trist completed a peace agreement. The treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo granted the United States almost the same terms rejected by Mexico three years before. For recognition of the Rio Grande boundary and for all of New Mexico and California, the United States agreed to assume Mexico's debts to American citizens

⁴⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong. 1st Session, p. 794.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Henry Steele Commager ed., *Documents of American History*, Appleton-Century Crofts, New York, 1963pp. 310-11.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

and to pay Mexico 15 million dollars rather than the 25 million that James Polk had authorized Slidell to offer.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Was the United States or was Mexico the aggressor in the Mexican-American war. Consider:
 - a. Whether the soil on which blood was shed really belonged to the US
 - b. Were there other legitimate reasons the US had for going to war against Mexico.
 - c. Should the US rather than Mexico own the land acquired in the war?



Fighting during the Mexican War