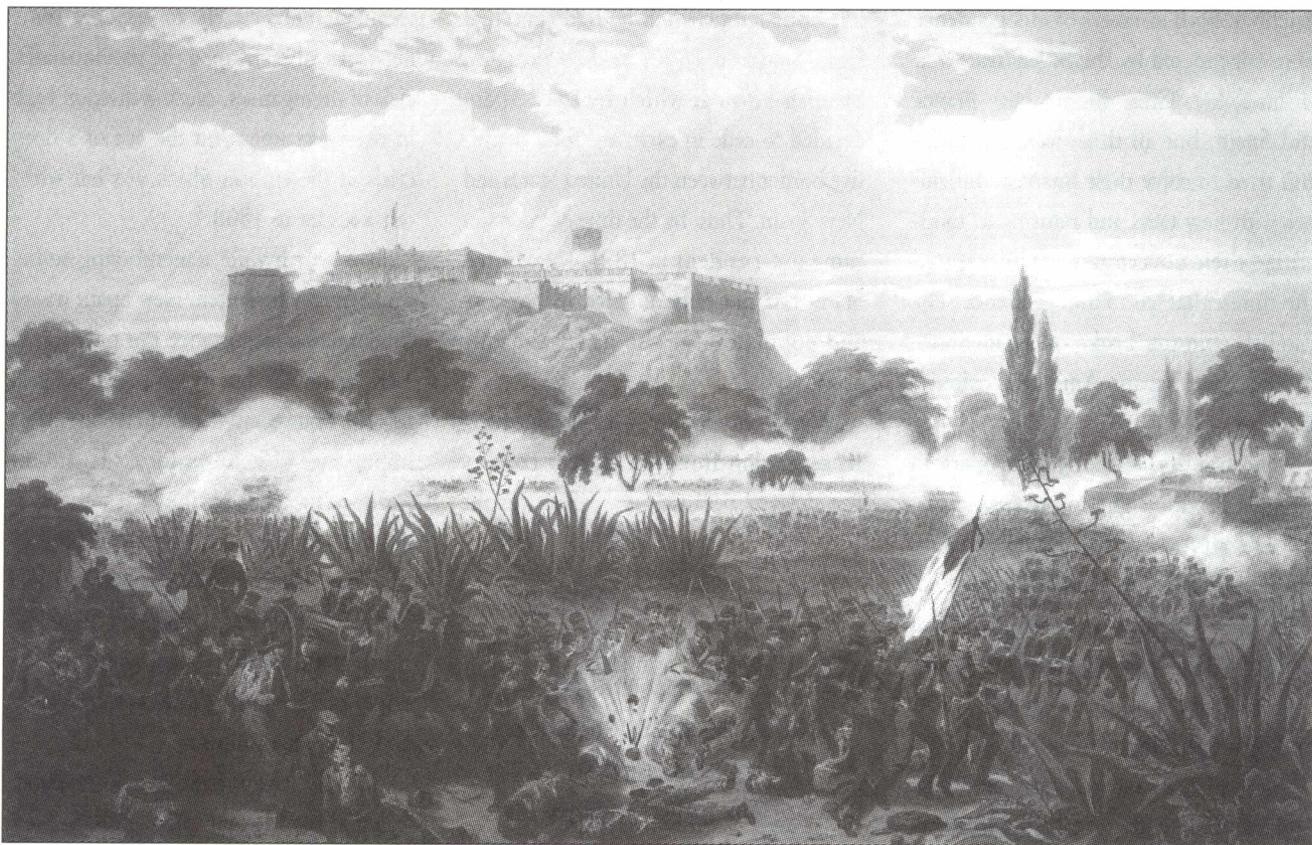


An Inevitable Disaster Foretold

The 1846-1847 War with the United States

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Carlos Nebel, *Assault on Chapultepec-Quitman's Attack*, c.1851 (lithograph).

One 14th of September, 150 years ago, U.S. troops launched the occupation of Mexico City.

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The lithograph was taken from page 90 of the book *Chapultepec. Historia y Presencia*, edited by Mario de la Torre, privately published by Smurfit Cartón y Papel de México in 1988. It has been reprinted here by authorization of the Institute for Historical Research's Rafael García Granados Library.

Eyewitness Carlos María de Bustamante wrote in his diary, "The Republic of Mexico, its independence and freedom have all ended." Perhaps the bitterness of the time, and the bitterness handed down to Mexicans today, originates not only in the undoubted injustice of the war, but also from not having won a single victory, from the division of the political class and the indifference of both citizenry

and government officials as long as the fight did not affect them directly. Historians of today must contend with another question: How did the rich and prosperous New Spain, "the most precious jewel in the Spanish Crown," turn into the weak and impotent republic of 1846 in just a few decades? By contrast, the 13 Anglo-American colonies, which when they became independent in 1775 were

practically insignificant, had become an ambitious and dynamic republic that would seize half its neighbor's territory. It is worthwhile contributing to an explanation that can free us from simplistic, defeatist answers that still affect us today.

The 50 years between the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the war was a half century of blessings for the United States and misfortunes for its southern neighbor. Both instances of independence were engendered by the Seven Years War (1756-1763). Great Britain beat France and Spain, but all three went bankrupt and tried to solve their financial difficulties with new taxes and reforms to modernize their government. This created the unrest that led to independence. The English colonies broke off immediately and the Hispano-American colonies later.

The priority of the Anglo-American struggle for the right to representation, in the context of the Enlightenment, ensured them European sympathies and, since the 13 colonies were less important to Great Britain than their productive "West Indies," and they also had France and Spain as allies, their war of independence was short and relatively bloodless. Great Britain, with a weak, diplomatically isolated government, decided to recognize U.S. independence in 1783, allowing it to enter the concert of nations as a full member. It also granted the new nation a generous border that included the part of Louisiana Britain had already won from France.

The new state was founded not without difficulties, but its brilliant politicians managed to keep it moving forward. The first government experiment, the confederation, failed, but a group of its

officials convened the Constitutional Convention which founded the federation in 1789. In that same year the French Revolution broke out, beginning a quarter century of European wars which allowed the United States to experiment with its government without interference, to trade actively as a neutral nation, to absorb European immigrants, to take advantage of Napoleon's 1803 offer to sell Louisiana (which he had snatched from Spain in 1800) and to threaten Spanish Florida, which in 1817 Spain decided to cede in exchange for a definitive border between the United States and New Spain. Thus, by the time Mexico became independent in 1821, the United States had not only doubled its territory and population, it also had a dynamic economy.

Mexico would not have the same luck. Its separation from the mother country was delayed because New Spain was the

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empire's most important kingdom and therefore they had very close ties. New Spain's prosperity had begun to fade by the eighteenth century since the modernization of the Spanish state had shaken New Spain's society, government and economy, and the new taxes and monopolies caused great distress. In addition, the reforms reorganized the territory in intendancies¹ which, although they corresponded more closely to regional trade networks, also stripped the previous officials of prerogatives, causing division high in the government on the eve of a deep crisis of the empire which was left without a leader in 1808.²

It is worthwhile remembering something usually forgotten: New Spain was of fundamental importance not only for its own metropolis, but increasingly for Great Britain, France and the United States. The importance of its silver for trade and for European wars had brought it into international markets. During the Napoleonic Wars, silver from New Spain became key for the contending forces. This would make it vulnerable, turning it into the target of the trading powers's ambitions and U.S. expansionism.

In the early nineteenth century, Spain's bankruptcy had pulled New Spain down with it. Its unfortunate wars had plagued it with taxation and both voluntary and forced loans that affected all classes of society, and its income poured out to the Caribbean or the Iberian peninsula, decapitalizing it. An 1804 decree ordered that all the Catholic Church's liquid assets be sent to the Crown as a kind of forced loan, and, since the Church served as the bank of the realm, this measure eliminated credit to agriculture, mining and trade and

caused general discontent. On the eve of independence, the old kingdom of New Spain was in crisis: indebted, decapitalized, with a fragmented elite and a beggared population. It was in these conditions that it would meet the crisis of 1808.

New Spain's very importance made for a long and bloody struggle for independence without any external support whatsoever, given the general hostility to fights for freedom after the excesses of the French Revolution. The 1812 Constitution, an encouragement to those who aspired to autonomy, was suspended by Fernando VII in 1814, further alienating people's loyalty to the Spanish Crown. This and the weariness of the general populace vis-à-vis excesses by both royalists and insurgents allowed Agustín de Iturbide to create the coalition of forces that consummated the independence.³

The new state was founded in deplorable conditions. The conflict had cost the country half its work force; its agriculture and trade were ruined; the mines, flooded; the roads full of bandits. Bankruptcy, decapitalization and political inexperience were feeble bases to build a state on, especially one that covered an immense stretch of territory bereft of communications with a heterogeneous, badly distributed population. This, together with the siege by the commercial powers, made Mexico the most threatened country in the hemisphere. The Great Alliance's exaggerated emphasis on the legitimacy of existing laws was an obstacle to Mexico's recognition, and its mother country did not grant recognition until late 1836, forcing it to go into debt to defend itself against attempts of reconquest.

The United States awoke ambivalent sentiments: admiration for its political sys-

tem and development and fear of the menace of its expansionism. Mexico sought to emulate it, and the Mexican Constitution—although modified by regionalism, making it more radical—was inspired in the U.S. document. Thus, the federal government that was set up was very weak, making it impossible for it to function. Dependent for income on payments from the states of the new republic determined according to their wealth and population size—payments which were only irregularly made—the federal government, reduced to financing itself on customs fees, soon fell into the clutches of moneylenders. It also imitated the United States' colonization policy. Since it placed high hopes on it, Mexico offered [colonists] better conditions for making Texas a model for its uninhabited North, but the results were disastrous.

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son for complaint. Their declaration of independence, aimed at getting sympathy and support from the United States, imitated the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, complaining of tyranny and not being able to follow their own religious beliefs, forgetting that they had entered as Catholics. Using centralism as a pretext meant forgetting that the first colonists had sworn allegiance to centralist monarchies. Almost all their complaints had been favorably dealt with by 1834; they were even authorized to use English in administrative and legal matters, and were granted the right to trial by jury.⁴ To favor Texas separating from Mexico, the annexationists manipulated the colonists' fear of Mexico's anti-slavery policies and the unhappiness caused by the opening of the Customs Office when the period of tax exemption for the area ended. With the open but indirect support of U.S. President Jackson, carelessness by Mexican President General Antonio López de Santa Anna ensured independence, since General Vicente Filisola obeyed orders from his captive president and led the Mexican troops south of the Rio Grande; later, conditions in Mexico made it impossible to organize another expedition.⁵

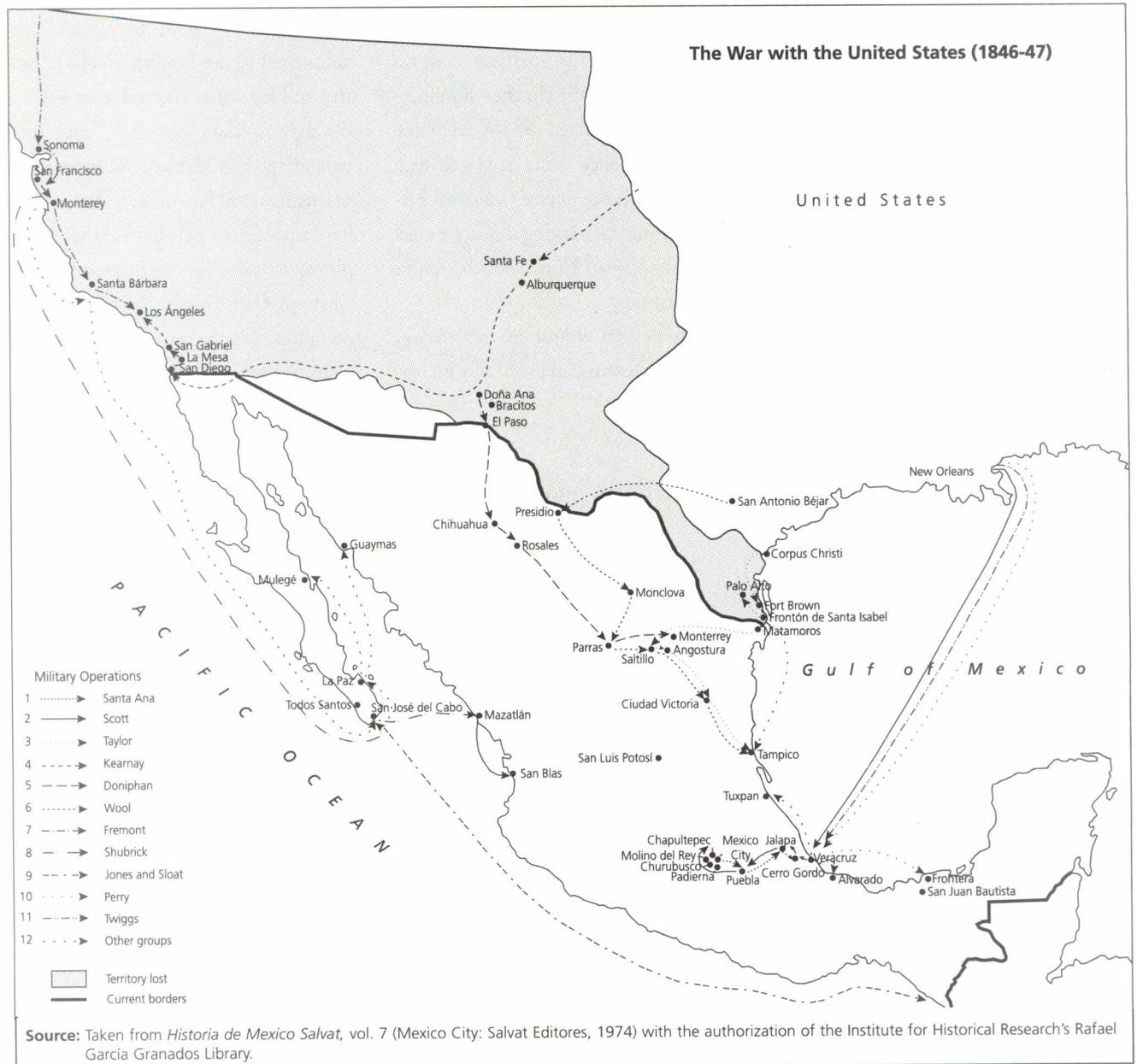
U.S. recognition of Texas independence contributed to the deterioration of relations between the two countries, in addition to the problem of war reparations. The worst thing was that by the 1840s, the asymmetry of 1821 had become even sharper. The U.S. population was now over 20 million, while Mexico had only 7 million people. Both countries had to deal with different internal political factions and regional division, but the expansionist fever neutralized

them in the United States while in Mexico it rendered federalism, centralism and even temporary dictatorships unable to function (1841-1843). The moderate Mexican government, aware of its inability to wage a war, began negotiations in 1845 with Texas, and, therefore, when the United States annexed it, the moderate government had to resign. Mexico, faced with two overwhelming

threats, war with the United States and the Spanish conspiracy to set up a monarchy, without allies, could do nothing but avoid provoking hostilities according to British counsel. But, U.S. President James Polk was determined to risk a war to acquire California and New Mexico, although he would have preferred to avoid the war and acquire the territories through bribes or a simple purchase. Polk simu-

lated an attempt at negotiations, but his envoy arrived with inappropriate credentials and offers of purchase; when the envoy was not received, Polk ordered Zachary Taylor's army to advance toward the Rio Grande into Mexican—or at the very least, disputed—territory.

Once the war was unleashed, the results were predictable. The first defeats increased centralism's discredit and in



the midst of the war, federalism was reestablished, making the organization of defense efforts even more difficult. The Mexican government had neither material nor human resources; its artillery and armament were obsolete; its officers, unprofessional; and its soldiers, raw recruits. The U.S. forces had a professional army and modern artillery, sanitation and clean-up services, as well as volunteers ready to be trained. This made it possible for it to dispatch several armies at once to attack simultaneously on different fronts, while the navy blockaded Mexico's ports, cutting off the Mexican government's main source of income.

With a small population and defenseless, New Mexico and California were occupied almost without resistance. The sacrifices made in the remainder of the territory turned out to be futile. The defeats demoralized a badly fed, badly armed and unpaid army that watched as the wounded were abandoned and had to march from the north to the east to join battle with fresh troops. Impotence increased political differences. Mexico's different states did not understand that the U.S. objective was "the walls of the Montezumas" and they did not support the national government to defend the capital. The general populace, seeing it abandoned by the army, tried desperately to defend it, which resulted in rivers of blood being spilt.

Meanwhile, U.S. victories had produced a movement at home clamoring for absorbing all of Mexico, although Polk was satisfied with a goodly piece. However, U.S. Commissioner Nicholas Trist disobeyed his orders to return to Washington for new instructions and negotiated a peace treaty. Later, Trist's wife would write

that, just as they were about to sign the treaty...one of the Mexicans, Don Bernardo Couto, remarked to him [Trist],

"This must be a proud moment for you; no less proud for you than it is humiliating for us." To this Mr. Trist replied, "We are making peace, let that be our thought." "But," said he to us in relating it, "could those Mexicans have seen into my heart at that moment, they would have known that my feeling of shame as an American was far stronger than theirs could be as Mexicans. For though it would not have done for me to say so there, that was a thing for every right-minded American to be ashamed of, and I was of it. This had been my feeling at all our conferences and especially at moments when I had felt it necessary to insist upon things which they were averse to. Had my course at such moments been governed by my conscience as a man, and my sense of justice as an individual American, I should have yielded in every instance. Nothing prevented my doing so but the conviction that the treaty would then be one which there would be no chance for the acceptance of by our government. My object, throughout was, not to obtain all I could, but on the contrary to make the treaty as little exacting as possible from Mexico, as was compatible with its being accepted at home. In this I was governed by two considerations: one was the iniquity of the war, as an abuse of power on our part; the other was that the more disadvantageous the treaty was made for Mexico, the stronger would be the ground of opposition to it in the Mexican Congress by the party who had boasted of its ability to frustrate any peace measures."⁶

Disobedience would be very costly for Trist. By contrast, the treaty not only saved the nation—as Don Manuel de la Peña said—but it also averted the need to hand over even more territory to the United States. In any case, the country had learned a very painful lesson. A century and a half after the war, its memory should warn us about how important it is to always put the interests of Mexico before internal divisions and partisan differences. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Between 1786 and 1812, New Spain was divided into 12 intendancies, an administrative district or province; each intendancy was headed by an intendente, the chief administrative official, like a governor, who also controlled the district treasury. [Editor's Note.]

² In 1808, the Spanish people heroically resisted Joseph Bonaparte's invasion, expelling the intruder, but leaving the Spanish Crown unoccupied for a short time. [Editor's Note.]

³ In 1821, Agustín de Iturbide, a criollo attached to the royalist forces, managed to establish an alliance with the insurgents led by Vicente Guerrero, who was finally able to force the capitulation of the last viceroy of New Spain, Juan O'Donojú. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ In Mexico the legal norm was and continues to be trial before a judge; trial by jury is non-existent. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ In 1836, Santa Anna led troops to San Antonio to enforce Mexican customs regulations and, after his victory at the Alamo, engaged the army of the recently declared independent Texas, headed by Sam Houston. After practically defeating Houston, Santa Anna was taken prisoner during a surprise attack made when he and his troops were asleep. Houston then extracted from him the recognition of Texan independence in return for his freedom. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ Robert W. Drexler, *Guilty of Making Peace. A Biography of Nicholas P. Trist* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 130-131.