

We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God

By HOWARD ZINN

COL. ETHAN ALLEN HITCHCOCK, a professional soldier, graduate of the Military Academy, commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, a reader of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Hegel, Spinoza, wrote in his diary:

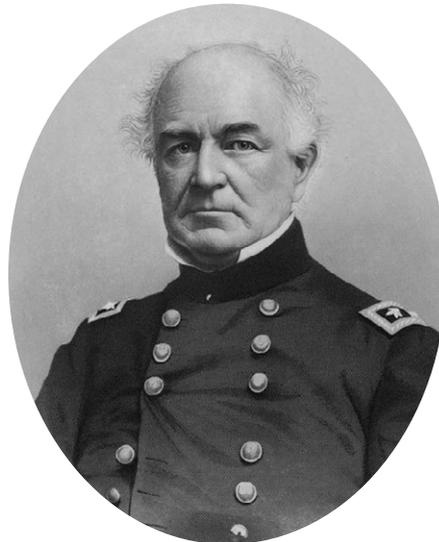
Fort Jesup, La., June 30, 1845. Orders came last evening by express from Washington City directing General Taylor to move without any delay to ... take up a position on the banks of or near the Rio Grande, and he is to expel any armed force of Mexicans who may cross that river. Bliss read the orders to me last evening hastily at tattoo. I have scarcely slept a wink, thinking of the needful preparations. ... Violence leads to violence, and if this movement of ours does not lead to others and to bloodshed, I am much mistaken.

Hitchcock was not mistaken. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase had doubled the territory of the United States, extending it to the Rocky Mountains. To the southwest was Mexico, which had won its independence in a revolutionary war against Spain in 1821. Mexico was then an even larger country than it is now, since it included what are now Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, and part of Colorado. After agitation, and aid from the United States, Texas broke off from Mexico in 1836 and declared itself the "Lone Star

Republic." In 1845, the U.S. Congress brought it into the Union as a state.

In the White House now was James Polk, a Democrat, an expansionist, who, on the night of his inauguration, confided to his secretary of the Navy that one of his main objectives was the acquisition of California. His order to General Taylor to move troops to the Rio Grande was a challenge to the Mexicans. It was not at all clear that the Rio Grande was the southern boundary of Texas, although Texas had forced the defeated Mexican general Santa Anna to say so when he was a prisoner. The traditional border between Texas and Mexico had been the Nueces River, about 150 miles to the north, and both Mexico and the United States had recognized that as the border. However, Polk, encouraging the Texans to accept annexation, had assured them he would uphold their claims to the Rio Grande.

Ordering troops to the Rio Grande, into territory inhabited by Mexicans, was clearly a provocation. Taylor's army marched in parallel columns across the open prairie, scouts far ahead and on the flanks, a train of supplies following. Then, along a narrow road, through a belt of thick chaparral, they arrived, March 28, 1846, in cultivated fields and thatched-roof huts hurriedly abandoned by the Mexican occupants, who had fled across the river to the city of Matamoros. Taylor set up camp, began construction of



Col. Ethan Allen Hitchcock

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a fort, and implanted his cannons facing the white houses of Matamoros, whose inhabitants stared curiously at the sight of an army on the banks of a quiet river.

‘Our Manifest Destiny’

The *Washington Union*, a newspaper expressing the position of President Polk and the Democratic party, had spoken early in 1845 on the meaning of Texas annexation: “Let the great measure of annexation be accomplished, and with it the questions of boundary and claims. For who can arrest the torrent that will pour onward to the West? The road to California will be open to us. Who will stay the march of our western people?”

It was shortly after that, in the summer of 1845, that John O’Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, used the phrase that became famous, saying it was “Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Yes, manifest destiny.

All that was needed in the spring of 1846 was a military incident to begin the war that Polk wanted. It came in April, when General Taylor’s quartermaster, Colonel Cross, while riding up the Rio Grande, disappeared. His body was found eleven days later, his skull smashed by a heavy blow. It was assumed he had been killed by Mexican guerrillas crossing the river.

The next day (April 25), a patrol of Taylor’s soldiers was surrounded and attacked by Mexicans, and wiped out: sixteen dead, others wounded, the rest captured. Taylor sent a dispatch to Polk: “Hostilities may now be considered as commenced.”

The Mexicans had fired the first shot. But they had done what the American government wanted, according to Colonel Hitchcock, who wrote in his diary, even before those first incidents:

I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors. ... We have not one par-

ticle of right to be here. ... It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses. ... My heart is not in this business ... but, as a military man, I am bound to execute orders.

On May 9, before news of any battles, Polk was suggesting to his cabinet a declaration of war. Polk recorded in his diary what he said to the cabinet meeting:

I stated ... that up to this time, as we knew, we had heard of no open act of aggression by the Mexican army, but that the danger was imminent that such acts would be committed. I said that in my opinion we had ample cause of war, and that it was impossible ... that I could remain silent much longer ... that the country was excited and impatient on the subject. ...

The country was not “excited and impatient.”

But the president was. When the dispatches arrived from General Taylor telling of casualties from the Mexican attack, Polk summoned the cabinet to hear the news, and they unanimously agreed he should ask for a declaration of war. Polk’s message to Congress was indignant: “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American

blood upon the American soil. ...”

Congress then rushed to approve the war message. The bundles of official documents accompanying the war message, supposed to be evidence for Polk’s statement, were not examined, but were tabled immediately by the House. Debate on the bill providing volunteers and money for the war was limited to two hours, and most of this was used up reading selected portions of the tabled documents, so that barely half an hour was left for discussion of the issues.

The Whig party also wanted California, but preferred to do it without war. Nevertheless,

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they would not deny men and money for the operation and so joined Democrats in voting overwhelmingly for the war resolution, 174 to 14. In the Senate there was debate, but it was limited to one day, and the war measure passed, 40 to 2, Whigs joining Democrats. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, who originally voted with “the stubborn 14,” later voted for war appropriations.

Abraham Lincoln of Illinois was not yet in Congress when the war began, but after his election in 1846 he had occasion to vote and speak on the war. His “spot resolutions” became famous—he challenged Polk to specify the exact spot where American blood was shed “on the American soil.” But he would not try to end the war by stopping funds for men and supplies. Speaking in the House on July 27, 1848, he said:

If to say “the war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President” be opposing the war, then the Whigs have very generally opposed it. ... The marching an army into the midst of a peaceful Mexican settlement, frightening the inhabitants away, leaving their growing crops and other property to destruction, to you may appear a perfectly amiable, peaceful, unprovoking procedure; but it does not appear so to us. ... But if, when the war had begun, and had become the cause of the country, the giving of our money and our blood, in common with yours, was support of the war, then it is not true that we have always opposed the war. With few individual exceptions, you have constantly had our votes here for all the necessary supplies. ...

A handful of antislavery Congressmen voted against all war measures, seeing the Mexican

campaign as a means of extending the southern slave territory. One of these was Joshua Giddings of Ohio, a fiery speaker, physically powerful, who called it “an aggressive, unholy, and unjust war.”

After Congress acted in May of 1846, there were rallies and demonstrations for the war in New York, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and many other places. Thousands rushed to volunteer for the army. The poet Walt Whitman wrote in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in the early days of the war: “Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised! ... Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!”

Accompanying all this aggressiveness was the idea that the United States would be giving the blessings of liberty and democracy to more people. This was intermingled with ideas of racial superiority, longings for the beautiful lands of New Mexico and California, and thoughts of commercial enterprise across the Pacific. *The New York Herald* said, in 1847: “The universal Yankee nation can regenerate and disenthral the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country.”

The *Congressional Globe* of February 11, 1847, reported:

Mr. Giles, of Maryland—I take it for granted, that we shall gain territory, and must gain territory, before we shut the gates of the temple of Janus. ... We must march from ocean to ocean. ... We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific ocean, and be bounded only by its roaring wave. ... It is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. ...

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Presidential candidate Gen. Zachary Taylor sits atop a mound of skulls in this 1848 cartoon criticizing his role in the U.S. war against Mexico.

Anti-War Sentiment

The American Anti-Slavery Society, on the other hand, said the war was “waged solely for the detestable and horrible purpose of extending and perpetuating American slavery throughout the vast territory of Mexico.” A 27-year-old Boston poet and abolitionist, James Russell Lowell, began writing satirical poems in the *Boston Courier* (they were later collected as the *Biglow Papers*). In them, a New England farmer, Hosea Biglow, spoke, in his own dialect, on the war:

*Ez fer war, I call it murder —
 — There you hev it plain an’ flat;
 I don’t want to go no furdur
 — Than my Testymnt fer that. ...
 They jest want this Californy
 — So’s to lug new slave-states in*

*To abuse ye, an’ to scorn ye,
 — An’ to plunder ye like sin.*

The war had barely begun, the summer of 1846, when a writer, Henry David Thoreau, who lived in Concord, Massachusetts, refused to pay his Massachusetts poll tax, denouncing the Mexican war. He was put in jail and spent one night there. His friends, without his consent, paid his tax, and he was released. Two years later, he gave a lecture, “Resistance to Civil Government,” which was then printed as an essay, “Civil Disobedience”:

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right. ... Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers ... marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.

His friend and fellow writer Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed, but thought it futile to protest. When Emerson visited Thoreau in jail and asked, “What are you doing in there?” it was reported that Thoreau replied, “What are you doing out there?”

The churches, for the most part, were either outspokenly for the war or timidly silent. The Reverend Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister in Boston, combined eloquent criticism of the war with contempt for the Mexican people, whom he called “a wretched people; wretched in their origin, history and character,” who must eventually give way as the Indians did. Yes, the United States should expand, he said, but not by war, rather by the power of her ideas, the pressure of her commerce, by “the steady advance of a superior race, with superior ideas and a better civilization. ...”

The racism of Parker was widespread. Congressman Delano of Ohio, an antislavery Whig, opposed the war because he was afraid of Americans mingling with an inferior people who “embrace all shades of color ... a sad compound of Spanish, English, Indian, and negro bloods ...

and resulting, it is said, in the production of a slothful, ignorant race of beings.”

As the war went on, opposition grew. The American Peace Society printed a newspaper, the *Advocate of Peace*, which published poems, speeches, petitions, sermons against the war, and eyewitness accounts of the degradation of army life and the horrors of battle. Considering the strenuous efforts of the nation’s leaders to build patriotic support, the amount of open dissent and criticism was remarkable. Antiwar meetings took place in spite of attacks by patriotic mobs.

As the army moved closer to Mexico City, the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* daringly declared its wishes for the defeat of the American forces: “Every lover of Freedom and humanity, throughout the world, must wish them [the Mexicans] the most triumphant success. ...”

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and an extraordinary speaker and writer, wrote in his Rochester newspaper the *North Star*, January 21, 1848, of “the present disgraceful, cruel, and iniquitous war with our sister republic. Mexico seems a doomed victim to Anglo Saxon cupidity and love of dominion.” Douglass was scornful of the unwillingness of opponents of the war to take real action (even the abolitionists kept paying their taxes):

No politician of any considerable distinction or eminence seems willing to hazard his popularity with his party ... by an open and unqualified disapprobation of the war. None seem willing to take their stand for peace at all risks; and all seem willing that the war should be carried on, in some form or other.

Where was popular opinion? It is hard to say. After the first rush, enlistments began to dwindle. Historians of the Mexican war have

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talked easily about “the people” and “public opinion.” Their evidence, however, is not from “the people” but from the newspapers, claiming to be the voice of the people. The *New York Herald* wrote in August 1845: “The multitude cry aloud for war.” The *New York Morning News* said “young and ardent spirits that throng the cities ... want but a

direction to their restless energies, and their attention is already fixed on Mexico.”

It is impossible to know the extent of popular support of the war. But there is evidence that many organized workingmen opposed the war. There were demonstrations of Irish workers in New York, Boston, and Lowell against the annexation of Texas. In May, when the war against Mexico began, New York workingmen called a meeting to oppose the war, and many Irish workers came. The meeting called the war a plot by slave owners and asked for the withdrawal of American troops from disputed territory. That year, a convention of the New England Workingmen’s Association condemned the war and announced they would “not take up arms to sustain the Southern slaveholder in robbing one-fifth of our countrymen of their labor.”

Some newspapers, at the very start of the war, protested. Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1846:

We can easily defeat the armies of Mexico, slaughter them by thousands. ... Who believes that a score of victories over Mexico, the “annexation” of half her provinces, will give us more Liberty, a purer Morality, a more prosperous Industry, than we now have? ... Is not Life miserable enough, comes not Death soon enough, without resort to the hideous enginery of War?

The Recruits

What of those who fought the war—the soldiers who marched, sweated, got sick, died? The Mexican soldiers. The American soldiers. We know little of the reactions of Mexican soldiers. We know much more about the American army—volunteers, not conscripts, lured by money and opportunity for social advancement via promotion in the armed forces. Half of General Taylor’s army were recent immigrants—Irish and German mostly. Their patriotism was not very strong. Indeed, many of them deserted to the Mexican side, enticed by money. Some enlisted in the Mexican army and formed their own battalion, the San Patrio (St. Patrick’s) Battalion.

At first there seemed to be enthusiasm in the army, fired by pay and patriotism. Martial spirit was high in New York, where the legislature authorized the governor to call 50,000 volunteers. Placards read “Mexico or Death.” There was a mass meeting of 20,000 people in Philadelphia. Three thousand volunteered in Ohio.

This initial spirit soon wore off. One young man wrote anonymously to the *Cambridge Chronicle*:

Neither have I the least idea of “joining” you, or in any way assisting the unjust war waging against Mexico. I have no wish to participate in such “glorious” butcheries of women and children as were displayed in the capture of Monterey, etc. Neither have I any desire to place myself under the dictation of a petty military tyrant, to every caprice of whose will I must yield implicit obedience. No sir-ee! ... Human butchery has had its day. ... And the time is rapidly approaching when the professional soldier will be placed on the same level as a bandit, the Bedouin, and the Thug.

There were extravagant promises and outright lies to build up the volunteer units. A man who wrote a history of the New York Volunteers declared: “Many enlisted for the sake of their families, having no employment, and having been offered ‘three months’ advance,’ and were promised that they could leave part of their pay for their families to draw in their absence. ... I boldly pronounce, that the whole Regiment was got up by fraud.”

By late 1846, recruitment was falling off, so physical requirements were lowered, and anyone bringing in acceptable recruits would get two dollars a head. Even this didn’t work. Congress in early 1847 authorized 10 new regiments of regulars, to serve for the duration of the war, promising them 100 acres of public land upon honorable discharge. But dissatisfaction continued.

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The Reality of Battle

And soon, the reality of battle came in upon the glory and the promises. On the Rio Grande before Matamoros, as a Mexican army of 5,000 under General Arista faced Taylor’s army of 3,000, the shells began to fly, and artilleryman Samuel French saw his first death in battle. John Weems describes it: “He hap-

pened to be staring at a man on horseback nearby when he saw a shot rip off the pommel of the saddle, tear through the man’s body, and burst out with a crimson gush on the other side.”

When the battle was over, 500 Mexicans were dead or wounded. There were perhaps 50 American casualties. Weems describes the aftermath: “Night blanketed weary men who fell asleep where they dropped on the trampled prairie grass, while around them other prostrate men from both armies screamed and groaned in agony from wounds. By the eerie light of torches the surgeon’s saw was going the livelong night.”

Away from the battlefield, in army camps, the romance of the recruiting posters was quickly

forgotten. The 2nd Regiment of Mississippi Rifles, moving into New Orleans, was stricken by cold and sickness. The regimental surgeon reported: “Six months after our regiment had entered the service we had sustained a loss of 167 by death, and 134 by discharges.” The regiment was packed into the holds of transports, 800 men into three ships. The surgeon continued:

The dark cloud of disease still hovered over us. The holds of the ships ... were soon crowded with the sick. The effluvia was intolerable. ... The sea became rough. ... Through the long dark night the rolling ship would dash the sick man from side to side bruising his flesh upon the rough corners of his berth. The wild screams of the delirious, the lamentations of the sick, and the melancholy groans of the dying, kept up one continual scene of confusion. ... Four weeks we were confined to the loathsome ships and before we had landed at the Brasos, we consigned 28 of our men to the dark waves.

Meanwhile, by land and by sea, Anglo-American forces were moving into California. A young naval officer, after the long voyage around the southern cape of South America, and up the coast to Monterey in California, wrote in his diary:

Asia ... will be brought to our very doors. Population will flow into the fertile regions of California. The resources of the entire country ... will be developed. ... The public lands lying along the route [of railroads] will be changed from deserts into gardens, and a large population will be settled. ...

It was a separate war that went on in California, where Anglo-Americans raided Spanish settlements, stole horses, and declared California separated from Mexico—the “Bear Flag Republic.” Indians lived there, and naval officer Revere gathered the Indian chiefs and spoke to them (as he later recalled):

I have called you together to have a talk with you. The country you inhabit no longer belongs to Mexico, but to a mighty nation whose territory extends from the great ocean you have all seen or heard of, to another great ocean thousands of miles toward the rising sun. ... Our armies are now in Mexico, and will soon conquer the whole country. But you have nothing to fear from us, if you do what is right ... if you are faithful to your new rulers. ... I hope you will alter your habits, and be industrious and frugal, and give up all the low vices which you practice. ... We shall watch over you, and give you true liberty; but beware of sedition, lawlessness, and all other crimes, for the army which shields can assuredly punish, and it will reach you in your most retired hiding places.

“It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right.”

General Kearny moved easily into New Mexico, and Santa Fe was taken without battle. An American staff officer described the reaction of the Mexican population to the U.S. Army’s entrance into the capital city:

Our march into the city ... was extremely warlike, with drawn sabers, and daggers in every look. ... As the American flag was raised, and the cannon boomed its glorious national salute from the hill, the pent-up emotion of many of the women could be suppressed no longer ... as the wail of grief arose above the din of our horses’ tread, and reached our ears from the depth of the gloomy-looking buildings on every hand.

That was in August. In December, Mexicans in Taos, New Mexico, rebelled against American rule. The revolt was put down and arrests were made. But many of the rebels fled and carried on sporadic attacks, killing a number of Americans, then hiding in the mountains. The American army pursued, and in a final desperate battle, in

which 600 to 700 rebels were engaged, 150 were killed, and it seemed the rebellion was now over.

In Los Angeles, too, there was a revolt. Mexicans forced the American garrison there to surrender in September 1846. The United States did not retake Los Angeles until January, after a bloody battle.

General Taylor had moved across the Rio Grande, occupied Matamoros, and now moved southward through Mexico. But his volunteers became more unruly on Mexican territory. Mexican villages were pillaged by drunken troops. Cases of rape began to multiply.

As the soldiers moved up the Rio Grande to Camargo, the heat became unbearable, the water impure, and sickness grew—diarrhea, dysentery, and other maladies—until 1,000 were dead. At first the dead were buried to the sounds of the “Dead March” played by a military band. Then the number of dead was too great, and formal military funerals ceased. Southward to Monterey and another battle, where men and horses died in agony, and one officer described the ground as “slippery with ... foam and blood.”

The U.S. Navy bombarded Veracruz in an indiscriminate killing of civilians. One of the Navy’s shells hit the post office, another a surgical hospital. In two days, 1,300 shells were fired into the city, until it surrendered. A reporter for the *New Orleans Delta* wrote: “The Mexicans variously estimate their loss at from 500 to 1,000 killed and wounded, but all agree that the loss among the soldiery is comparatively small and the destruction among the women and children is very great.”

Colonel Hitchcock, coming into the city, wrote: “I shall never forget the horrible fire of our mortars ... going with dreadful certainty ... often in the centre of private dwellings—it was awful. I shudder to think of it.” Still, Hitchcock, the dutiful

soldier, wrote for General Scott “a sort of address to the Mexican people” which was then printed in English and Spanish by the tens of thousands saying “we have not a particle of ill-will towards you ... we are here for no earthly purpose except the hope of obtaining a peace.”

It was a war of the American elite against the Mexican elite, each side exhorting, using, killing its own population as well as the other. The Mexican commander Santa Anna had crushed rebellion after rebellion, his troops also raping and plundering after victory. When Col. Hitchcock and Gen. Winfield Scott moved into Santa Anna’s estate, they found its walls full of ornate paintings. But half his army was dead or wounded.

General Scott moved toward the last battle—for Mexico City—with 10,000 soldiers. They were not anxious for battle. Three days’ march from Mexico City, at Jalapa, seven of his eleven regiments evaporated, their enlistment times up, the real-

ity of battle and disease too much for them.

On the outskirts of Mexico City, at Churubusco, Mexican and American armies clashed for three hours and thousands died on both sides. Among the Mexicans taken prisoner were sixty-nine U.S. Army deserters.

As often in war, battles were fought without point. After one such engagement near Mexico City, with terrible casualties, a marine lieutenant blamed Gen. Scott: “He had originated it in error and caused it to be fought, with inadequate forces, for an object that had no existence.”

In the final battle for Mexico City, Anglo-American troops took the height of Chapultepec and entered the city of 200,000 people, General Santa Anna having moved northward. This was September 1847. A Mexican merchant wrote to a friend about the bombardment of the city: “In some cases whole blocks were destroyed and

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a great number of men, women and children killed and wounded.”

General Santa Anna fled to Huamantla, where another battle was fought, and he had to flee again. An American infantry lieutenant wrote to his parents what happened after an officer named Walker was killed in battle:

General Lane ... told us to “avenge the death of the gallant Walker” ... Grog shops were broken open first, and then, maddened with liquor, every species of outrage was committed. Old women and girls were stripped of their clothing—and many suffered still greater outrages. Men were shot by dozens ... their property, churches, stores, and dwelling houses ransacked. ... It made me for the first time ashamed of my country.

One Pennsylvania volunteer, stationed at Matamoros late in the war, wrote:

We are under very strict discipline here. Some of our officers are very good men but the balance of them are very tyrannical and brutal toward the men. ... [T]onight on drill an officer laid a soldier’s skull open with his sword. ... But the time may come and that soon when officers and men will stand on equal footing. ... A soldier’s life is very disgusting.

On the night of August 15, 1847, volunteer regiments from Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina rebelled in northern Mexico against Col. Robert Treat Paine. Paine killed a mutineer, but two of his lieutenants refused to help him quell the mutiny. The rebels were ultimately exonerated in an attempt to keep the peace.

Desertion grew. In March 1847 the army reported over a thousand deserters. The total number of deserters during the war was 9,207 (5,331 regulars and 3,876 volunteers). Those who did not desert became harder and harder to manage. General Cushing referred to 65 such men in the 1st Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry as “incorrigibly mutinous and insubordinate.”

The glory of victory was for the president and the generals, not the deserters, the dead, the wounded. The Massachusetts Volunteers had started with 630 men. They came home with 300 dead, mostly from disease, and at the reception dinner on their return their commander, General Cushing, was hissed by his men.

As the veterans returned home, speculators immediately showed up to buy the land warrants given by the government. Many of the soldiers, desperate for money, sold their 160 acres for less than 50 dollars.

Mexico surrendered. There were calls among Americans to take all of Mexico. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed February 1848, just took half. The Texas boundary was set at the Rio Grande; New Mexico and California were ceded. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million, which led the *Whig Intelligencer* to conclude that “we take nothing by conquest. ... Thank God.” ■

Howard Zinn is author of *A People’s History of the United States*.

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Mexico in 1830



Land Mexico Lost to the United States

