

THE MEXICAN VIEWPOINT

On the War

With the United States

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The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. U.S. historians refer to this event as “The Mexican War,” while in Mexico we prefer to use the term “The U.S. Invasion.” These contrasting conceptualizations are not based on mere whims, but on different perceptions of the conflict. When the U.S. Congress authorized a declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, President Polk’s viewpoint was officially accepted. It held that the posture of the Mexican government—or, better said, the Mexican governments—had left the United States with no other alternative for defending its national security and interests, and that Mexico was to blame for causing the war. That argument has been the object of debate in Mexican and U.S. historiographies, with those who have defended it and criticized it trying to explain the conduct of Mexican political leaders and opinion makers. U.S. historians have found it difficult to explain the attitude



Jesús Corral, *Allegory of the National Coat of Arms*, 105 x 94.5 cm, nineteenth century (oil on canvas).

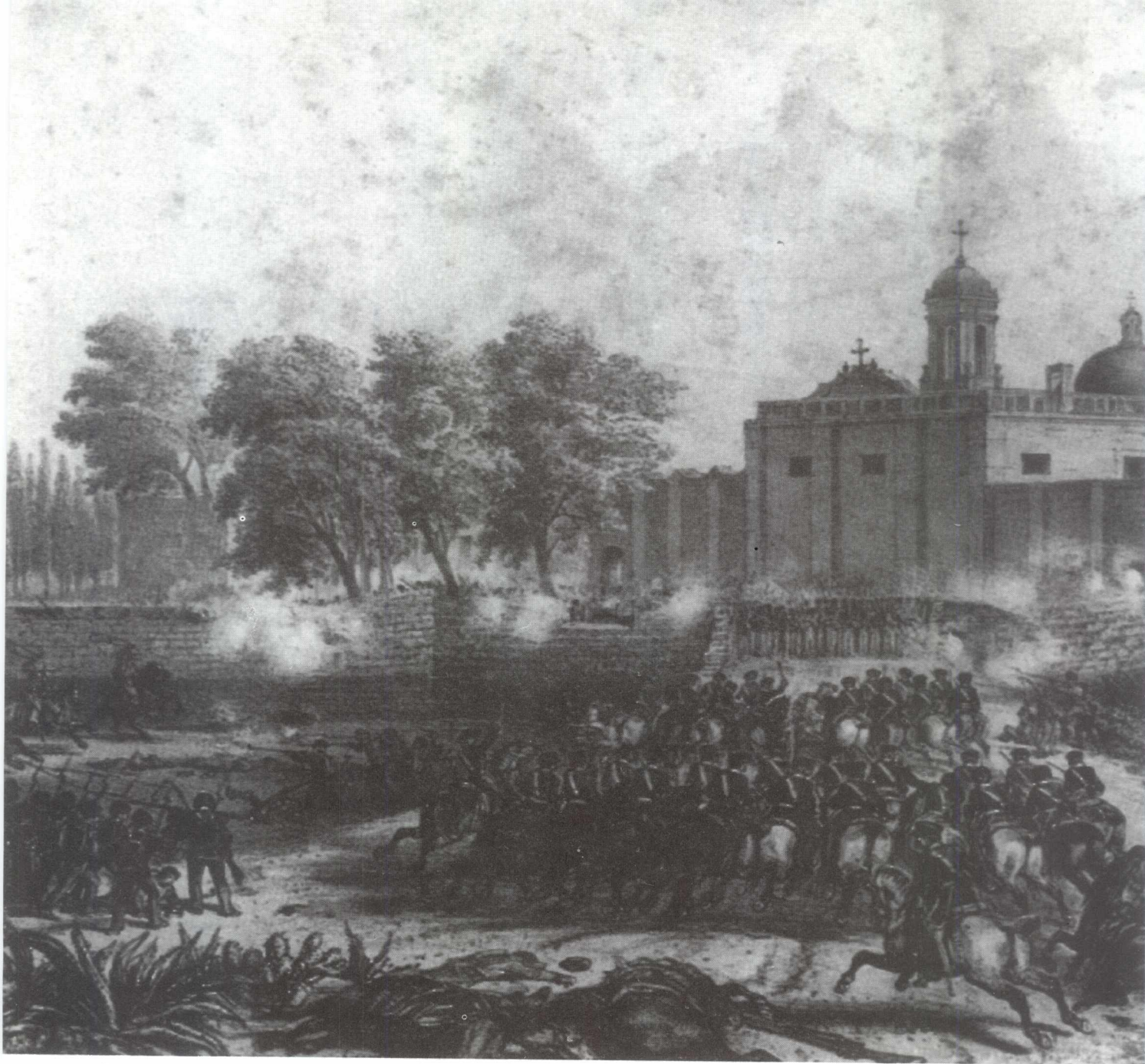
adopted by the Mexican governments and the national press in those years. Their interpretations have been biased, taking some official declarations and newspaper articles out of context and using them as supposed evidence of Mexico’s exaggerated belligerency. If these very documents are studied in the context of Mexico’s internal situation at that time, however, we can see the other side of the coin. Indeed, in order to understand Mexico’s viewpoint with regard to the war with the United States, it is necessary to consider three important issues: first, Mexico’s internal state

of affairs during the 1840s; second, the problem of Texas; and third, the U.S. invasion of Mexican territory.

Between 1841 and 1848, Mexico experienced one of the most critical periods in the formation of its State. First, there was the Santa Anna dictatorship between 1841 and 1843, and then, the second Centralist Republic, in power until December 1845. This was followed by the Mariano Paredes dictatorship which lasted eight months and during which the possibility of setting up a monarchy was once again discussed. The federal republican government was finally restored in 1847, after six presidents had succeeded one another from June 1844 to September 1847. With the exception of Manuel

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Julio Michaud, *Battle of Churubusco*, 1847, 32 x 43 cm, nineteenth century (color lithography).

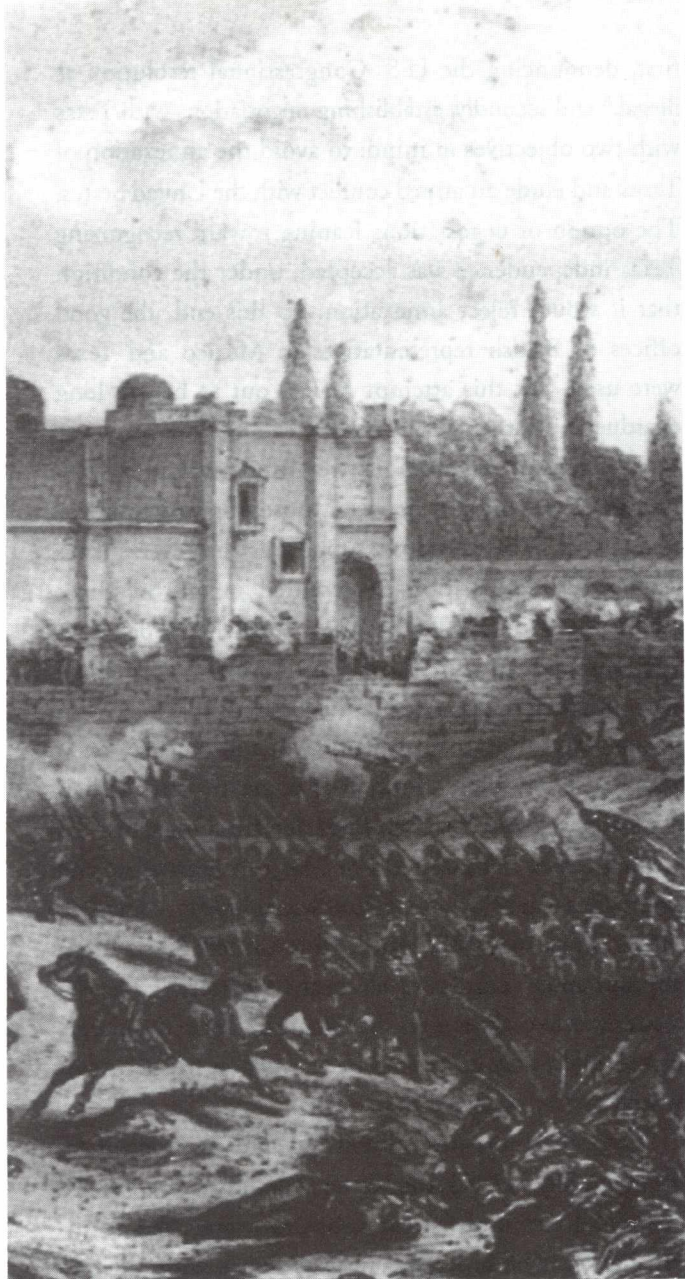
de la Peña y Peña, the rest came to power as a result of popular or military uprisings against their predecessors. Thus, all confronted opposition forces that questioned their legitimacy and were eager to overthrow them. As a result of these conditions, the problems of the separation of Texas and its annexation to the United States, as well as John Slidell's mission,¹ became part of the debate among

¹ John Slidell was a U.S. government envoy whose mission was to seek an economic agreement on compensation for the annexation of Texas to the United States. [Editor's Note.]

political parties and factions and a pretext for one faction or another to downplay the legitimacy of its opponents.

As pointed out in an article in the daily *El Siglo XIX*, the issue of Texas separation and the attempts to bring it back under Mexican sovereignty were used to justify, enhance, tear down or revive the reputations of important figures and political parties, and above all, as an excuse to justify any type of "revolutionary" movement.² In the same way,

² "Resurrecciones Políticas," *El Siglo XIX*, 20 May 1847, p. 4.



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stant suspicion of treason, which prevented him from establishing direct contact with Nicholas Trist,³ after the *Cerro Gordo* defeat. The fragile state of authority was therefore an obstacle to any attempt at negotiated solutions. The political limitations characterizing the Mexican governments' negotiating capacity were even acknowledged by U.S. representatives beginning in 1844, when Secretary Wilson Shannon reported the following to his government with regard to the Texas annexation:

...many intelligent Mexicans privately entertain and express opinions favorable to the amicable arrangements of the difficulties....But there are few who have the boldness to express these opinions publicly, or who [would] be willing to stem the current popular prejudice by undertaking to carry them out.⁴

It is also worth emphasizing here that constitutional changes made during this period imposed restrictions on the actions of those in power. Some examples include: an article added to the constitution prohibiting the transfer of control over territory;⁵ and amendments to the 1824 Federal Constitution which were approved in 1847 and which disqualified "the Executive from signing a peace agreement and concluding negotiations with foreign nations."⁶

From the Mexican perspective, there were two facets to the problem of Texas: one was related to its separation from Mexico and the other to its annexation to the United States. With regard to the first, Mexico asserted from 1836 to 1845, perhaps a bit inflexibly, that the secession of Texas was illegitimate, and it reaffirmed its right to reincorporate this part of its territory by any means necessary, including the use of force. Furthermore, it consid-

efforts during 1845 and 1846 to seek negotiated solutions for avoiding the annexation of Texas to the United States and later, for the war, were denounced by the opposition press as acts of weakness and even treason.

The José Joaquín Herrera administration, for example, had only very precarious support for negotiating with the Texas government in April and May 1845, and also for receiving envoy John Slidell at the end of that same year. Mariano Paredes confronted the same situation in 1846. And in 1847, Santa Anna would face the con-

³ Nicholas Trist was the main U.S. government negotiator for avoiding the war, which finally broke out during that same year. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ Wilson Shannon to John C. Calhoun, October 28, 1844, in Carlos Bosch García, *Documentos de la relación de México con los Estados Unidos*, vol. IV, UNAM, Mexico City, 1985, p. 351.

⁵ "Bases Orgánicas de la República Mexicana," Article 89, IV, Mexico, June 14, 1843, in Felipe Tena Ramírez, *Leyes Fundamentales de México, 1808-1971*, fourth edition, Editorial Porrúa, Mexico City, 1971, p. 420.

⁶ Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, "De la difícil constitución de un Estado, 1821-1854," in Josefina Zoraida Vázquez (ed.), *La Fundación del Estado Mexicano*, Nueva Imagen, Mexico City, 1994, p. 31.

ered that despite the recognition Texans had gained in other countries, the conflict was an internal problem. Let it be said in passing that Mexico's position was very similar to that adopted by the U.S. government when it faced the problem of the secession of its southern states years later. But, in addition, the potential emancipation of Texas forewarned of the vulnerability of the New Mexico and California territories, due to both the intentions of Texas to define its border along the Rio Grande and those of the United States to expand its territory to the Pacific Ocean.

The impossibility of reincorporating Texas through military submission of the rebels was already clear in 1843 when the Santa Anna government agreed to sign an armistice. In that year, the option of negotiations leaning toward a recognition of Texan independence began to take shape. By that time, however, the United States had already revived its old project of annexing the region.

From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it reaffirmed the posture it had expressed a year before that Mexico would consider such an act "a declaration of war." And later, when the Congress approved the joint resolution inviting Texas to join the United States, Mexico suspended diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Mexico asserted that the annexation of Texas—whether by treaty or in a U.S. Congressional resolution—was a violation of the 1828 border treaty, which had acknowledged Mexico's sovereignty over that territory.⁷ Consequently, such acts were a violation of the fundamental principles of international law, and furthermore, they established a dangerous precedent threatening Mexico's territorial security, since the same formula could be used to annex other areas along the border.

Faced with this situation, the José Joaquín Herrera administration attempted a double-edged diplomacy by,

first, denouncing the U.S. Congressional resolution as illegal,⁸ and secondly, establishing negotiations with Texas with two objectives in mind: to avoid the annexation of Texas and elude an armed conflict with the United States. The option of negotiations leaning toward recognizing Texas independence was accepted, under the condition that it would reject annexation. To this end, the good offices of British representatives in Mexico and Texas were used, but this attempt turned out to be too long overdue and unfruitful.

While these negotiations were underway, the Mexican press was divided between those opposed to negotiating with Texas and those supporting the government's actions. The opposition, represented mainly by those referred to as "purists," insisted that Texas should be recovered through an armed expedition. The "moderates," who originally supported a negotiated solution with Texas, switched to the other side when in the end, Texas accepted annexation. Both sides chose to launch their campaigns against Texas and not declare war against the United States. The opinion of Mexican journalists and politicians regarding annexation was that Mexico had no other choice but "to impede the United States from appropriating Texas, using all means necessary."⁹ The objective was to make it clear that whatever desire the United States might have to expand its territory at Mexico's cost would not be accepted passively.¹⁰

Once the Texas government had agreed to the annexation, on July 4, 1845, the Herrera administration ordered the mobilization of federal troops to protect the northern border. The order was in accordance with a decree approved by Congress exactly one month earlier, authorizing the government "within its full rights, to use all available resources to resist such an annexation to the very end."¹¹ This was later reaffirmed in the bill presented to Congress on July 21 which maintained that the military mobilization was aimed at:

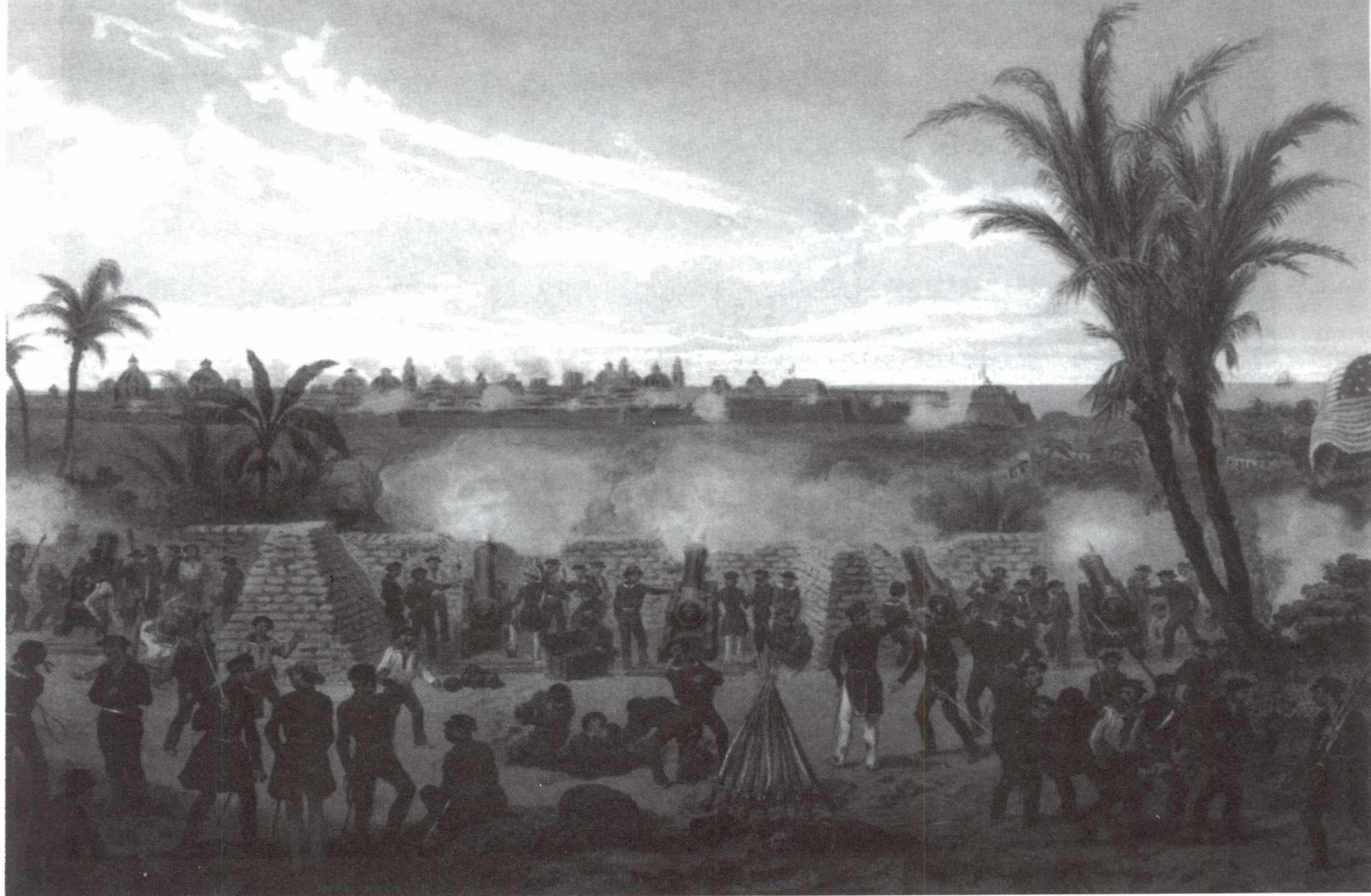
⁸ Luis G. Cuevas to representatives from France, England and Spain in Mexico, March 28, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., pp. 471-472.

⁹ "Guerra con los Estados Unidos," *El Siglo XIX*, 20 July 1845, p. 4.

¹⁰ "Estado de la Cuestión de Texas," *El Siglo XIX*, 30 November 1845, p. 4.

¹¹ Congressional decree no. 2826, Mexico, June 4, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., p. 526.

⁷ Manuel Crescencio Rejón to Shannon, October 31, 1844, Bosch, op. cit., p. 352.



Carlos Nebel, *The Bombardment of Veracruz*, 37 x 52 cm, nineteenth century (color lithography). CNCA-INAH-MEX

...preserving the integrity of Mexican territory according to the old borders recognized by the United States in treaties dating from 1828 to 1836.¹²

Thus, the order was given on the twenty-third day of the same month to strengthen the defensive line along the bank of the Rio Grande with the army's Fourth Division under the command of General Arista.¹³ The posture in favor of seeking a negotiated solution was, however, maintained. One month earlier, the Mexican government's position had been communicated by U.S. agent William Parrot to Secretary of State Buchanan in the following terms:

I have satisfactorily ascertained, through the indirect channel of communication...that the present government

will not declare war against the United States, even if Texas be annexed.¹⁴

Mexico's anti-belligerent posture in favor of negotiations was confirmed October 15, 1845 when its foreign relations minister, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, notified U.S. consul John Black

...that although the Mexican nation was gravely offended by the United States due to its actions in Texas—belonging to Mexico—the government was willing to receive a commissioner who would arrive in this capital from the United States possessing full faculties to settle the current dispute in a peaceful, reasonable and respectable way.¹⁵

¹² Enrique Olavarria y Ferrari, *México a través de los siglos, México Independiente, 1821-1855*, Editorial Cumbre, Mexico City, 1958, vol. IV, p. 543.

¹³ Pedro García Conde to Mariano Arista, Mexico, July 23, 1845, in Genaro García (ed.), "Archivo del General Paredes," *Documentos inéditos o muy raros para la Historia de México*, Editorial Porrúa, Mexico City, 1974, pp. 554-555.

¹⁴ William Parrot to James Buchanan, Mexico, June 17, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., p. 540.

¹⁵ Manuel de la Peña y Peña to John Black, October 15, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., p. 599.



Carlos Nebel, *The Entrance of General Scott*, 37 x 52 cm, nineteenth century (color lithography).

Any possibilities for entering into negotiations, however, faced serious obstacles. First, opposition from public opinion and certain political interests to an agreement signifying a recognition of Texas' annexation had increased.¹⁶ Thus, the government lacked the internal consensus necessary for negotiations. Secondly, the U.S. proposal included in the instructions given to envoy John Slidell did not have much to offer in terms of negotiations. Those instructions not only included the demand that the Rio Grande serve as the Texas border, when in fact the Nueces River had always been defined as such, but also a demand for the cession of the territories of New Mexico and California linked to claims which had been resolved since the signing of the Convention of 1843.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Polk administration had accredited Slidell as a plenipotentiary secretary and not as an ad hoc commissioner with faculties only for initiating

negotiations, as the Mexican government had agreed to. The Slidell mission was therefore used to force the Mexican government into tacitly recognizing the annexation of Texas and the cession of the disputed territory. This last point was the initial obstacle for beginning negotiations and was a recurrent issue in the correspondence between the U.S. envoy and Ministers Manuel de la Peña y Peña and Joaquín María del Castillo y Lanzas between December 8, 1845 and March 21, 1846.¹⁸

To analyze President Polk's intentions for the Slidell mission, it is worth highlighting comments made earlier by William Parrot to Secretary Buchanan:

There are other considerations, important to the government and people of the United States, which incline me to believe that it would be far better that Mexico should declare a war now, than that it should propose to open negotiations for the settlement of pending differences;

¹⁶ See Jesús Velasco Márquez, *La Guerra del 47 y la opinión pública (1845-1848)*, SEP, Mexico City, 1975, pp. 29-36.

¹⁷ James Buchanan to John Slidell, Washington, November 10, 1845, Bosch, op. cit., pp. 613-621.

¹⁸ J. Black to J. Slidell, Mexico, December 15, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., pp. 632-635; M. de la Peña y Peña to J. Slidell, December 20, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., pp. 639-642; J. M. del Castillo y Lanzas to J. Slidell, Mexico, March 12, 1846, in Bosch, op. cit., pp. 671-677.

among these, that of tracing certain geographical lines drawn upon the maps of the northwest coast of America, is not the least important; these lines could be satisfactorily run in a case of war; but not in a negotiation, now or at any future period.¹⁹

The demands made by John Slidell and the U.S. government's refusal to modify the terms of his accreditation, accompanied by the formalization of the admission of Texas to the United States and the order given to General Taylor to occupy the territory between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River, were the factors that confirmed to Mexicans that the objective of the mission was none other than to lay out

...a crude trap...with an outrageous Machiavellian objective. The dilemma was after all quite simple: either the Mexican government admitted a regular government secretary, which would be equivalent to reestablishing friendly relations between the two countries without the dispute being resolved, thus approving the usurpation of Texas and proving to the world that despite any matter of offense and divestment, Mexico would always be dependent on and a slave to the United States; or —the more likely possibility— the Mexican government would not agree to such an excessive humiliation, and a pretext would thus exist for resorting to war and for more cases of usurpation.²⁰

Scarcely a week after Slidell received his credentials and began his trip back to the United States, the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Rio Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation. This provocation by President Polk would be acknowledged even by John C. Calhoun, who had been the main promoter of the annexation of Texas.²¹

In the eyes of the Mariano Paredes government, the mobilization of the U.S. army was an outright attack on Mexico's territorial integrity and clearly demonstrated that the United States had no intention of subjecting itself to the terms of the 1828 border treaty. As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River —an order which led to the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.

Even before these incidents, President Polk had already decided to ask the U.S. Congress to declare war against Mexico, but the battles provided a pretext to mobilize the opinions of both U.S. legislators and the public in favor of such a measure. He held that

Mexico had crossed over the U.S. border, had invaded our territory and had caused the shedding of U.S. blood in U.S. territory.²²

This declaration not only implied a unilateral definition of the U.S. border with Mexico, but also clearly defined the reason for the war as the defense of U.S. territorial security. Nevertheless, Polk immediately ordered the occupation of the territory to the south of the Rio Grande, as well as the New Mexico and California territories and the blocking of Mexican ports.

The question was and continues to be: were these actions in defense of U.S. territorial security or the flagrant invasion of Mexican territory? From the viewpoint of Mexicans, the answer was clear: the U.S. government was not seeking to protect its territorial security, nor did it have other supposed demands, but rather it was determined to take over a territory legitimately belonging to Mexico. This posture was reiterated in an article in the daily *El Tiempo* which stated: "The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveller."²³ The daily *El Republicano* published the following opinion:

¹⁹ William Parrot to James Buchanan, Mexico, July 26, 1845, in Bosch, op. cit., p. 566.

²⁰ "La Cuestión del Día," *El Tiempo*, Mexico City, 5 April 1846, p. 1.

²¹ Speech on reply to Mr. Turner of Tennessee, February 12, 1847, in *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, New York, 1854, vol. IV, p. 336; "Speech on the Three Million Bill," February 9, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 305.

²² "President James Knox Polk's war message to Congress," Washington, D.C., May 11, 1846, in Thomas G. Patterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy, Documents and Essays*, second edition, D.C. Heat and Company, Lexington, Mass., 1984, vol. I, pp. 245-247.

²³ "Parte Política," *El Tiempo*, 11 May 1846, p. 1.

No one has any doubts about the intentions the Washington cabinet has had for some time now with respect to Mexico....One fights in the name of usurpation; the other defends justice...the war has begun and the [Mexican] nation has a great deal at stake, since even if justice is on its side, that is unfortunately not enough to triumph and hold back the excesses of a powerful enemy....The war...has now begun, to our misfortune, and it is urgent that time not be wasted.²⁴

Most people in Mexico believed the use of arms was the only option available to defend their rights and territorial integrity. Thus, on July 6, 1846, President Mariano Paredes enacted the Congressional decree that sustained such principles in the following terms:

Article 1. The government, in the natural defense of the nation, will repel the aggression initiated and sustained by the United States of America against the Republic of Mexico, having invaded and committed hostilities in a number of the departments making up Mexican territory.
Article 3. The government will communicate to friendly nations and to the entire republic the justifiable causes which obliged it to defend its rights, left with no other choice but to repel force with force, in response to the violent aggression committed by the United States.²⁵

If we carefully analyze the text of this decree, we find that war was never declared against the United States. Rather, reference was only made to the need for defending the country's territorial integrity and repelling the U.S. invasion. This is even more important to note if we consider that by that time, General Taylor's forces had already crossed the Rio Grande and seized the city of Matamoros; Mexican ports had been blocked; Captain John Fremont was promoting a revolt in California; and Colonel Stephen Kearny had received orders to occupy New Mexico and California.

²⁴ "Neutralidad," *El Republicano*, 20 June 1846, p. 3.

²⁵ Alberto María Carreño, *México y los Estados Unidos de América. Apuntaciones para la historia de acrecentamiento territorial de los Estados Unidos a costa de México desde la época colonial hasta nuestros días*, second edition, Editorial Jus, Mexico City, 1962, p. 107.

On August 8, 1846, President Polk asked the U.S. Congress for a special two-million-dollar fund to cover the costs of the war. In a message accompanying his request, he declared that these resources would also be used to make adjustments in the border with Mexico, thus making it clear that the intention was to forcefully acquire Mexican territory. When news of this message reached Mexico, the daily *El Republicano* commented that a war started for such motives was "unjust and barbaric, and those responsible should be considered enemies of Humanity."²⁶ A month later, it reiterated that:

A government...that starts a war without a legitimate motive is responsible for all its evils and horrors. The bloodshed, the grief of families, the pillaging, the destruction, the violence, the fires, are its works and its crimes....Such is the case of the U.S. government, for having initiated the unjust war it is waging against us today.²⁷

The U.S. army continued to advance during the second half of 1846 and the first months of the following year. On March 3, 1847, the U.S. Congress approved a three-million-dollar fund for allowing the president to reach a treaty of "peace, boundaries and borders" with Mexico. A month later Nicholas Trist was appointed to negotiate with Mexican authorities. But by this time a new offensive had been initiated under the command of General Winfield Scott who was ordered to attack the territory between the port of Veracruz and Mexico City. The opinion shared by Mexican society and government was against signing a peace agreement in disgrace.²⁸ And even after the first contacts between Trist and Mexican authorities, *El Diario del Gobierno* stated:

[The peace] that could be established right now between the Republic of Mexico and the United States would be ignominious for the former, and would lead to so much discontentment toward other nations and such negative impacts within the country that Mexico would soon

²⁶ "El último mensaje de Mr. Polk," *El Republicano*, 15 September 1846, p. 3.

²⁷ "La guerra," *El Republicano*, 23 October 1846, p. 3.

²⁸ "No importa," *El Republicano*, 6 April 1847, p. 4.



Julio Michaud y Thomas, *Chapultepec Castle*, 23.8 x 36.5 cm, nineteenth century (black/white lithography).

become a stage for war once again, and would disappear from the list of free and independent nations.²⁹

The events of the following months dramatically prevented Mexicans from pursuing the stubborn, however just, defense of their territory, and they finally had to accept a negotiation that was difficult, painful and undignified for negotiators on both sides. This is revealed by comments made by Nicholas Trist to his wife regarding the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the attitude assumed by Mexicans with regard to the U.S. invasion:

Just as they were about to sign the treaty...one of the Mexicans, Don Bernardo Couto, remarked to him, "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 only 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 ashamed of it, most cordially and intensely ashamed of it."³⁰

Indeed, during the entire conflict, from the separation of Texas to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico defended its territory and if at any time its position was belligerent, it was belligerent in the defense of national security and for the preservation of international legal order. Therefore, it was not a result of arrogance, nor of irresponsibility, but rather the only possible response to the arguments and actions of the U.S. government. In conclusion, the armed conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the product of deliberate aggression and should therefore be referred to as "The U.S. War Against Mexico." ❖

³⁰ Virginia Randolph Trist to Tockerman, July 8, 1864, *Nicholas P. Trist Papers*, Box 10, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Robert W. Drexler, *Guilty of Making Peace: A Biography of Nicholas P. Trist*, University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, 1991, p. 129.

²⁹ "La Guerra y la Paz," *Diario del Gobierno*, 8 July 1847, p. 3.