

THE MEDIA, A PRESIDENT, AND HIS GENERALS:

How the Media Shaped Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War

**A Monograph
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Abstract

THE MEDIA, A PRESIDENT, AND HIS GENERALS: How the Media Shaped Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War by MAJ Matthew N. Metzel, U.S. Army, 56 pages.

The topic of civil-military relations during the Mexican War resurfaces as an interesting historical study in the aftermath of President Obama's recent decision to relieve General McChrystal of command in Afghanistan.

This review of U.S. civil-military relations during the Mexican War reveals a media wedged between President Polk and his battlefield generals. From 1846 to 1848, newspaper reports repeatedly interrupted clear communication between Polk and his military officers by exposing real and imagined seeds of distrust that emerged from dissimilar political affiliations. Ultimately, the media influenced Polk's perception that both General Scott and General Taylor sought to exploit military achievements in pursuit of Presidential aspirations. Trends in this dysfunctional relationship include the President's reliance on editorials to gauge the performance and loyalty of his Whig officers.

Recent events between President Obama and General McChrystal demonstrate several similarities to the Polk scenario and provide insight for addressing tension within the system of civil-military relations. Although direct application of lessons learned from the Mexican War is not appropriate, there is value in making certain general assumptions and recommendations. These in turn offer national security practitioners a deeper understanding of civil-military relations for more effective management of U.S. foreign policy.

First, tension exists between a President and his general officers when the administration's leadership style falls outside the established military culture. Second, there is the question of the media's choice to exploit tension between a President and his commanding officers. Third, both Presidents faced limited options for replacement of what they considered politically hostile generals. Fourth, one cannot overlook the analogous events surrounding the embarrassment that occurs when private correspondences from military officers reach the public eye. Finally, the media will likely continue to play a strong role in shaping the President's view of battlefield commanders.

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Introduction

The President of the United States (U.S.) quietly placed the newspaper on his desk. He stared out of the White House office window, wondering aloud why a battlefield commander would betray his confidence by openly criticizing the administration to a member of the press corps. With less than two years in office and no real military experience of his own, the Commander-in-Chief found himself in a difficult political situation. His thoughts turned to potential replacements for this popular, if not insubordinate, general. In a war that contained significant ramifications for the Democratic Party, he could not afford to make a mistake in his selection of senior military leaders.

A reader could easily mistake this historical account for events in 2010 involving President Barak Obama and General Stanley McChrystal. However, this is the story of an earlier time, when the nation was at war with Mexico, and newspapers brashly aligned themselves with political parties at the national and local levels. The date was 1846 to 1848, and Manifest Destiny captured the spirit behind a public's growing desire to stretch the national border across the North American continent. A year after taking his oath of office, President James K. Polk found himself flanked between political goals for war with Mexico and his personal distrust of two senior battlefield generals. As Ulysses S. Grant so adequately observed, "The administration had indeed a most embarrassing problem to solve. It was engaged in a war of conquest. . . . Yet all the capable officers of the requisite rank belonged to the opposition. . . ." ¹

During the Mexican War, the media served as a wedge between the President and his battlefield generals by exposing friction within the delicate landscape of U.S. civil-military relations. This paper explores the level of influence newspapers had on the Commander-in-Chief's perception of his senior military leaders. Research uncovers Polk's fascinating use of the

¹Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1894), 57.

press to calculate the political aspiration of his officers and damage the reputation of Whig generals. These events are significant when taking into account the revolutionary growth and influence of the press corps on the American public from 1846 to 1848. The following study reveals trends from which one can draw broad conclusions concerning the media's influence on U.S. civil-military relations. This in turn provides insight concerning the media's influence on President Obama's 2010 decision to relieve General McChrystal of command in Afghanistan. Part 1 provides a historical backdrop that explains the political climate and introduces key players within this nineteenth century saga. Part 2 offers a chronological comparison and contrast of President Polk's treatment of General Winfield Scott and General Zachary Taylor. Finally, part 3 offers a review of relevant considerations and recommendations to surmise the findings.

Part 1 - Historical Setting

The Politics of War: Jacksonian Democracy

War, by its very nature, is a political struggle, and the Mexican War was no exception. To frame the portrait of this story, one must look to the landscape of early 19th century politics. American discourse in the 1830s and 1840s found two major political parties vying for control of a growing nation. On one side of the aisle stood Jacksonian Democrats, taking their ideology from President Andrew Jackson who served the White House from 1829-1837.² Jackson's egalitarian ideals supported broadening the voting base from white, male landowners to all white males of voting age. This political cornerstone fueled Jackson's personality cult as a leader of the commoner against the aristocratic rule of the elite. Once at the helm of leadership, Jackson wasted no time absorbing executive powers considered unconstitutional by many of his political opponents. Jackson so polarized the nation, that by 1834, challengers from the National

²Sean Wilentz, *Andrew Jackson: The American Presidents* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2005), 153.

Republican camp identified themselves as “Whigs,” a British term that represented opposition to monarchy.³

The Politics of War: James K. Polk

Born in North Carolina on November 2, 1795, James K. Polk was the oldest of ten children. When the family moved to Tennessee, the physically frail James found his strength in academics. Returning to his home state to attend the University of North Carolina, Polk graduated with honors in 1818 and entered a career in politics. The hard working Tennessean served as a Congressional representative for fourteen years and as governor for one term. When selected as the Speaker of the House in Congress, Polk’s unilateral support of President Jackson made him a close friend of the legendary leader and earned him the nickname, “Young Hickory.” For all his political successes, however, Polk’s rise as a Presidential candidate in 1844 was more a fluke than predicted certainty. As the top two Democrats vied for the party’s nomination, Polk unexpectedly learned that Democrats selected him in what amounted to a political compromise between supporters of Martin Van Buren and John Calhoun.⁴

As for Polk’s views on national defense, he had no real military experience of his own and openly distrusted the ranks of Army regulars. Polk once remarked that these men were “contrary to the genius of our free institutions. . . . Our reliance for protection and defense on the land must be mainly on our citizen soldiers. . . .”⁵ Polk claimed, “Our forces are the best troops in the world, and would gain victories over superior forces of the enemy, if there was not an officer

³Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 289.

⁴Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War* (Texas Christian University, 1994), 4-5.

⁵Martin Dugard, *The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 191-192.

among them.”⁶ These values did not bode well for either General-in-Chief Scott or the commander of the Army of Observation, General Taylor. Not only were they members of the Whig party, each man served as career soldiers in an era of distrust toward military professionals that dated back to British abuses during the Revolutionary War. Although Polk’s military views are important to this research, they were not at the forefront of his national popularity. During the 1844 presidential race against Whig candidate Henry Clay, Polk capitalized on the nation’s desire to extend its border westward and campaigned with a consistent message on the benefits of national expansion.⁷ Polk embodied a continuation of the Jacksonian political spirit, hoping to carry on Jackson’s legacy if elected to office.⁸

Early in his Presidency, Polk’s political shrewdness recognized the growing importance of newspapers in the world of public opinion. When Polk took office in 1845, a Democrat named Francis Blair worked out of the White House as the newspaper editor of the *Washington Globe*. This media outlet served to promote Presidential policies, dating back to the Jackson administration. However, after criticizing Polk in several articles before the general election, the new President decided to fire Blair. Thomas Ritchie, a close friend and trusted ally of Polk, bought the paper and renamed it the *Washington Union*. For the remainder of the Polk administration, the newspaper aggressively promoted and defended the President’s political agenda.⁹ There is evidence of the President’s close association with the *Union* that includes personal editorials and rebukes to the editor for failing to write stories that did not meet his expectations. On 24 April 1846, Polk recorded one such incident, “Mr. Ritchie meant well, but

⁶James K. Polk, *Polk; The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, ed. Allan Nevins (Longmans, Green and Company, New York, 1929), 221.

⁷Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 5-6.

⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, xiii.

⁹*Ibid.*, 24.

might occasionally make mistakes, but he was always ready to correct them when informed of them.”¹⁰

The Politics of War: The Whig Party

On the opposite side of the Democratic political spectrum, members of the Whig party were skeptical of expansionist efforts. This is an important element to consider when reviewing events surrounding the Mexican war. Whigs joined with abolitionists, sharing the idea that slave owners conspired for war with Mexico to secure additional slave territory.¹¹ A striking example of the distrust of Democrats came from Whig Congressman Abraham Lincoln who would later become the first Republican President. On the floor of the House, the young lawyer defiantly presented the “Spot Resolutions,” challenging President Polk to show the specific spot on U.S. soil where blood was shed to justify war.¹² Ulysses S. Grant, another Whig who would one day claim the office of the Presidency, wrote, “The Mexican war [sic] was a political war, and the administration conducting it desired to make party capital out of it.”¹³

General Winfield Scott: “Old Fuss and Feathers”

Winfield Scott was born on June 13, 1786 near Petersburg, Virginia.¹⁴ His father was a Virginia farmer, but died when Winfield was just six years of age. Averse to the subject of mathematics but gifted in reading and writing, Scott gravitated toward literary studies and boasted of his fluency in the French language. While attending the College of William and Mary in 1805,

¹⁰Ibid., 74-76.

¹¹Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 202.

¹²Dugard, *The Training Ground, 1846-1848*, 389.

¹³Grant, *Memoirs*, 74.

¹⁴Thomas W. Cutrer, *The United States and Mexico at War: Scott, Winfield*, ed. Donald S. Frazier (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998), 380.

he demonstrated an interest in law school, but ambition and a sense of adventure distracted him from serious pursuit of this dream.

Using political connections with the administration of President Thomas Jefferson, Scott managed to receive a commission as a captain in the Army in 1808. Stumbling out of the gate as a military leader, Scott found himself on the losing end of a court-martial in 1810 for insubordination to a superior officer.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the imposed punishment of one year's suspension from the Army was not enough to curb Scott from regularly insulting supervisors. As President Polk would soon learn, Scott had a knack for speaking his mind with candor, even when doing so violated the honor of high-ranking political and military officials. Scott held the deep-seeded belief that officers were not required to obey "unlawful orders."¹⁶

Were it not for his brave actions during the War of 1812, Scott's penchant for arrogance would likely have ended his career unglamorously. However, war with Britain served as a springboard for Scott's path to fame and glory. He volunteered to fight on the Canadian border, but quickly found himself a prisoner of war after British forces captured his position. After working out an agreement for parole from confinement, Scott defiantly rejoined the fight against the Red Coats. His heroic battle at Lundy's Lane forever elevated his reputation as a brave warrior and led to a brevet promotion to major general in July 1814.¹⁷ Although Lundy's Lane was more or less a tactical draw, newspapers in the northeast portrayed Scott as a war hero for his

¹⁵Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 8-12, and 17.

¹⁶Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieutenant General Scott* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 1:292.

¹⁷Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 22, 59, 60, 92.

bravery against reputable British soldiers.¹⁸ Congress also expressed approval of Scott's actions on the battlefield, awarding him a gold medal for heroism on November 3, 1814.¹⁹

The War of 1812 ended in 1815 with the ratification of the Treaty of Ghent. Scott next turned his attention to fighting political battles in Washington, for no sooner did the war end, than Congress began to reduce the size of the nation's military. Scott believed that a republic owned numerous advantages over other forms of government, but that its one weakness was resistance to maintaining a strong national defense. He also developed an interest in politics after the war. In 1823, Scott invested \$600 to start the *Patriot*, a pro-Calhoun newspaper whose sole objective was to influence voters in New York to vote against the Democrat candidate, Martin Van Buren.²⁰

Despite his political acumen, Scott failed to predict the overwhelming popularity of Jackson in the late 1820s and early 1830s. In Scott's mind, the public was under the spell of Jacksonian Democracy, and his own aristocratic code juxtaposed itself against the fast-moving current of egalitarianism. Scott once wrote, "Everywhere in the deep columns of his supporters the loud cry could be heard: Washington was great, but Jackson is greater! – just as faithful Mussulmans [sic] shout at every turn: God is great and Mahomet is his prophet!"²¹ Therefore, when the Whig party formed in 1834 in opposition to Jackson, Scott naturally joined their number. Harkening back to Hamiltonian views, which called for a strong centralized government, Scott believed that Jackson's policies failed to realize the reality of control necessary for national stability.²²

¹⁸Ibid., 64.

¹⁹Cutrer, *The United States and Mexico at War*, 381.

²⁰Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 69, 72, 84, and 213.

²¹Scott, *Memoirs*, 1:268.

²²Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 91, 108, 109, 110, and 146.

As a military leader, Scott was a detailed planner and disciplinarian who dedicated himself to training his men. An avid student of General Antoine de Jomini's *Art of War*, Scott adopted French tactics, insisting that the American Army mirror what he termed a "superior" method of battle.²³ Unfortunately, French tactics did not help Scott in the Seminole War in 1836.²⁴ The Indians avoided decisive engagements and Scott left the battlefield frustrated and embarrassed. He also experienced the wrath of the media during his time in Florida. The general wrote a private letter that indirectly accused the local populace of cowardice for failing to stand up against the Seminoles. When a local paper found and published the letter, it created public outrage. Protesters complained to President Andrew Jackson who intervened quickly by relieving Scott of command. The President then ordered a court martial inquiry that eventually exonerated Scott's actions.²⁵ Unfortunately, this would not be the last time one of Scott's private letters found its way into a newspaper publication.

In 1839, Scott sought the Whig Presidential nomination, but his opinionated views translated poorly in newspapers who criticized his aristocratic ideals. Four years later, Scott failed again in his bid to become the Whig nominee for President. Interestingly, he published his thoughts on the dangers of foreign immigration in the *National Intelligencer*, under the pseudonym "Americus."²⁶

As Scott grew older, the nickname "Fuss and Feathers" captured his aristocratic nature. The old general preferred the pomp and circumstance of full-dress battle uniform, viewing sloppiness as a sign of an undisciplined soldier. Tied to Scott's lavish reputation was his penchant for arrogance. Contemporaries described him as a man of enormous confidence to the point of

²³Ibid., 68, 70, 77, 169.

²⁴Cutrer, *The United States and Mexico at War*, 381.

²⁵Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 119, 121, 125.

²⁶Ibid., 135, 136, 144, 145, 214.

egotistical conceit. These painful accusations were not limited to Scott's enemies. Ulysses S. Grant, an admirer of Scott, once quipped that the general was, "not averse to speaking of himself, often in the third person, and he could bestow praise upon the person he was talking about without the least embarrassment."²⁷ Scott unabashedly embodied the aristocratic qualities that the Jacksonian movement sought to defeat.²⁸

General Zachary Taylor: "Old Rough and Ready"

Zachary Taylor was born on 24 November 1784 in Orange County, Virginia. Soon after his birth, the Taylor family moved to Kentucky, where young Zachary enjoyed farming and life in the great wilderness.²⁹ Often clad in leather moccasins, blue pants, and a coonskin cap, Taylor embodied the ideal of a frontiersman and was no stranger to guarding against Indian attacks.³⁰ As a child, he admired his older brother's choice to join the Army and soon followed his example.³¹

Like Scott, Taylor received his commission in 1808 from President Thomas Jefferson's administration.³² In his first year of service, Taylor worked as an Army recruiter. The following year, he served as the Commandant at Fort Pickering (present-day Memphis, Tennessee). This must have been an emotional assignment for Taylor, since Indians killed his brother at that location in 1809. In September 1812, he bravely fought several hundred Indians at Fort Harrison with only a handful of soldiers under his command. This heroic event thrust Taylor before the eyes of the media. In Washington D.C., the *National Intelligencer* filled an entire page recounting

²⁷Grant, *Memoirs*, 85.

²⁸Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 67 and 109.

²⁹Silas Bent McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready: The Life and Times of Zachary Taylor* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1946), 4, 25.

³⁰McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 33.

³¹Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier of the Republic* (1941: reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon, 1966), xv.

³²*Ibid.*, 33.

Taylor's brave actions at Fort Harrison. On October 31, 1812, the same paper published the first ever brevet rank awarded by the federal government, "President [James Madison] has been pleased to confer the brevet rank of major on Captain Z. Taylor."³³

In 1832, Taylor participated in the Black Hawk War. In 1837, he successfully led soldiers in the Second Seminole War, routing the Indians during the battle of Okeechobee.³⁴ Interestingly, Taylor's skill in frontier warfare provided tactical victory against Native Americans, where Scott's Jominian approach repeatedly failed. Taylor's famed success against the Seminoles resulted in his nickname, "Old Rough and Ready."³⁵ After the Seminole War, he was brevetted brigadier general and assumed command of all troops in the territory of Florida. Democrats and Whigs alike respected his successful work on the frontier, honoring him as a capable guardian of settlers against the danger of Indians. Andrew Jackson once told President-elect Polk, "If we get into a war with England, Gn. Taylor is the man to lead our armies."³⁶

Unlike Scott, General Taylor was not a highly educated or intellectual man; in fact, his education consisted primarily of home schooling with his father.³⁷ Ethan Allen Hitchcock, one of Taylor's chief lieutenants during the Mexican War, accused the general of only reading one book in his lifetime. This insult, however, did little to diminish Taylor's ability as a commander. On the subject of those who attained a West Point education, Taylor stated that the Academy had military application, but warned, "unless practice can be blended with theory, the latter will be but of little service. . . ."³⁸

³³Ibid., 35, 42-44.

³⁴Ibid., XV-XVII.

³⁵McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 5.

³⁶Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 157.

³⁷McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 33-34.

³⁸Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 66-67.

Taylor's manner and dress were the polar opposites of Winfield Scott's flamboyant elitism. He almost never wore his military uniform and spoke in the dialect of the common citizen.³⁹ New recruits often reported to the general, surprised to find a leader who wore baggy blue jeans, a straw hat, and kept a mouth full of chewing tobacco.⁴⁰ Although a member of the Whig party, his average looks and simple dress appealed to the public during the age of Jacksonian egalitarianism. His military experience in the wilderness and hard work ethic weaved nicely into the fabric of the American frontiersman, similar to the 1841 popularity of Whig President William Henry Harrison. As for the difficult living conditions that often accompanied military life, Taylor stated, "but a soldier ought not to repine at the circumstance for when he enters the army he ought to give up society entirely."⁴¹ In essence, the American citizenry looked into the mirror from 1846 to 1848 and saw Zachary Taylor staring back at them. In contrast to General Scott, Zachary Taylor was less prone to public proclamations on politics. When measured against Scott's arrogant frankness, Taylor demonstrated an ability to speak with restraint on political matters, or not to speak at all.⁴²

Party Wrangling and the Media

Although the two parties held very different positions on the conflict with Mexico, both pressed to gain political capital through party wrangling. During the course of the war, Polk worked to alter the political demographics of the Army's officer corps. Of the thirteen volunteer generals authorized by Congress from 1846 to 1848, the President nominated thirteen party-loyal Democrats. Several prominent figures noticed this brash ploy, including General Scott and

³⁹Grant, *Memoirs*, 84-85.

⁴⁰John E. Weems, *To Conquer a Peace: The War between the United States and Mexico* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), 29.

⁴¹Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 35.

⁴²McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 8-9

General Taylor. A long-time professional soldier, Scott openly criticized these appointments, arguing that the President selected each man based on political affiliation rather than military competence.⁴³

Central to Polk's bold foreign policy beliefs was the idea that westward expansion would translate to broad Democratic victories at the ballot box. Whigs, on the other hand, looked to counter this scheme by capitalizing on the popularity of their officers during a time of war.⁴⁴ Within this complex web of tension lay a politically charged media. From 1846 to 1848, newspaper businesses thrived on news about the war. In fact, the Mexican War witnessed the birth of the American war correspondent in May 1846.⁴⁵ Two years later, the Associated Press (AP) established a financial alliance between members of the press to reduce the cost of transmitting war stories to press outlets.⁴⁶ Across the nation, media entrepreneurs gained a prominent seat of influence at the table of public sentiment as newspapers offered political battle space for opponents to faceoff in a war of ideas.

The Prelude to War

On March 1, 1845, President John Tyler signed a proposal to annex the Republic of Texas.⁴⁷ This resolution set in motion a firestorm of events that quickly escalated into a political maelstrom with Mexico. Three days after Tyler's bold act, James K. Polk became the nation's eleventh President, promising to fulfill his own campaign pledge for westward expansion.⁴⁸

⁴³Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, 34, 37.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁵George W. Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, ed. Lawrence Cress (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 11.

⁴⁶Ralph Frasca, *The War of 1812 & The Mexican American War* vol. 2 of The Greenwood Library of American War Reporting, ed. David A. Copeland (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 362.

⁴⁷John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico 1846-1848* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1989), 381.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

Mexico almost immediately severed diplomatic ties with the U.S., further intensifying differences between the two young republics.⁴⁹ Anticipating hostilities between the Republic of Texas and Mexico, President Polk ordered the Army of Observation, under the leadership of General Zachary Taylor, to move U.S. forces to Corpus Christi on July 25, 1845.⁵⁰ By late August, Polk convinced himself that Mexico planned to invade the Republic of Texas. He called a special meeting of his cabinet members on August 29, 1845, and Polk ordered General Taylor to attack Mexican forces if they invaded Texas. Polk further argued that if Taylor deemed necessary, “not to wait to be attacked but to attack [Mexico’s] army first.”⁵¹

On September 16, 1845, the President backed off his belief that war was imminent and decided to try his hand at diplomatic persuasion. He secretly dispatched John Slidell to Vera Cruz to reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico, work toward an agreed boundary, and offer money for the purchase of California and New Mexico. The President estimated that Mexico would ask for between fifteen and forty million dollars and Polk demonstrated a willingness to cede as much for the prospect of westward expansion.

Interestingly, Polk quickly placed the Slidell mission on hold for two months after reading newspaper articles from New Orleans that described words of war from prominent Mexican officials.⁵² This provides insight to the media’s influence on the President’s decision-making process at an early stage of the ensuing conflict. His willingness to place an executive decision on hold because of newspaper articles reinforces the powerful influence the media had on the President. This observation is not in line with Polk’s self-assessment concerning the importance of newspapers. On December 19, 1845, Polk described a visit from a New York

⁴⁹Frasca, *The War of 1812 & The Mexican American War*, 360.

⁵⁰Weems, *To Conquer a Peace*, 459.

⁵¹Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 5-6.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 9-11, 25, and 26.

Herald newspaperman. The reporter asked the President if he was “pleased” with the paper. Polk responded, “I told him I had but little opportunity to read newspapers, and could at no time do more than glance hastily over them.”⁵³ Further study questions this claim and demonstrates how the President closely monitored news articles regarding many issues, including public opinion of his Whig generals.

On December 29, 1845, the U.S. formally annexed Texas as the twenty-eighth state.⁵⁴ Annexation sent a clear signal to Mexico of Polk’s resolve toward westward expansion. As tensions built a high wall between diplomatic talks, Polk ordered General Taylor to move his 3,500 men from Corpus Christi to the Rio Grande in February 1846. On March 24, Taylor’s convoy of U.S. soldiers and supplies set up base camp at Point Isabel. On March 28, General Taylor established Fort Texas on the north bank of the Rio Grande (current day Brownsville, Texas), placing his eighteen-pound guns within range of the Matamoras town-square and local ferry.⁵⁵

Hostilities Commence

On April 15, 1846, Taylor wrote a dispatch to General Winfield Scott and Secretary of War William Marcy in Washington D.C. The message relayed a growing tension along the border.

On the 12th [April 1846] I received from General [Pedro de] Ampudia a dispatch, summoning me to withdraw my force within twenty-four hours, and to fall back beyond the river Nueces. . . . I considered the letter . . . sufficient to warrant me in blocking up the Rio Grande, and stopping all supplies for Matamoras. . . .”⁵⁶

⁵³Ibid., 32-33.

⁵⁴Frasca, *The War of 1812 & The Mexican American War*, 360.

⁵⁵Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 6-7.

⁵⁶Editorial, *Union* (Washington), May 22, 1846.

On April 24, 1846, Mexican General Mariano Arista arrived at the scene and took command of the Army from General Ampudia. Arista responded to Taylor's blockade of the Rio Grande by sending approximately 1,600 cavalry across the river to disrupt U.S. supply routes headed for Point Isabel. On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces ambushed 80 American dragoons under Taylor's command at Rancho de Carricitos (roughly twenty miles from Fort Texas). Eleven U.S. soldiers died, with many more captured. General Taylor confirmed the attack the following day, and sent a request to President Polk for additional forces. He then reinforced Fort Texas and withdrew his headquarters to Point Isabel in an effort to protect his supply line.⁵⁷ Polk, unaware of events far away, worked to influence the public to support an aggressive stance against Mexico through newspaper editorials. On April 24, 1846, he wrote, "It is the second or third time since I have been President that I have sketched an article for the [*Union*] paper."⁵⁸

Polk received Taylor's report of Mexican hostilities on Saturday, May 9, 1846. Coincidentally, the President was in the middle of drafting a speech to Congress that recommended going to war with Mexico. Mexican forces killed U.S. soldiers in Texas, thus providing enormous justification for the President's argument.⁵⁹ On May 11, 1846, Polk announced to Congress that Mexican forces had invaded sovereign U.S. territory. Borrowing a line from his *Union* newspaper, he declared, "American blood has been shed on American soil!" Editor Ritchie called on bi-partisan support for the war effort, "The action of Congress will . . . at once respond to the action of the people, and to the call of the Executive. . . . Who now . . . calls himself in this matter whig or democrat?"⁶⁰

⁵⁷Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 6-7.

⁵⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 76.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁶⁰Editorial, *Union* (Washington), May 11, 1846.

Congress agreed with the President's recommendation, and Polk signed a congressional declaration of war on May 13, 1846.⁶¹ As the nation focused its efforts in support of Taylor's forces, Polk sent Colonel Stephen Kearny with dragoons from Fort Leavenworth to occupy New Mexico and claim California.⁶² The President hoped Kearny's 1,000-mile march would cut off Mexico's northern territories from the central government in Mexico City, forcing Mexico to accept the U.S. offer to purchase the coveted land.⁶³

Although Polk initially adopted a strategy of U.S. forces holding strongholds in northern Mexico to negotiate from a position of strength, he altered his plan under the advice of General Winfield Scott. Scott believed that striking south at Mexico's capital could end the war quickly, something Polk greatly desired. On May 30, 1846, the President penned his political goals for the conflict, stating, "I declared my purpose to be to acquire for the United States, California, New Mexico, and perhaps some others of the Northern Provinces of Mexico whenever a peace was made."⁶⁴ Polk also recommended drawing troops from every state in the Union to maintain a wide range of interest and political support for the war effort.⁶⁵

Part Two – Polk and His Generals

A Relationship of Oil and Water

Polk's relationship with Scott and Taylor resembled a mixture of oil and water. Scott openly considered Polk's presidential election a "disaster" for the nation. Taylor agreed, though he did so with less vigor than the general in chief. Meanwhile, Polk looked to infuse Democratic blood into the Whig-controlled officer corps. At the base of their differences, the men represented

⁶¹Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 90.

⁶²Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 7-9

⁶³Stephen A. Carney, *The Occupation of Mexico: The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War* (U.S. Army Center of Military History: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), 9.

⁶⁴Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 106.

⁶⁵Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, 69.

opposite political values and envisioned different dreams for the nation they served.⁶⁶ When Polk took office, Scott flatly argued that a conflict with Mexico would be nothing more than an attempt to satisfy the nation's lust for neighboring lands.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Taylor privately described the motives for the conflict as "ambitious views of conquest."⁶⁸ Although the generals took aim at their President's policies, they dutifully accepted their leadership roles once hostilities commenced. As Taylor fought valiantly in May 1846, Scott repeatedly expressed his desire to deploy to Mexico in the service of his country. Scott later remarked that he convinced himself of enjoying a genuine friendship with the President, but this dream soon turned to delusion.⁶⁹ Polk did not trust either man and repeatedly tried to have Congress authorize politically appointed general officers for his own selection.⁷⁰

Polk offered his first negative perception of Scott in a diary entry dated May 13, 1846. "I did not consider [Scott] in all respects suited to such an important command. . . ."⁷¹ This is a key indicator of Polk's view of a "qualified" commander. Scott was a member of the Whig party and embedded within the professional establishment as a career soldier. In Polk's mind, these two traits were disqualifying characteristics. On May 14, 1846, the President wrote another negative assessment of his Whig general-in-chief, "General Scott did not impress me favourably [sic] as a military man."⁷² Meanwhile, Scott worked diligently to offer Polk a strategy for victory in Mexico, "To compel a people, singularly obstinate, to sue for peace, it is absolutely necessary . . .

⁶⁶Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 146, 147.

⁶⁷Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:379.

⁶⁸Weems, *To Conquer a Peace*, 161,

⁶⁹Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:397-399.

⁷⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 174-180.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 90.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 93.

to strike, effectively, at the vitals of the nation [take Mexico City].”⁷³ The President disagreed with Scott’s assessment that 20,000 troops were necessary to take Mexico City, believing that fewer troops could accomplish the mission. However, Polk did not openly express his disagreement for fear that Whigs would blame him for refusing the advice of the Army’s senior military officer.⁷⁴

On May 16, 1846, the President briefed Scott’s plan to his cabinet, even while planning to replace the old warrior with a Democrat before the end of the war.⁷⁵ He discussed his possibilities with Senator Thomas Benton, a Democratic politician from Missouri who served as the Chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee.⁷⁶ When Scott learned of the President’s plot from friends in Washington, he was devastated. Still reeling from the emotion of the Polk’s betrayal, Scott received an order from Secretary of War Marcy to move quickly for a summer campaign in Mexico. Scott believed he needed more time to train the recruits and to avoid the malaria season along the Mexican coast. He sent Marcy a letter, stating that he would not deploy until the first part of September.⁷⁷ Scott wrote, “I do not desire to place myself in the most perilous of all positions: a fire upon my rear, from Washington, and the fire, in front, from the Mexicans.”⁷⁸ Scott would thereafter regret his decision to write his emotional response after an unprecedented move by a sitting President to publish private correspondence in a public newspaper.

Meanwhile, at the White House, Polk fought off criticism from Whig newspapers. Political opponents accused the administration of being “weak imbeciles” for failing to provide

⁷³Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:404.

⁷⁴Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 93-94.

⁷⁵Ibid., 94-95.

⁷⁶Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 93.

⁷⁷Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:384.

⁷⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 100 and 101.

Taylor with enough men to defeat Mexican forces. On May 20, 1846, the *Union* jumped to Polk's defense by shifting blame to the Whig battlefield general, "General Taylor, we are distinctly informed by the President, had authority to call for reinforcements . . . whenever he deemed their presence and services necessary. . . . General Taylor, we are somewhat fearful that, his very good qualities have led him into error."⁷⁹ While the *Union* threw accusations at Taylor, Polk made a bold political move. He made a recommendation to the U.S. Senate to brevet General Taylor to the rank of Major General for his success at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.⁸⁰ These actions allowed the President to appear apolitical toward his Whig commander, while using the *Union* to fend off Whig accusations of incompetence.

A Political Storm

On May 21, 1846, Polk entertained an obscure guest at the White House by the name of F.W. Risque.⁸¹ The visitor gave the President a private letter addressed from Scott to a trusted friend. Dated more than three months prior to the war, the letter revealed Scott's belief that Democrats were standing up a mounted rifle regiment with the sole purpose of commissioning party-loyal Democratic officers.⁸² Polk responded defensively to Scott's accusations in his diary, "After seeing this letter I can have no confidence in General Scott's disposition to carry out the views of the administration as commander-in-chief of the army. . . ."⁸³ Adding fuel to the political fire, Marcy arrived with Scott's response to an early departure for Mexico. Polk read Scott's note and declared, "Taken in connection with the letter . . . I am satisfied that the administration will

⁷⁹Editorial, *Union* (Washington), May 20, 1846.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, May 21, 1846.

⁸¹Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 99.

⁸²Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 74.

⁸³Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 99.

not be safe in intrusting [sic] the command of the army in the Mexican War to General Scott. His bitter hostility towards the administration is such that I could not trust him. . . .”⁸⁴

Polk’s temper flared the following day when he learned that General Scott approached members of Congress to oppose passage of a bill that would authorize the President to appoint party-loyal friends as general officers.⁸⁵ Polk fumed, “These officers are all Whigs and violent partisans, and not having the success of my administration at heart seem disposed to throw every obstacle in the way of my prosecuting the Mexican War successfully.”⁸⁶ The *Union* did not immediately let on to the turbulence forming between the two, instead choosing to ignore Scott while lavishing praise on Taylor, “the President of the United States received the official despatches [sic] from General Taylor, he lost no time in testifying the high respect in which he holds the meritorious service of that distinguished officer.”⁸⁷

Lesser of Two Evils

On May 23, 1846, Polk called his cabinet together. When they discussed Scott’s latest acts of insubordination, the members became emotionally charged. After the heated meeting, the President wrote a short, unemotional note in his diary, acknowledging news of Taylor’s victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.⁸⁸ On May 25, 1846, Polk directed Marcy to relieve Scott from command of volunteer forces and ordered him to remain in Washington. The President wrote extensively about the drama with General Scott, but managed to write just one short line

⁸⁴Ibid., 100.

⁸⁵MG William O. Butler, Democrat politician from Kentucky, commissioned June 29, 1846; MG Robert Patterson, Democrat politician from Pennsylvania, commissioned July 7, 1846; BG Thomas Marshall, BG Gideon J. Pillow, BG Thomas L. Hamer, BG Joseph Lane, BG John Quitman, and BG James Shields were all party-loyal democrats, commissioned July 1, 1846. Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, 37-49.

⁸⁶Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 100.

⁸⁷Editorial, *Union* (Washington), May 21, 1846.

⁸⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 100-103.

about confirmed intelligence on the stunning success of Taylor's men.⁸⁹ The wide variance between Polk's lengthy journal entries concerning Scott's political betrayal, contrasted with an emotionless entry of Taylor's battlefield victories, offer a window into the President's priorities. He appeared more concerned with the political war of words in Washington than with the state of military affairs in Mexico.

When Scott received the President's decision to keep him from deploying to Mexico, the message deeply disturbed him. Scott attempted to mend relations through a hasty letter of apology, "I may then hope that the President saw no such intended disrespect; and I can assure you . . . that I feel too great a deference to the constitution and the laws of my country to offer or to design an indignity to our chief magistrate."⁹⁰ The President coldly responded with a note in his diary, "[Scott] now sees his error no doubt, but it is too late to recall what has been done."⁹¹ It is here that Polk appears to have shifted strategies with his Whig commanders. Owning new confidence in Taylor's ability to achieve a decisive victory in Mexico on his own, the President no longer needed Scott's services to reach his political objective. Since Taylor did not outwardly express the political ambition that Scott displayed, Taylor became the lesser of two evils for Polk's choice of military leadership in Mexico.

President Polk as Editor-in-Chief

The drama of Scott's fall from grace may have played quietly in the background noise of war had Whig papers remained silent on the subject. However, the *National Intelligencer* printed rumors asking why the administration did not deploy Scott to the front line. The *Columbus State Journal* picked up the story and attributed Scott's fate to the, "injustice of the Democratic party,

⁸⁹Ibid., 103-104.

⁹⁰Editorial, *Union* (Washington), June 8, 1846.

⁹¹Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 104-105.

and to the jealousy of Mr. Polk.”⁹² With Whig allegations running rampant in daily newspapers, the President made a stunning political move in an effort to defend himself. On June 8, 1846, Polk wrote an editorial in the *Union* that explained his decision to keep Scott in Washington. He then openly published Scott’s correspondence that accused the administration of creating, “a fire upon my rear from Washington, and the fire in front from the Mexicans.” Humiliating the general further, Polk ordered Richie to publish Scott’s embarrassing letter of apology.⁹³ At face value, Scott’s initial message portrayed him as disloyal to the President, while the letter of apology displayed Scott’s confession of guilt to his critics. A firestorm of gossip erupted in Washington, and General Scott soon became a laughingstock within political circles.

Scott attempted to fight back, writing a letter to the editor. The *Union* surprisingly published his letter on June 10, 1846. Scott accused the paper of lacking character by purposefully taking him out of context in order to injure his reputation. The *Union* responded, “We would say simply . . . that we are as incapable of intentionally garbling or misprinting any gentleman’s official correspondence to his disadvantage. . . .”⁹⁴ Scott later recounted this embarrassment, stating that Polk’s abuse of the press crippled his ability to command during the Mexican War. He also believed that this event led the Whig Party to drop him as their Presidential candidate in 1847, choosing instead to endorse General Zachary Taylor.⁹⁵

Far from Washington

Far from Washington, Taylor struggled to understand the President’s war plan. Shortly after hostilities commenced, Taylor received a letter from Washington stating that Scott would take command of forces. However, as of June 12, 1846, Taylor did not receive any updates and

⁹²Editorial, *Union* (Washington), June 8, 1846.

⁹³*Ibid.*

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, June 10, 1846.

⁹⁵Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:385, 389, and 390.

wrote a private letter to a trusted friend, “It is strange . . . that I have heard nothing from [Washington] since my official report of the battles . . . the receipt of them [Taylor’s reports] have not been acknowledged.”⁹⁶ In fact, Secretary of War William Marcy penned a letter to Taylor on June 8, 1846, but it took time to reach the front lines in Mexico.

The President is desirous of receiving your views and suggestions in relation to the fall campaign. His determination is to have the war prosecuted with vigor, and to embrace in the objects . . . in that campaign, such as will dispose the enemy to desire an end of the war. . . . A peace must be conquered in the shortest space of time practicable; your views of the manner of doing it are requested.”⁹⁷

By June 21, 1846, Taylor learned of Scott’s falling out with Polk. Taylor found the drama amusing, “Scott, & the President has had a serious misunderstanding, growing out of the [General’s] declining to come here, as it would interfere with his prospects & necessary steps to enable him to succeed in being elected president in 1848.”⁹⁸ Then turning to his own problems in the field, Taylor wrote of his frustration with the logistical situation.

I consider there is an entire breakdown in the [quartermaster] department. . . . I might very readily suppose there was an intention somewhere among the high functionaries to break me down. . . . I want nothing more than to see this campaign finished and the war brought to a speedy and honorable close, and then to be permitted to be quiet in the balance of my days.⁹⁹

The lack of trust between the field general and his President grew, as Taylor feared that logistical delays were somehow politically motivated. Taylor confided that for all the logistical problems, he worried that the Mexican campaign would ultimately fail, leaving him as the President’s “scape goat.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶Zachary Taylor, *Letters of Zachary Taylor: From the Battlefields of the Mexican War* (Batavia, NY: Genesee Press, 1908), 9, <http://www.archive.org/details/letterszachtaylor00taylrich> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁹⁷The *Delta* printed Marcy’s June 1846 correspondence to General Taylor in a story that ran on February 22, 1847. Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), February 22, 1847.

⁹⁸Taylor, *Letters of Zachary Taylor*, 14.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 18-19.

Polk Doubts Taylor's Leadership Abilities

After two months with no mention of Taylor in his daily diary, Polk suddenly lashed out at his field general. On September 5, 1846, Polk wrote, "General Taylor, I fear, is not the man for the command of the army. He is brave but he does not seem to have resources or grasp of mind enough to conduct such a campaign."¹⁰¹ Polk argued that Taylor failed to offer a war plan against Mexico. The President sought to relieve Taylor, but acknowledged, "I know of no one whom I can substitute in his place."¹⁰² Evidence indicates that Polk's real problem with Taylor was the general's growing popularity. Polk wrote, "After the late battles, which were well fought, the public opinion seems to point to him as entitled to the command."¹⁰³ The media's attention on Taylor translated into political capital for the Whig Party at a time when Polk needed momentum for Democrats leading into the fall mid-term elections. Polk began to view Taylor as a threat to his grand strategy for the Mexican War, a strategy for political victory at the ballot box.

On September 22, Polk convened a meeting of his cabinet to discuss a new direction for the Mexican War that included Democratic military leadership. Demonstrating the desperate state of the President's options, Polk called for Democrat General Robert Patterson to take charge of U.S. forces. Polk refused to consider Scott as an alternative to Taylor, stating that the old officer was an "embarrassment" to the administration.¹⁰⁴ Congressional law, however, prevented Polk from relieving Scott without a valid reason, so Scott continued to work in the background of the war effort.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 144.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 148-150.

¹⁰⁵Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: Politics, Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 134.

Recognizing that mending relations with Polk was a bridge too far, Scott turned his attention to winning Marcy's confidence. He proposed a detailed Mexico City campaign plan, believing that the current operation contained a central flaw of focusing only on the northern portion of Mexico along the Rio Grande River. In Scott's mind, winning required the Army to strike at the heart of Mexico's capital.¹⁰⁶

A Final Excuse to Turn on Taylor

Taylor captured the Mexican city of Monterey in a series of battles from September 20-24, 1846.¹⁰⁷ Of 6,220 U.S. soldiers, 120 died in battle, 368 suffered injuries, and 43 went missing. This amounted to 8.5 percent of the American fighting force. Polk would later criticize Taylor's ability as an officer because of the high casualty rate at Monterey. Mexican losses included 367 dead and wounded, or about 5 percent of a 7,303-man force.¹⁰⁸ War correspondent George Kendall (Whig supporter) from the New Orleans *Picayune* stated that Taylor's victory at Monterey was inevitable.¹⁰⁹ Even the Democratic New Orleans *Delta* hailed the victory, "detailing the heroic and meritorious onset of our army upon Monterey."¹¹⁰ When confronted with Taylor's controversial decision to offer an armistice to the surviving Mexican forces, Kendall wrote a news article that shifted blame for the cease-fire to the Polk administration, stating that Taylor merely followed orders from the President in order to spare life and property.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:404.

¹⁰⁷Frasca, *The War of 1812 & The Mexican American War*, 361.

¹⁰⁸Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, 100.

¹⁰⁹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 90, 98.

¹¹⁰Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), October 26, 1846.

¹¹¹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 115.

On September 25, 1846, General Taylor sent Captain Eaton to Washington with dispatches describing the battle at Monterrey. It took Eaton sixteen days to reach Washington with news of the victory.¹¹² Rather than celebrate the military achievement, however, Polk lashed out at his general's decision to give the Mexicans an eight-week armistice, arguing that Taylor acted in violation of his authority. It is worth noting that Taylor initially insisted on an unconditional surrender of the city, but his men were short of ammunition and provisions. Although Taylor arguably exceeded his purview, he and his defenders believed the decision was the only prudent option.¹¹³

As news of Taylor's victory at Monterey spread, the media portrayed the general as a public icon. Herman Melville's weekly magazine, *Yankee Doodle*, portrayed Old Rough and Ready as a frontier hero, similar to a Hollywood depiction of tough-guy actor Clint Eastwood.¹¹⁴ Taylor's reputation fit the image of a "common man" preferred by a growing egalitarian electorate. Ulysses S. Grant recounted, "after the fall of Monterrey, [Taylor's] third battle and third complete victory, the Whig papers at home began to speak of him as the candidate of their party for the Presidency."¹¹⁵ Walt Whitman wrote in the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, "[Taylor] preferred all the solid reasons of a sure and less bloody triumph, to the more brilliant contingency of storming the citadel, of immense slaughter on both sides. . . ."¹¹⁶ Even with Taylor's victories, or probably because of them, President Polk became impatient with the Whig general's popularity. As the press corps sang Taylor's praise, the President studied his narrowing options to

¹¹²Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), October 26, 1846.

¹¹³Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 155.

¹¹⁴McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 6.

¹¹⁵Grant, *Memoirs*, 74.

¹¹⁶Joseph Wheelan, *Invading Mexico: America's Continental Dream and the Mexican War* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007), 264.

turn the tide of political momentum against the Whig party.¹¹⁷ On October 12, 1846, the day after Taylor's dispatches reached Washington, the *Union* published the President's directive to terminate the armistice. The Democratic New Orleans *Delta* republished the administration's decision on October 26, 1846, "an armistice which was thus agreed to by Gen. Taylor . . . should be at once terminated."¹¹⁸

Back in Mexico, Taylor grew frustrated with Polk's use of newspapers to berate the armistice in Monterey. On November 9, 1846, he wrote a private letter to General Edmund Gaines that would come back to haunt him in January 1847.

I do not believe the authorities at Washington are at all satisfied with my conduct in regard to the terms of the capitulation entered into with the Mexican commander, which you no doubt have seen, as they have been made public through the official organ [*Union*] and copied into various other newspapers.¹¹⁹

On November 14, President Polk unleashed his political anger, claiming that a newspaper war correspondent controlled Taylor. In a heated diary entry, he vented his conspiratorial thoughts by stating,

The Cabinet fully discussed the conduct of General Taylor and were agreed that he was unfit for the chief command, that he had not mind enough for the station, that he was a bitter political partisan and had no sympathies with the administration, and that he had been recently controlled, particularly in his expedition to Monterey, by Bailey Peyton, Mr. Kendall, editor of the *Picayune* at New Orleans . . . who are cunning and shrewd men of more talents than himself, and had controlled him for political purposes.¹²⁰

Three days later, the President met with his cabinet to discuss who should command volunteer troops that were set to deploy to Vera Cruz. Polk still wanted Patterson, but Marcy believed Scott deserved another chance after seeing the general-in-chief develop a detailed war plan. Marcy presented Scott's ideas to Polk, offering the President a campaign option that

¹¹⁷Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 153.

¹¹⁸Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), October 26, 1846.

¹¹⁹Editorial, *Union* (Washington), January 26, 1847.

¹²⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 167.

stretched U.S. forces from Vera Cruz to Mexico City with roughly 14,000 men. Polk listened to Marcy's recommendation, but dismissed the meeting without making a decision.¹²¹ Meanwhile, newspapers openly predicted the military's next move. The *Delta* wrote, "A well-authenticated report is prevalent here, that a Cabinet Council has decided upon an immediate attack upon Vera Cruz by a combined movement of our Army and Naval forces . . . dispatches to this effect are already on their way."¹²²

Scott Returns from Obscurity

On November 18, 1846, the President spoke privately with Marcy and decided to bring General Scott back from obscurity.¹²³ Although Scott dutifully accepted the President's offer, Polk continued to work for Congress to authorize a lieutenant general position so that Democratic Senator Benton could take charge of the war effort. Outwardly, Scott showed a gesture of peace to the President by offering to take any Democrat generals to Mexico that Polk wanted to send.¹²⁴ One such possibility was Brigadier General Gideon Pillow.¹²⁵ Privately, however, Scott confided that the President had become, "an enemy more to be dreaded than Santa Anna."¹²⁶

As for Polk, he clearly stated his reason for placing Scott back in the lead in a diary entry dated November 21, 1846, "General Scott informed me that he would leave for Mexico . . . and was exceedingly grateful to me for having assigned him to the command. In truth it was the only

¹²¹Ibid., 168-169.

¹²²Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), November 9, 1846.

¹²³Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 170.

¹²⁴Ibid., 171.

¹²⁵Gideon J. Pillow of Tennessee threw his political support behind Polk during the 1844 presidential election. Polk rewarded Pillow with a commission as a brigadier general on July 1, 1846. Before this appointment, Pillow had no military experience of his own. Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, 37-40.

¹²⁶Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 159, 161.

alternative.”¹²⁷ That same day, Polk received additional correspondence from Taylor that provided further details of the battle at Monterrey. Polk combined the report with his review of newspapers and convinced himself of Taylor’s aspirations for the Presidency. The President stated, “[Taylor] is evidently a weak man and has been made giddy with the idea of the Presidency . . . I am now satisfied that he is a narrow-minded, bigoted partisan, without resources and wholly unqualified for the command he holds.”¹²⁸ Therefore, as Taylor’s men celebrated their hard-fought battlefield victories in Mexico, the President shifted leadership of the main effort in Mexico to General Winfield Scott. When Taylor learned of the President’s decision, he insisted that Scott and Polk conspired to undermine his successes to advance their own political goals and aspirations.¹²⁹

Polk, meanwhile, continued to look for a solution to the Whig officer problem. In December 1846, the President approached members of Congress about creating a lieutenant general position on four separate occasions. Each time, legislators and advisors strongly stated that this option was not possible due to the potential backlash from Whig opponents.¹³⁰ Even the Democrat New Orleans *Delta* warned against such a move. On January 18, 1847, in a front-page editorial, the newspaper printed, “The proposition of the President to create a high officer [lieutenant general] to control the operations of the army in Mexico is injudicious and unnecessary.”¹³¹

¹²⁷Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 174.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

¹²⁹Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 160.

¹³⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 174-180.

¹³¹Editorial, *Delta* (New Orleans), January 18, 1847.

Taylor's Embarrassment

On January 25, 1847, President Polk lamented the publication of Taylor's November 9, 1846 letter to General Gaines. The letter openly criticized the administration about the war effort and greatly embarrassed the Commander-in-Chief. While the President tried to figure out how the letter ended up in the news, General Gaines sent a note to Polk boasting that he was responsible for the publication. The incident enraged both Taylor and Polk, as both men perceived the published letter as inappropriate and a betrayal of trust. The President conferred with his cabinet, seeking to minimize the political damage created by the general's criticism of the administration. Polk directed Secretary of War Marcy to publish a rebuttal in the *Washington Union*. Polk wrote, "The Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy stepped into my private secretary's office and prepared an article for the paper. The Secretary of State took their draft and prepared one from it which I thought too mild but assented to in this form."¹³² Ritchie published the administration's response in its Tuesday night edition, along with a copy of Taylor's letter.

We deeply regret the publication, in the "New York Express," of the following letter from Major General Taylor to a friend. . . . In justice to General Taylor, we will not suppose that this letter was ever intended for publication because its effect will be to place Santa Anna in possession of information which cannot fail to prove most injurious to us and advantageous to the enemy.¹³³

On February 16, 1848, even while President Polk claimed Taylor had his eyes set on the Presidency, the old general insisted otherwise. "So far as I am personally concerned there are but few individuals in the Union who take less interest as to who will be the successful candidate for the Presidency at the coming election than myself. . . . I trust I will not be the nominee."¹³⁴ In Taylor's mind, he was too busy fighting a war to focus on political ambition. Polk, however, refused to let his anger subside. On February 20, 1847, he wrote, "I have good reason to believe

¹³²Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 191-193.

¹³³Editorial, *Union* (Washington), January 26, 1847.

¹³⁴McKinley, *Old Rough and Ready*, 5.

that General Taylor's camp has been converted into a political arena, and that . . . injustice has been done to many officers of high merit who happen to be Democrats."¹³⁵

Taylor's Victory at Buena Vista

On February 23 and 24, 1847, Old Rough and Ready fought and won yet another stunning victory, this time at Buena Vista against Santa Anna's "Army of the North." The Americans sustained 272 killed, 387 wounded, and six missing in action. This was roughly 14 percent of the 4,594-man force. The Mexicans lost 591 killed, 1,048 wounded, and 1,894 missing out of their much larger 21,553-man force.¹³⁶

Buena Vista had but one American war correspondent present, J.G.H. Tobin, from the Democratic New Orleans *Delta*. The other reporters left General Taylor to follow General Scott's campaign, which was set to move from Vera Cruz to Mexico City.¹³⁷ Even though Tobin witnessed the battle and wrote a detailed account of the events, most of his writings did not make it to New Orleans, and Kendall of the *Picayune* ended up getting news to the public first.¹³⁸ Though not personally present, Kendall took the liberty of placing the now famous quote in the mouth of General Taylor, "A little more grape, Captain Bragg," referring to the skill of U.S. artillery fire against the numerically superior Mexican forces. Like a modern-day Hollywood director, Kendall recognized the public's desire for heroic quotes of this nature and gladly painted vivid images of heroes in action.¹³⁹

¹³⁵Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 198.

¹³⁶Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, 206, 217.

¹³⁷Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 19.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 152.

¹³⁹Gregory S. Hospodor, "The Home Front in the Mexican War," in *Daily Lives of Civilians in Wartime Early America: The American Home Front in the Mexican War*, ed. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 120.

On March 22, 1847, the President studied newspaper accounts from New Orleans to learn of General Taylor's status. Although reports hailed the battle as a military triumph, Polk concluded that Taylor displayed "imprudence" by moving too far into the interior. "The truth is that from the beginning of the war he [Taylor] has been constantly blundering into difficulties . . . at the cost of many lives."¹⁴⁰ The public, however, viewed Taylor as a homespun hero, and Whigs grew warm to the idea of nominating the general as their Presidential nominee. Whig Congressman, Thomas Newton declared,

I can assure gentlemen that all the clamor they may get up here against [Taylor] the old veteran will only attract more attention to his merits, and add new fuel to the flame already burning at the bare idea of his being superseded in his command, or being subjected to the dictation of a political general, fresh from the Halls of Congress.¹⁴¹

For Taylor, Buena Vista would be his last major battle of the war. He and his men spent the remainder the war in northern Mexico fighting bandits and guerrilla forces, while Scott forged ahead with the Mexico City campaign.¹⁴²

Scott's Triumph

Military historians recognize that Scott's landing at Vera Cruz on March 10, 1847 was a remarkable military triumph.¹⁴³ The first wave of 5,500 U.S. soldiers reached the Mexican beaches in small vessels known as "surfboats." Two weeks later, the number of U.S. forces on shore increased to approximately 12,600 soldiers.¹⁴⁴ One eyewitness account claimed that the

¹⁴⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 206-207.

¹⁴¹Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 133.

¹⁴²Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 142.

¹⁴³Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 174.

¹⁴⁴Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 159.

eastern horizon looked like a wall of white canvass, with boats lining up a mile long to off-load men and supplies.¹⁴⁵

Scott's attention to detailed planning overcame logistical shortages imposed by the mammoth invasion force. On March 18, 1847, Scott sent an angry letter to the War Department complaining of the shortage of ordnance. His men had but ten mortars and four howitzers at their disposal, less than a fourth of the guns requested. The *Picayune* wrote, "A heavy responsibility rests upon the War Department in not having the ordnance here in due season, for here are some 12 to 15,000 men completely paralyzed as it were for their essential arm in the attack upon Vera Cruz."¹⁴⁶ Back in Washington, Polk busied himself arguing with the Quartermaster Department about Scott's logistical requests. Frustrated with inadequate answers from the Army, he wrote, "The truth is that the old army officers have become so in the habit of enjoying their ease . . . that most of them have no energy. . . ." ¹⁴⁷ This statement reinforces the perception that Polk viewed regular officers as lazy and inefficient.

Assessing his shortage of firepower, Scott called on Commodore Matthew Perry of the Navy to provide six heavy naval guns. The Navy's sixty-8-pound guns each weighed over three tons and provided massive firepower capability. On March 22, Scott used Perry's guns to bombard Vera Cruz. Mexican General Juan Morales surrendered the city to American forces the following week. Lieutenant George McClellan (later General McClellan in the Union Army) described Scott's bombardment of Vera Cruz as a "superb" achievement.¹⁴⁸ Newspapers, such as the *Picayune*, praised Scott's decision to lay siege at Vera Cruz to save U.S. forces from

¹⁴⁵Robert T. Conrad, *General Scott and His Staff* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, First Published 1848, Reprinted 1970), 24-25.

¹⁴⁶Kendall., *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 167.

¹⁴⁷Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 204.

¹⁴⁸Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 177, 178.

unnecessary harm.¹⁴⁹ Kendall's editorials compared Scott and Taylor, stating, "for hand-to-hand combat, Monterrey was far ahead of this; but for grandeur and sublimity this far exceeds any attempt that has ever yet been made by the American arms."¹⁵⁰

Having studied French lessons of war during its occupation of Spain in 1808, Scott immediately ordered martial law in Vera Cruz under General Order Number 20.¹⁵¹ Scott stated, "without it [martial law], I could not have maintained the discipline and honor of the army, or have reached the capital of Mexico. . . ." ¹⁵² His strict rules applied to both U.S. soldiers and Mexican citizens. He outlawed destruction of private property, murder, rape, assault, desecration of cultural facilities, and disruption of religious services.¹⁵³

In contrast to Taylor, Scott aggressively courted Mexico's Catholic clergy in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the civilian population. Although he was not Catholic, Scott attended mass to win the respect of religious leaders in Vera Cruz.¹⁵⁴ The general made public announcements that U.S. forces were there to stop the Mexican government's abuse of power, and paid Mexican cleaning crews to bring order back to the city. By the war's end, Scott earned a reputation for providing swift justice to citizens and soldiers alike.¹⁵⁵

On April 8, 1847, Scott moved westward toward Jalapa (60 miles inland from Vera Cruz). Santa Anna blocked the advance with about 12,000 Mexican troops at Cerro Gordo, but U.S. forces out-flanked them when Captain Robert E. Lee (later the famous Confederate general

¹⁴⁹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 19.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁵¹Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 266.

¹⁵²Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:393-395.

¹⁵³Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 165.

¹⁵⁴Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 267.

¹⁵⁵Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 179.

of the Civil War) discovered a path to the extreme left of Santa Anna's line.¹⁵⁶ Even Santa Anna praised the artful maneuver, claiming that it resulted in the greatest American victory during the Mexican War.¹⁵⁷

The Baltimore *Sun* reached Polk first with news of the Vera Cruz victory on April 10, 1847.¹⁵⁸ This gave Polk cause to capitalize on Scott's military successes by sending Nicholas P. Trist (chief clerk at the State Department) on a secret diplomatic mission to Mexico, authorizing him to pay up to \$30,000,000 for New Mexico, California, and disputed lands in Texas. Trist, a loyal Democrat with diplomatic experience in the region (former U.S. consul to Havana), could be trusted by the administration.¹⁵⁹ As Trist set out on April 16, 1847, Polk wrote of his anger at Whig newspapers. For the President, the politically charged media, "have done more to prevent a peace than all the armies of the enemy. . . . If the war is protracted it is to be attributed to the treasonable course of the Federal [Whig] editors and leading men."¹⁶⁰ In an unfortunate turn of events for Polk, the secret diplomatic mission became public news on April 21, 1847. Polk reeled in anger, claiming that Whig papers gave "aid and comfort" to the enemy and would send couriers to Mexico to discourage peace in order to gain a political advantage in the next Presidential election. He concluded his thoughts by calling Whig editors "unpatriotic" and "anti-American."¹⁶¹

On May 15, 1847, the city of Puebla fell with little resistance.¹⁶² Scott waited for reinforcements from the states and continued his policy of pacifying the populace to reduce

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 174, 181, 183.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 186, 213.

¹⁵⁸Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 290.

¹⁵⁹Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 188.

¹⁶⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 218.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 220.

¹⁶²Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 190.

animosity toward the occupation. His operational pause drew criticism from the Democratic New York *Sun* who argued that General Scott should have advanced at once rather than wait in Puebla to “suck oranges.”¹⁶³ Meanwhile, the Whig controlled New Orleans *Picayune* harshly criticized the Polk administration’s failure to provide supplies for the soldiers.¹⁶⁴ As the war trudged on through summer, Polk grew impatient with Scott’s lack of progress. On July 16, 1847, he declared, “The protraction of the war may properly be attributed to the folly and ridiculous [sic] vanity of General Scott.”¹⁶⁵ The President and his field commander were clearly at odds on how to proceed operationally in order to achieve the strategic objective.

When troop reinforcements finally arrived from the states in August, Scott continued westward movement toward Mexico City with a force of approximately 11,000 men. When Scott left Puebla, he made a decision that affected embedded news correspondents. By breaking contact with Vera Cruz, messages from correspondents would be without the protection of military escorts for a distance of 176 miles.¹⁶⁶ This action drew sharp criticism from the *London Morning Chronicle* who compared Scott’s decision to sever contact to Napoleon’s decision to march to Moscow in 1812.¹⁶⁷ The *Picayune* paid a high price for their determination to keep news flowing back to the states. In all, they lost twenty-five couriers (captured or killed) through the summer and fall of 1847. To reduce risk of losing their stories, news correspondents sent the same dispatch by multiple couriers (staggered by time and route) to increase the chance of getting the report through hostile terrain.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 411.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶⁵Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 251.

¹⁶⁶Timothy D. Johnson, *A Gallant Little Army: The Mexico City Campaign* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 273.

¹⁶⁷Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 196.

¹⁶⁸Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 18.

Meanwhile, Santa Anna maintained a force of roughly 20,000 troops to defend the cities outside of Mexico City where a series of heated battles ensued. On August 19, 1847, Scott defeated Santa Anna's forces at Contreras. The following day, U.S. forces crushed Santa Anna's men at Churubusco.¹⁶⁹ These battles reduced the Mexican force to about 10,000 soldiers.¹⁷⁰ Scott's success on the battlefield began to win over some of his greatest critics. One correspondent from Democratic New Orleans *Delta* was amazed that Mexicans wounded General Scott in the leg by grapeshot during the engagement, yet the general kept the news of his injury secret until after the battle ended.¹⁷¹ The *Delta* stated the following:

A great deal has been said and written in reference to the ability of General Scott as a military man, but those who have not seen him in command and under fire, cannot form any just conception of his abilities. His cool consideration of everything around him – his quick perception – his firm resolves and immediate execution – equal if they do not surpass those of any of the great generals whose deeds have been made so conspicuous in history.¹⁷²

Failing to learn Taylor's lesson on the President's opinion of armistice agreements, Scott fell into a political trap of his own. On August 20, 1847, Scott agreed to an armistice with Santa Anna to give Trist an opportunity to negotiate peace and stop the bloodshed. He paid a heavy price in the media for this decision as Santa Anna violated the terms and gained a defensive stronghold that resulted in greater battlefield casualties when the campaign resumed. The New Orleans *Delta* wrote, "[Scott] was totally in the wrong; his conduct was not only foolish, but, in view of the consequences which they ascribe to it, criminal."¹⁷³ They went on to blame Scott for delaying the capture of Mexico City and for the subsequent loss of life associated with Santa Anna's ability to strengthen Mexican positions during the tactical pause. The *Picayune* came to

¹⁶⁹Carney, *The Occupation of Mexico*, 7.

¹⁷⁰Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 199, 200.

¹⁷¹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 343.

¹⁷²Conrad, *General Scott and His Staff*, 46-47.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 47-53.

Scott's defense, "[Scott] doubtless has instructions in his pocket from his Government, and has obeyed them; and if any disadvantage should now grow out of his not pursuing a panic-stricken enemy to their utter discomfiture, the fault must not lie at his door."¹⁷⁴ The Democrat *Hartford Times* surprisingly praised Scott's accomplishments, claiming that although they would not support his Presidential aspirations, the battles of Contreras and Churubusco were among the most "brilliant" military accomplishments in military history.¹⁷⁵

On September 8, Scott scored another victory over Mexican forces at Molino Del Rey, though at great cost to his men. Then, on September 13, Scott defeated Santa Anna at Chapultepec, just outside Mexico City.¹⁷⁶ This victory set the stage for Scott's triumphant entry into Mexico's capital on September 14, 1847. Old Fuss and Feathers proudly rode into the Mexico City plaza with as a U.S. military band played "Yankee Doodle."¹⁷⁷ During his march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, Mexican forces typically outnumbered U.S. soldiers by a ratio of 3:1, with the Americans suffering roughly 3,200 casualties. In contrast, U.S. forces inflicted four to five times the number of Mexican casualties, and ultimately delivered a humiliating loss by taking Mexico's capital city.¹⁷⁸ Kendall with the *Picayune* and Freamer with the *Delta* were the first to report Scott's historic victory. Their stories arrived in New Orleans on October 13, 1847.¹⁷⁹ The *Hartford Times* wrote that Scott was, "careful never wantonly to waste the lives of his troops in unnecessary stormings [sic] or reckless assaults . . . has always abstained from any indiscriminate slaughter even of a sanguinary and merciless foe."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 339.

¹⁷⁵Conrad, *General Scott and His Staff*, 73-74.

¹⁷⁶Carney, *The Occupation of Mexico*, 7.

¹⁷⁷Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 7.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁷⁹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 18, 382.

¹⁸⁰Conrad, *General Scott and His Staff*, 75.

As Scott worked to stabilize Mexico City, he once again ran into trouble involving the media and newspapers. Major General Gideon Pillow, a subordinate to Scott and a close friend of Polk, wrote an account of the Mexico City campaign that newspapers published on September 10, 1847.¹⁸¹ Pillow's memory embellished his own actions and marginalized Scott's role in achieving victory over the Mexican army. As Scott contemplated his options on prosecuting an officer with close ties to the White House, Polk continued to gauge the war effort through the opinions expressed in news articles.¹⁸²

On October 4, 1847, Polk recalled Trist from the peace effort in Mexico.¹⁸³ Trist received Buchanan's message on November 16, but brashly disregarded the order and wrote his intention to carry on with negotiations. Meanwhile, newspaper editorials grumbled about Trist's authorization to offer \$30,000,000 for the desired land. The *Picayune* wrote, "I will say nothing of the bribery – that dark side of the picture is undoubtedly the work of the . . . men at Washington." The article went on to say, "I trust the experience of the past may prove a lesson for the future, and that by this time our rulers must see and feel that in order to bring about a peace with the Mexicans they must use hard blows instead of soft words."¹⁸⁴ The *Boston Atlas* called the Mexican War, "Mr. Polk's War."¹⁸⁵ The political damage intensified as the Whig party gained momentum going into an election year.

Back in Mexico, Scott had his fill of the Pillow scandal and issued General Order 349 in mid-November, reiterating the Army prohibition against publishing private correspondence dealing with military issues. Scott then preferred charges against Pillow for violating Army

¹⁸¹Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 424.

¹⁸²Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 263.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁸⁴Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 379.

¹⁸⁵Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 287.

policy. Although the case ended in Pillow's acquittal, Scott stood to face the backlash of wrath from the President.¹⁸⁶ Whig newspapers quickly pointed to Pillow's guilt. The Whig *Picayune* wrote, "Gen. Pillow has made himself . . . the laughing stock of the army . . . it is because he . . . pester[s] not only his own officers but editors with stories of his prowess, and with bold requests that they might assist in spreading his deeds before the world."¹⁸⁷ Such were the editorials that pressured the administration to move cautiously in protecting one of their own close associates.

Polk called a cabinet meeting on December 11, 1847 to discuss newspaper articles about events in Mexico. These rumors claimed that Scott and Trist entered into an agreement to pay Santa Anna one million dollars if he made peace with the U.S.¹⁸⁸ On December 28, 1847, Polk entered a diary entry about an unscheduled private meeting that occurred between himself and Brigadier General James Shields. Shields, a Democratic volunteer who saw extensive combat from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, defended General Scott. He argued that the general-in-chief never bribed Santa Anna. The President countered Shield's with an allegation from a newspaper article.¹⁸⁹ Polk's conversation further demonstrated the media's influence on the President's perception of his commanding officers.

On December 30, Polk learned that Scott formally charged his friend Major General Pillow. The President blamed Scott's vanity, "The whole difficulty has grown out of letters written from the army and published in the newspapers of the United States, in which General Scott is not made the exclusive hero of the war."¹⁹⁰ The next day he wrote, "A most embarrassing state of things exists in the army, all produced by General Scott's bad temper, dictatorial spirit,

¹⁸⁶Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory*, 210-212.

¹⁸⁷Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 427 and 428.

¹⁸⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 284-285.

¹⁸⁹General Shields was a Democratic volunteer general appointed during the Mexican War and saw extensive combat under Scott from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 287.

¹⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 288-289.

and extreme jealousy lest any other general officer should acquire more fame in the army than himself.”¹⁹¹ On January 3, 1848, Polk met with his cabinet to consider relieving Scott from command for his arrest of Pillow and other senior officers. The cabinet unanimously agreed and the majority recommended that Taylor take command. Polk disagreed, believing that Democrat General William O. Butler should take charge of forces in Mexico.¹⁹² The President, however, refrained from making a decision that day.¹⁹³

On January 4, 1848, Polk learned that Trist continued negotiations with the Mexicans. Fuming at this disregard for a Presidential order, Polk wrote, “[Trist] is acting, no doubt, upon General Scott’s advice. He has become the perfect tool of Scott. . . . He seems to have entered into all Scott’s hatred of the administration, and to be lending himself to all Scott’s evil purposes.”¹⁹⁴ On January 9, Marcy convinced Polk to order a court of inquiry against Scott, rather than a court martial, and on January 13, the President’s dispatch left Washington with orders for General Butler to supersede Scott of his command.¹⁹⁵

Scott received the President’s order to turn over command Major General Butler on February 18, 1848. He instantly did so, noting that the same message brought orders to release the accused officers under Scott from arrest. Scott responded, “Thus a series of the greatest wrongs ever heaped on a successful commander was consummated. . . .”¹⁹⁶ Scott eventually defeated

¹⁹¹Ibid., 289.

¹⁹²Polk appointed Democratic General Butler of Kentucky who served from June 29, 1846 to August 15, 1848. Butler later ran as the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate and lost to the Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore ticket. Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 162 and 194.

¹⁹³Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 292.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 293.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 295.

¹⁹⁶Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:583-586.

charges, which claimed that he bribed Santa Anna in an effort to end hostilities in Mexico.¹⁹⁷ He then returned to take command of the Eastern Department of the Army, headquartered in New York. Taylor also returned from Mexico, becoming the Whig nominee for President and commander of the Western Department of the Army.¹⁹⁸

Trist and the Mexican commissioners formally signed negotiations for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848.¹⁹⁹ Although initially outraged at Trist's insubordination, the President reviewed the document on February 19 and decided to forward the proposed treaty to Congress for ratification. Polk concluded that Trist's negotiated agreement was the best solution to end the war. Given the harsh circumstances of the political climate in Washington, Polk's options were limited. He wrote, "A majority of one branch of Congress is opposed to my administration . . . if I were now to reject a treaty made upon my own terms . . . Congress would not grant either men or money to prosecute the war."²⁰⁰ Interestingly, the President faced arguments against the treaty from many of his political supporters because they believed the treaty failed to solve the problem with Mexico. The Democratic New York *Sun* wrote, "Are we to give Mexico back to her military despots?"²⁰¹ Even so, the political atmosphere in congress forced Polk to forward the proposed treaty.

On March 10, 1848, the Senate approved the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, "38 ayes to 14 nays, four Senators not voting."²⁰² The Mexican Congress then ratified the treaty in May. In the end, peace ensued as President Polk received the officially ratified document on July 4, 1848.

¹⁹⁷Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 424.

¹⁹⁸Scott, *Memoirs*, 2:583-586.

¹⁹⁹Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, 385.

²⁰⁰Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 304-306.

²⁰¹David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 561.

²⁰²Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 314 & 315.

Regardless of political views, the U.S. undeniably benefited from the spoils of war. Even with a total cost of approximately \$137,000,000 (including military operations, land, pensions, and benefits), the 529,017 square miles of land gained from the treaty amounted to a bargain price of roughly forty-eight cents per acre.²⁰³ Vast natural resources acquired provided the nation with an economic surge of opportunity and financial growth. In the words of President Polk, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, “added to the U.S. an immense empire, the value of which twenty years hence it would be difficult to calculate. . . .”²⁰⁴ One hundred and sixty years later, the nation is still unable to calculate the riches gained.

American forces ended their occupation when the last U.S. unit left Mexico in early August 1848.²⁰⁵ However, the nation selected the Whig presidential nominee to be the 12th President of the United States, Zachary Taylor. The voting public listened to Old Rough and Ready’s candid answers to political issues and identified with his down-to-earth approach. The American workingman looked up to the wartime general, and supported him with the popular vote by a margin of 140,000 votes.²⁰⁶ Polk sourly responded in his November 8, 1848 diary entry, “Information received by the telegraph and published in the morning papers of this city and Baltimore indicate the election of General Taylor as President of the United States. Should this be so, it is deeply to be regretted.”²⁰⁷

²⁰³Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, 397-398.

²⁰⁴Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 313.

²⁰⁵Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, 26-27.

²⁰⁶Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 162.

²⁰⁷Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 352.

Part Three – Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

A review of U.S. civil-military relations during the Mexican War reveals a media wedged between the President and his battlefield generals. From 1846 to 1848, newspaper reports repeatedly interrupted clear communication between Polk and his military officers by exposing real and imagined seeds of distrust that emerged from dissimilar political affiliations. Ultimately, the media influenced Polk's perception that both Scott and Taylor sought to exploit military achievements in pursuit of Presidential aspirations.

Trends in this dysfunctional relationship include the President's reliance on editorials to gauge the performance and loyalty of his Whig officers. Before the war, Polk offered no derogatory diary entries concerning either general from August 25, 1845 to May 12, 1846. However, from May 13, 1846 forward, he exhibited an abrupt change in tone. In fact, Polk wrote frequently about his feelings that Whig generals were incompetent and subversive, making specific references to the newspapers' influence on his beliefs.²⁰⁸ When Whig newspapers hailed Taylor as a potential Presidential candidate, Polk's crosshairs shifted from national interests to the emerging political threat. Under the pressures of war, the President grew fearful of political discourse found in the media. This fear climaxed in Polk's declaration that a war correspondent from the *Picayune* "controlled" General Taylor.²⁰⁹

The President's June 1846 decision to publish Scott's private correspondence in the *Union* heightened a culture of distrust between the White House and the military establishment. In fact, throughout the war, the President used both proactive and reactive press releases to suggest disloyalty and incompetence by Whig officers. Polk also lobbied Congress to authorize a

²⁰⁸Ibid., 167 and 287.

²⁰⁹Ibid., 167.

lieutenant general position in order to appoint a Democratic officer to take command in Mexico. Of the thirteen volunteer generals authorized by Congress from 1846 to 1848, the President nominated thirteen party-loyal Democrats.²¹⁰ Although one could argue that Polk merely sought to follow the partisan precedent set by Federalist President John Adams, his actions violated the professional norms and culture of military promotions that developed after the War of 1812.²¹¹ This further intensified feelings of distrust, frustration, and miscommunication, opening the door for media exploitation and sensationalism. When Scott and Taylor's personal views made their way into news headlines, it ignited a powder keg of political gossip in the press.

In essence, President Polk had the difficult challenge of winning the Mexican War with senior commanders loyal to an opposing political party. For Polk, this distrust arguably defined his relationship with Scott and Taylor. Because of the politics involved in the Mexican War, the media served as a wedge between the President and his generals. Since Polk's cognitive values were inseparable from his political allegiance to the Democratic Party, newspaper stories praising Whig commanders threatened to unravel his plan. Although the President attained his tactical goals for the war, his strategic objective of winning political capital for Democrats went unfulfilled. Although Polk's reelection bid was never in danger, since the President never intended to run for a second term, he failed to achieve a Democratic successor. Polk soured at Taylor's selection as President in November 1848. "The country will be the loser by his [Taylor's] election, and on this account it is an event which I should deeply regret."²¹²

²¹⁰Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, 34, 37.

²¹¹As part of expanding the U.S. Army in 1798, Federalist President John Adams appointed Federalist George Washington to the office of lieutenant general, along with other staunch Federalists Alexander Hamilton, Charles Pinckney, and Henry Knox as major generals of "sound" politics. After the War of 1812, the nation adopted reforms that reduced politicization of the officer corps until Polk reverted to old practices during the Mexican War. William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 23, 128, 129, and 145.

²¹²Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 352.

Recommendations

Recent events between President Obama and General McChrystal demonstrate several similarities to the Polk scenario and provide insight for addressing tension within the system of civil-military relations. Although direct application of lessons learned from the Mexican War is not appropriate, there is value in making certain general assumptions and recommendations. These in turn offer national security practitioners a deeper understanding of civil-military relations for more effective management of U.S. foreign policy.²¹³

First, tension exists between a President and his general officers when the administration's leadership style falls outside the established military culture.²¹⁴ Polk's overt use of the press to belittle his commanding officers, coupled with his break in promotional traditions, unsettled established norms.²¹⁵ Likewise, President Obama, "an outspoken, acerbic opponent of the Iraq War," undermined a level of trust between the Commander-in-Chief and his senior military officers.²¹⁶ When McChrystal's secret request for 40,000 additional troops made news in the fall of 2009, the President confided to political advisors that the military leaked the story in an effort to trap the administration. The President later accused McChrystal of attempting to box him in a corner on his decision for Afghanistan.²¹⁷

Second, there is the question of the media's choice to exploit tension between a President and his commanding officers. Although most modern media outlets define their political affiliation with less zeal than their nineteenth century counterparts, news outlets continue to thrive on profits from political gossip concerning tense relations between a President and his senior

²¹³Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 214.

²¹⁴Dale R. Herspring, *The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations from FDR to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 2 and 409.

²¹⁵Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: Patronage, and the American Military in the Mexican War*, 139.

²¹⁶Bob Woodward, *Obama's War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 14-16.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, 195 and 197.

military leaders. Recently, the media wedged itself between General McChrystal and President Obama. During a *60 Minutes* interview in September 2009, McChrystal admitted that in his first 70 days as commander in Afghanistan, the President only spoke with him on one occasion. This caused the President to look out of touch with the war effort, and even drew criticism from the left-leaning *New York Times*.²¹⁸

On October 1, 2009, McChrystal gave a speech in London that the media portrayed as a disagreement between the general and the White House. The following day, the President responded with a 25-minute, face-to-face meeting with McChrystal in Denmark aboard Air Force One. The next week, President Obama raised McChrystal's media mishaps in a meeting with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen. The Admiral replied, "It will never happen again."²¹⁹ Unfortunately, it did. The final straw came from the infamous *Rolling Stone* article that dominated news headlines in June 2010. The reporter led the story with, "Stanley McChrystal . . . has seized control of the war by never taking his eye off the real enemy: The wimps in the White House."²²⁰ The story then called attention to friction between the White House and the military over a request for additional troops in Afghanistan, "It was Obama versus the Pentagon, and the Pentagon was determined to kick the president's [butt]."²²¹ The article quoted McChrystal as saying the President's strategy review was "painful," and that the administration forced the General to sell, "an unsellable position."²²² Pentagon spokesperson Geoff Morrell later claimed the press report merely exposed the existing

²¹⁸Ibid., 193.

²¹⁹Ibid., 193-197.

²²⁰Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236> (accessed October 5, 2010).

²²¹Ibid.,

²²²Ibid.

mistrust between the White House and military leadership. As the story took a life of its own, the President relieved McChrystal of command by accepting his resignation on June 23, 2010.²²³

Third, both Presidents faced limited options for replacement of what they considered politically hostile generals. A lack of Democratic alternatives caused Polk to sideline Scott for Taylor, followed by removing Taylor for Scott. It was not until February 1848, that Polk placed a political friend in command of forces in Mexico. President Obama faced similar challenges during his tenure, for there was only one real political option as McChrystal's replacement, General David Petraeus. Unfortunately, for the President, his selection was a well-known registered Republican who authored the successful military surge in Iraq that then Senator Obama adamantly opposed in 2007.²²⁴ With this in mind, it is reasonable to conclude that political affiliation of general officers will continue to raise interest from the media, creating heightened tensions between a Commander-in-Chief who owns one political ideology and a senior military officer who holds opposing political views.

Fourth, one cannot overlook the analogous events surrounding the embarrassment that occurs when private correspondences from military officers reach the public. With the casual use of electronic messaging, military officers risk criticism from political leaders for candid views on political matters. This further complicates relations when electronic messages and unnamed sources make headlines within a twenty-four hour news cycle. Of particular interest is the similarity of written complaints from past and present generals concerning inadequate supplies of resources needed to accomplish the mission. Although Taylor, Scott, and more recently, McChrystal could not imagine their private views reaching the front page, each man felt the crushing political backlash of a President scorned. As military officials continue to wield

²²³Geoff Morrell served as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' spokesman and personal confidant during when McChrystal's story broke. Woodward, *Obama's War*, 372-373.

²²⁴*Ibid.*, 14 and 17.

significant influence and authority in the public eye, they must own a heightened awareness of political distrust that may exist under the umbrella of civil-military relations.²²⁵

Finally, the media will likely continue to play a strong role in shaping the President's view of battlefield commanders. Historical examples of this phenomenon include President Abraham Lincoln with General George McClellan, as well as Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman with General Douglas MacArthur. General Powell, having experienced a media wedge under President Bill Clinton, attempted to bridge the gap between President Obama and General McChrystal before the inevitable occurred. On September 16, 2009, when the question of how many troops the President should send to Afghanistan was still undecided, Powell paid the President a personal visit. He advised President Obama to take his time with the decision by not allowing the political left, the political right, or the media to push him for a decision before he was ready.²²⁶ Then, when McChrystal made his controversial speech in London the following month, Powell sent the general an e-mail advising him to lower his profile in the press.²²⁷

In summary, commanders must tread carefully on the minefield of ideas, for the media serves as a wedge between the President and his military leadership. Once the media identifies existing tension in civil-military relations, news reporters sensationalize political differences to heighten public interest. This exploitation increases the probability of creating a climate of distrust between a Commander-in-Chief and his military generals. Like Scott and Taylor, General McChrystal's proud military service to the nation ended not because of a poor battlefield decision, but for candid personal views that exposed tension in the system of professional relationships. Military leaders at war would do well to accept the wisdom of a legendary voice

²²⁵Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 456.

²²⁶Woodward, *Obama's War*, 174 and 175.

²²⁷*Ibid.*, 194 and 195.

from the past, when General Winfield Scott declared, “I do not desire to place myself in the most perilous of all positions: a fire upon my rear, from Washington, and the fire, in front, from the [enemy].”²²⁸

²²⁸Polk, *The Diary of a President 1845-1849*, 100 and 101.

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