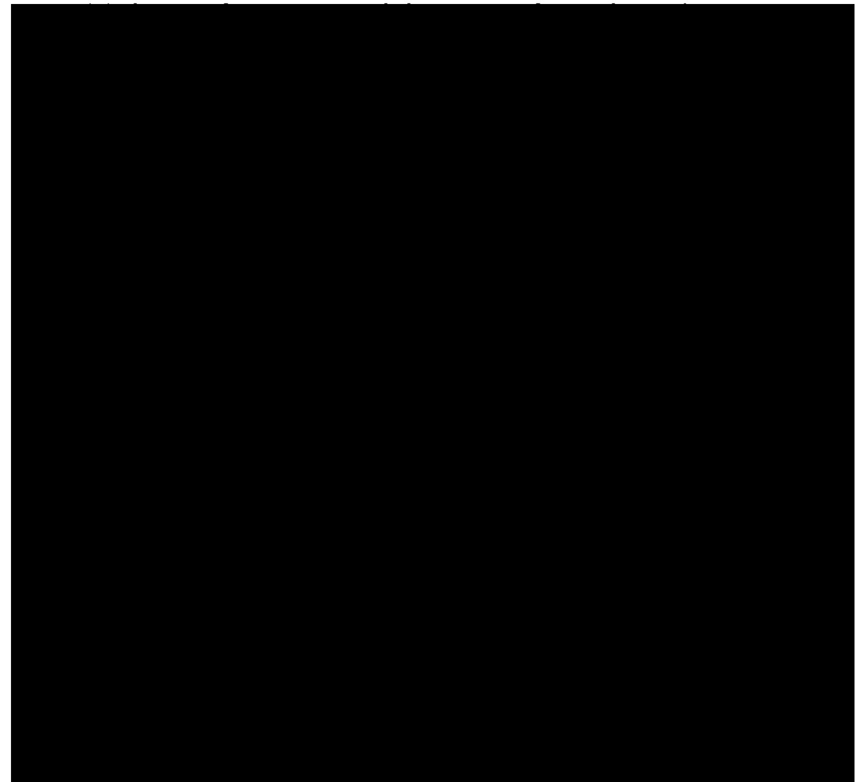
The Polk administration missed few chances to fan the flames of Mexico's war hysteria. It clung fiercely to its contention that Texas was bounded to the south by the Rio

Grande, not the Nueces as it had been when it was a Mexican state. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor, the commander at Fort Jesup in western Louisiana, to move his troops toward the Rio Grande. By mid-July Taylor's forces were encamped at Corpus Christi, just inside the disputed territory. Meanwhile, papers allied to the Polk administration were denouncing the "insolence, stupidity and folly" of the Mexicans, ridiculing their threats of war. Apparently Polk and his supporters believed that bellicosity was the best way to bring the Mexicans to the bargaining table. In fact, bellicosity had precisely the opposite effect: it inspired fear, humiliation, and rage, playing squarely into the hands of Mexico's war party. Herrera, with few options, sent Mexican troops to the Rio Grande with orders to remain south of the river and to avoid hostilities.

The Mexican army was in no sense prepared for war with the United States. "Strictly speaking," lamented one moderate Mexican politician, "the army does not exist. What today bears that name is only a mass of men without training and without weapons."[7] Mexican officers might create an impressive spectacle with their fine mounts and gaudy uniforms, but many were political hacks whose loyalty was questionable and who lacked the most basic military competence. According to one estimate, there were eighteen officers for every five regular soldiers, and those officers' bloated salaries were ruinous to the budget. Service in the Mexican army was infamously unattractive, so recruits had to be coerced. Prisoners, vagrants, and drunkards were pressed into service. Indians were often captured, quite literally, with lassos as they tried to flee from recruiters, and brought to the barracks chained together. Discipline was notoriously derelict. Brantz Mayer, secretary of the U.S. legation during the 1840s, recounted seeing a sergeant at Veracruz drilling a few recruits "to the tap of the drum. The music seemed to be a dead march, and the step of the soldiers was slow and solemn. Nothing could

be more dreary—more heart-sickening."[8] Armaments were scarce and of low quality. Mexico had no firearms factories, so most of the army's weapons were antiquated muskets purchased at bargain prices in Europe, which were useless except at short range. U.S. minister to Mexico Waddy Thompson guessed that no more than one in ten recruits had ever seen a gun prior to doing service, and fewer than one in a hundred had actually fired one. Food and clothing were likewise scarce. Under such circumstances desertion was an entirely sensible option and was often employed. In 1845 General Mariano Arista, who commanded the Mexican forces at the northern frontier, complained that of the four thousand troops who had been sent to the border since 1841, all had deserted, and he was left with only a small corps of veterans on the very eve of hostilities with the United States.



Even as Slidell was packing his bags, General Zachary Taylor and his troops were arriving at the banks of the Rio Grande, deep within the disputed territory. General Pedro Ampudia demanded that Taylor move his forces back across the Nueces River within twenty-four hours. Taylor refused; his primary intention was clearly to provoke an incident that would serve as a pretext for war. President Polk made no se-

cret of his conviction that diplomacy had been exhausted and that he was now resolved to declare war: he needed only some plausible pretext. He pondered basing a war declaration on the supposed insult to Slidell, or perhaps on Mexico's failure to pay its debts, but neither option would be ideal. He fervently hoped the Mexicans would attack Taylor's forces in the disputed territory.

On May 8 he got his wish. On that date Zachary Taylor's dispatch arrived at the White House bearing the news that a force of several hundred Mexicans had attacked a small reconnaissance party on April 25 at a place on the Rio Grande about fifteen miles upstream from the present-day site of Brownsville, Texas. Sixteen Americans had been killed or wounded in the melee, the rest taken prisoner. Polk immediately set to work on his war message, which unequivocally branded the Mexicans as the aggressors and the Americans as long-suffering victims:

> The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte [Rio Grande]. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood on American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

The declaration was, of course, founded upon a deliberate deception. The Mexicans had not invaded American territory. The Americans, rather, had provoked an attack in territory they claimed on dubious grounds. Polk's maneuvering leaves little room to doubt that he was resolved to relieve Mexico of its northern lands by fair means or foul.

7

THE WAR OF 1847

As war began, most realistic Mexicans realized that their country had little hope of victory. They thought, however, that they might manage to avoid a crushing defeat. If they could hold the line at the frontier, it would force the United States to launch a risky amphibious invasion. Perhaps the Mexicans could then bottle up the invaders at the coast, where tropical diseases would take a fearsome toll. If all else failed, they hoped they might be able to wear down the enemy with guerrilla warfare.

All of these strategies, however, presumed the existence of a motivated fighting force. Commodore Matthew Perry, who commanded U.S. naval forces during the war, commented insightfully on the problem. "The Mexicans are not deficient in personal courage," he wrote; "nothing is wanting to make them good soldiers, other than military discipline and national ardor which cannot be expected of men impressed as they are into service, in the most cruel and ruthless manner."[1] The elites who managed the war tried mightily to convince

themselves that the Mexican people clamored for a vindicating war, but in fact very few of those people were passionate about the fight. Nonelite Mexicans—the ones who were expected to do most of the fighting—realized that, in the eyes of their leaders, they were useful only as drudges or cannon fodder. During the war and its aftermath, when impoverished Mexicans fought enthusiastically, it was not against the foreign invaders but against their own overlords.

"National ardor" was also lacking among the elites themselves, making a unified response to the invasion practically impossible. Civil strife had become such an ingrained habit among Mexican politicos that not even a foreign invasion could keep them from fighting one another. "A sensible, patriotic people unites and offers a solid front at the first hint of the common peril," moaned one Mexican politician, even as U.S. forces closed in on Mexico City. "A people that is neither sensible nor patriotic grows weak, thus smoothing out difficulties for the invader, who wins without opposition."[2]