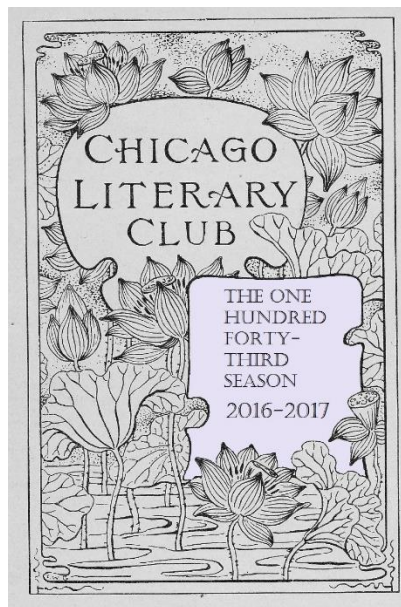


The One Hundred Forty-Third Season of The Chicago Literary Club

“NARROWS ESCAPE FROM GOOD VIEW”

James A. Knox, Jr.

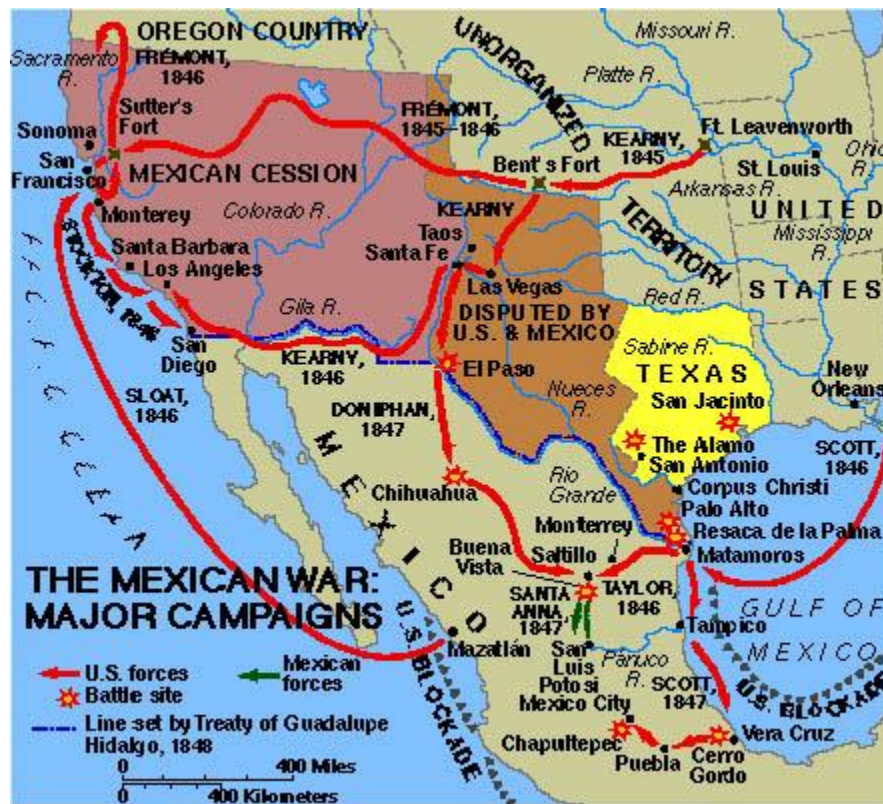
Part I



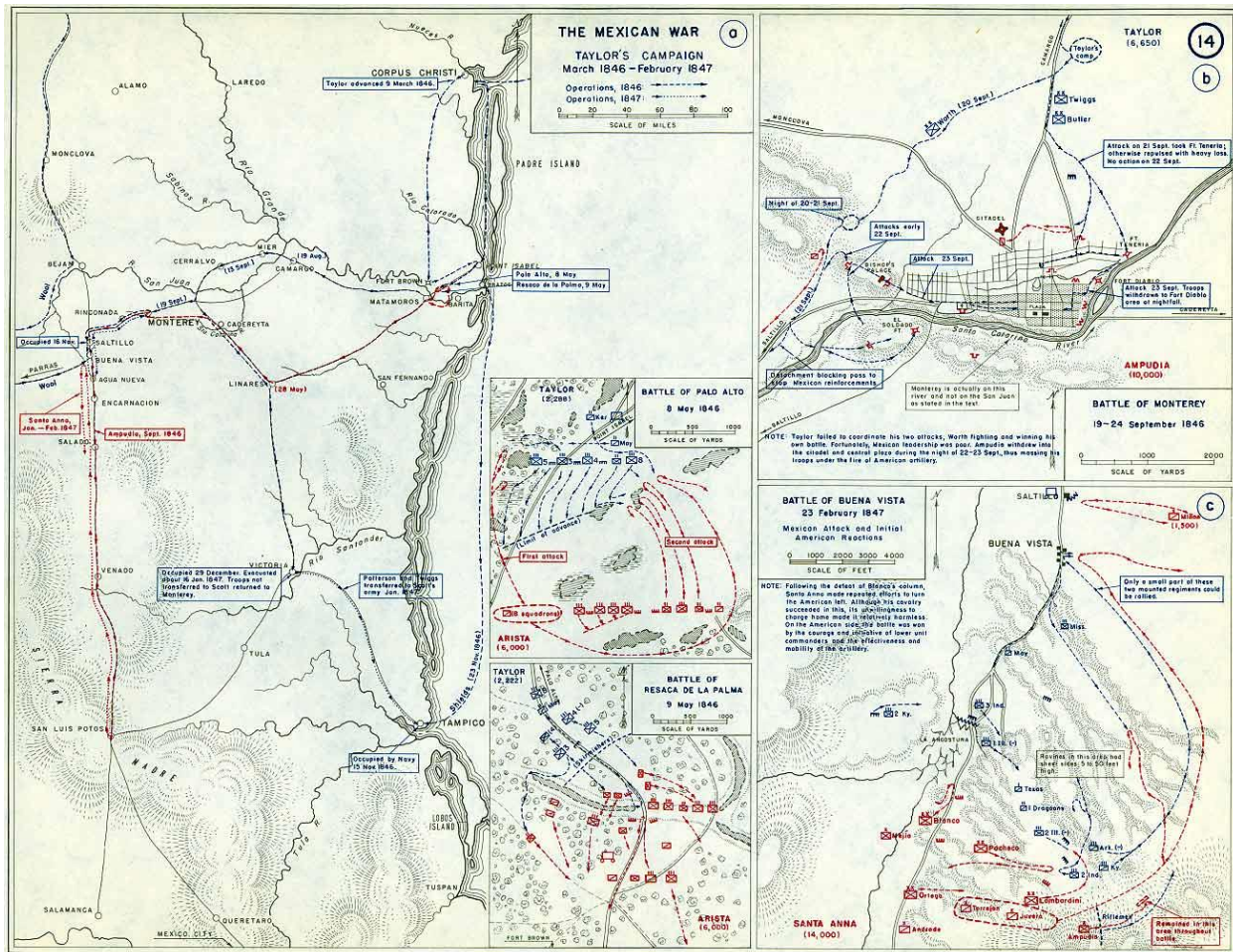
January 23, 2017

Maps

The Mexican War¹



Taylor's Campaign, including the Battle of Buena Vista²



I. Introduction

On a brisk and bright morning in the winter of 1847, the sun rose over a rugged desert valley, high in the Sierra Madre. Two hundred miles beyond the nearest bend of the Rio Grande, six miles south of Saltillo, two armies faced each other. After a skirmish the day before, they remained in position overnight, exposed to cold and drizzle with no tents, fires or blankets. One army, led by Zachary Taylor, fought for the United States of America, the other, under Santa Anna, for the United States of Mexico. Americans call the battle Buena Vista, after a ranch at the back of the site. Mexicans call it La Angostura—the Narrows. This refers to a forty-foot-wide pass at the front of the site. The road from San Luis Potosí snaked through the pass. Santa Anna brought an army this way eleven years earlier, en route to the Alamo. Now nothing would stop him, if he liked, from getting that far again, if he got past Taylor.³

Taylor's 4500 troops had a strong position though. By occupying the road and the bluffs above it with artillery, they had turned the Narrows into a gauntlet. By occupying the plateau running east of the road, they gave the Mexicans below no choice except to run the gauntlet or make an uphill frontal attack across a tangle of gullies that hampered maneuver. High and steep ridges hemming in both sides of the plateau (plus a river inside the ridge on the west side) prevented anything else. It was a gauntlet within a gauntlet. However, the US was badly outnumbered. Though he had lost thousands in marching across the desert, Santa Anna still had over 15,000 men, a three to one advantage. According to the Prussian doctrine of "the mass of decision," if all else is equal but one army outnumbers the other by three to one, that army has a nine to one chance of winning. Though many of Santa Anna's troops were hastily dredged-up conscripts with no combat experience, there were veterans as well, trained in European technique. After all, the Mexican Army had repelled Spanish and French invasions. The Duke of Wellington thought it would defeat the US army too. On the US side, President Polk had sent virtually all of Taylor's regulars back to the Gulf to carry out a new plan under a new general. Most of the troops left were inexperienced, disaffected and unruly volunteers. Even so, many would fight well, such as John Hardin's 1st Illinois, Jeff Davis's Mississippi Rifles and Ben McCullough's Texas Rangers. Taylor still also had several hundred well-trained regulars, including three batteries of the innovative "flying artillery" (under John Washington, Thomas Sherman and Braxton Bragg) that had proved critical to US victories already.⁴

As the Mexican army lined up for the attack in uniforms of crimson, red, green, yellow and blue, sumptuously robed priests said Mass, incense burned, bands played sacred music and Santa Anna gazed up through his spyglass at the *yanquis* hunkered down in the rocks. The Mexicans had reason to be optimistic, the Americans to be uneasy. Already one Mexican detachment, late the day before, had managed, under fire, to move along the ridge to the east, above the American flank.⁵ The outcome of the desperate fighting about to ensue would be in doubt to the very end. Yet, curiously, we tend to forget this battle, not to mention the war, the one we call the Mexican War. The morality of this war has always been dubious but it had an enormous effect on the future of the continent. As for the battle, it was Mexico's best chance to win the war.

II. How the US and Mexico Came To Be at War

A. Manifest Destiny

By 1821, Mexico had broken off from Spain. The United States supported the fledgling republic to its southwest, as shown by the Monroe Doctrine, at least on paper. The friendship did not last though. By 1845, the land area of the United States had doubled, its population had quadrupled and its economy had grown eightfold, since 1800.⁶ That no small part of this could be attributed, directly or indirectly, to slave labor on land stolen from Indians was an inconvenient truth to be reckoned with later. For now, America looked west, at land claimed by Mexico, all the way to the Pacific. As General Worth put it: “Why [does] Mexico matter? Have not our Anglo Saxon race been land stealers from time immemorial and why shouldn’t they? When their gaze is fixed on other lands, the best way is to make out the deeds.”⁷

Mexico, in contrast, was struggling. Its population had stagnated. Its economy had collapsed. Well-tended missions and trading posts in California, Santa Fe and Texas had been abandoned or neglected. Tiny settlements in the north such as Buena Vista had to be walled against Comanche attacks. Back in Mexico City, unrest and civil war prevailed. One corrupt aristocratic Spanish-blooded caudillo after another seized power, but none brought order or prosperity. Most Mexicans were illiterate Indians eking out a peasant existence with no thought of migrating north.⁸

Driven by emerging nativism, Americans viewed Mexico’s plight with antipathy. The so-called “Know Nothings” in New York and elsewhere already were demonizing the Irish and German immigrants who were pouring into America to escape famine and political upheaval back home. An evangelical revival, the Second Great Awakening, was peaking as well. Know-Nothings were virulently anti-Catholic and this had infected the army too. Mexico, in spite of anticlerical tendencies and native traditions, was Catholic. On top of that, a racist attitude could be maintained. To the typical Know-Nothing, the typical Mexican, as an Indian or half-Indian, was no better than his savage cousins to the north.⁹

Above all, America was bent on expansion and Mexico stood in the way. True, a vast wasteland, the Great Plains, remained between the two countries’ settled zones, not to mention even more inhospitable lands further west. Then too there were those “wild Indians.” Following the buffalo, Comanches, Kiowas and Apaches held sway over the southwest, while Lakotas, Cheyennes and others ranged across the northwest. US settlement, however, had never been stopped by Indians for very long. Pioneers had opened a trail across the Louisiana Purchase to Oregon and the Pacific. Americans were beginning to arrive in California by sea. However, claims by Great Britain and Russia threatened to impair further settlement in that direction. Not only did Britain not recognize US sovereignty in the area then known as Oregon (which stretched to Alaska), but it had designs on Alta California, that Mexican province that fronted the Pacific south of Oregon. In fact everything beyond a diagonal running southeast from Oregon was Mexico—all we now know as the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona plus half of New Mexico (Texas already claimed the rest) and part of Colorado. Even Texas was still Mexico, according to Mexico, which did not recognize Texas independence. Mexico asserted sovereignty but Americans wanted in. Something had to give.¹⁰

B. Texas – Revolution and Annexation

In the 1820s, Mexico had opened the door. Americans were already entering illegally but now they got permission to found colonies in Texas. Led by Stephen F. Austin, who would pass through Buena Vista on his way to Mexico City to close the deal, these Texians, as they were called—agreed to be Mexican citizens. Slavery, though outlawed, was tolerated at first, but in 1836, when Mexican attempts to govern more strictly from the capital were resisted, Santa Anna, Mexico's president, marched troops into San Antonio. After the Alamo, Santa Anna ordered a second massacre at Goliad. Texans fled north, but Sam Houston's 830-man army, outnumbered and facing entrapment against a bayou, struck back at San Jacinto, taking the Mexicans by surprise and capturing Santa Anna. The Texans handed him a treaty recognizing Texas independence. He assented and was released but Mexico repudiated the deal and vowed reconquest. Years of raids and provocations by both sides followed. Texas remained vulnerable and demanded US annexation but the US was not ready. It would have meant war. President Andrew Jackson did not want war. Nor did he want to upset the balance between free and slave states. Not until John Tyler became president did Texas move to the top of the agenda. Intrigue between Texas and Britain had become alarming. Besides, Tyler, nominally a Whig, did not have a solid base of support. Henry Clay was the preeminent Whig and Tyler had alienated the Whigs by vetoing legislation for improvements in the West. As the 1844 election approached, Tyler tried to boost his prospects by pushing for annexation.¹¹

C. Mr. Polk's War

The Democrats thwarted Tyler's move by coming around to it themselves. "Old Hickory" (Jackson) summoned "Young Hickory" (James Knox Polk), to the Hermitage. Polk's career as a Tennessee politician had foundered when he lost a race for governor, but he agreed to run for president. After several ballots, Polk, the original "dark horse," became the Democratic nominee at the convention in Baltimore. Campaigning for expansion, Polk then pulled off an upset over Clay. With President-Elect Polk's support, Congress admitted Texas to the Union in the last days of Tyler. Polk characterized it as a reannexation, controversially suggesting Texas had been part of the Louisiana Purchase. Jackson, dying, left some final advice: "let war come if necessary."¹²

War did come, necessary or not. Vowing to serve only one term, Polk had no time to lose. His audacity was staggering—he wanted not just Texas but everything to the Pacific. He did not, however, want to do this as simply a naked conquest. As with the Indian nations, a treaty would be better, but if it took a war to force a treaty, so be it. The way Polk handled it, it did end up taking a war—Mr. Polk's war, as they called it. Not until US troops under Winfield Scott occupied Mexico City—the Halls of Montezuma—was it over, but Mexico finally then came to terms by entering into the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. For the net price of about \$18 million, Mexico gave up 529,000 square miles. That is less than 19 cents an acre. If Texas (even bigger then than now) was included (since Mexico never had recognized Texas independence), Mexico ceded 915,000 square miles, 55% of its territory. In the face of not only unexpected Mexican resistance, but a strong antiwar movement at home, Polk prevailed. Polk pulled off another feat as well, this one without a war. He got Britain to drop its claims to half of Oregon (with Britain retaining what became British Columbia). It was an astonishing aggrandizement of the nation. Woody Guthrie might not have sung about the redwood forest had it

not been for Polk. That land would not have been our land. The morality of invading Mexico, however, still is troublesome. US Grant, who was there, called it “the wicked war.”¹³

Polk’s first move was diplomatic, but he bungled it. He wanted to see whether Mexico would concede not only that Texas now belonged to the United States, but that the Rio Grande was its border, as Santa Anna (in captivity at least), had acknowledged in 1836. The border was not, as Mexico claimed, the Nueces River, 160 miles north. That no Texans had settled south of the Nueces did not matter. Polk also was ready to buy California and the colony at Santa Fe. Polk’s envoys to Mexico City, however, were arrogant and ignorant of protocol. They got nowhere. Though there had been interest in a deal after the exile of Santa Anna to Cuba, President Herrera would not even see these men. Mexico was not for sale. It severed diplomatic relations. Plan A was scrapped.¹⁴

D. Taylor Goes To Texas

In June 1845, Polk implemented Plan B. He sent the “Army of Occupation” to Corpus Christi, a forlorn new outpost on the Gulf of Mexico, at the mouth of the Nueces. To lead this force, he chose a 61 year-old War of 1812 veteran—Brevet Brigadier General Zachary Taylor. Taylor’s last combat had been in Florida eight years earlier, fighting the Seminoles. Before that he had led Illinois troops, including Lincoln, in the Black Hawk war of 1832. Known as “Old Rough and Ready,” he wore a straw hat, blue jeans, a linen-duster coat, plain shoes, chewed tobacco and rode a nag called “Old Whitey.” Self-effacing, bluff, stolid and folksy, he did not play the aristocrat. Rank and file troops adored him. Though he owned cotton lands worked by slaves, he was a Whig and had reservations about fighting Indians. He had even opposed the annexation of Texas. In the campaign to come he would (albeit with limited success) forbid depredations against Mexican civilians. He also struggled ineffectively to restrain hostility against his Irish and German volunteers. Too many junior officers, fresh out of West Point, would “buck and gag” them, or even string them up by their thumbs, for the slightest infractions. Taylor was not considered a military genius, but no one doubted he had good judgment. Most importantly, in battle, he was imperturbable.¹⁵

Taylor’s mission at first was simply to camp at Corpus and see if that would bring about the concession Polk sought. It did not. Mexico remained intransigent. As winter arrived, Taylor’s disease-ridden troops became ever more miserable and restless in their flimsy tents. In February, 1846, Polk set Plan C in motion. He sent Taylor’s army forward to the Rio Grande. The army built a fort while the navy came down for a blockade. Large numbers of ill-treated Irish now took the opportunity to desert to the Mexican army, encamped just across the river. They simply swam over when the sentries weren’t looking. They would form the San Patricio Brigade, an artillery unit that would make the most of the Mexicans’ heavy guns, despite their immobility and antiquity. First though, the war had to begin. Soon enough, an incident occurred. Mexican cavalry attacked a US patrol. The US declared war, won two quick battles, occupied Matamoros and moved upriver. Mexico pulled back the remnants of its army but became only more defiant.¹⁶

III. Taylor Occupies Northeast Mexico

A. Monterrey and the Taylor-Ampudia Truce

Plan D was mind-blowing. Polk launched three expeditions—Taylor to Monterrey, Wool to Chihuahua, and Kearny to Santa Fe and on to California. Not since Coronado had anything like it

been seen. Fanning out over the continent, troops, horses, mules and oxen pulling wagons trekked across mountains and deserts. The route to Chihuahua proved impassible and General Wool's troops, including the 1st and 2d Illinois, under Colonels Hardin and Bissell, ended up at Saltillo under Taylor, where they would soon have a leading role.¹⁷

Taylor made it to Monterrey with little resistance but the Mexican army under General Ampudia took a stand there. The house-to-house fighting proved costly so Taylor cut his losses by entering into a truce. The Mexican army withdrew and Taylor occupied the city. Objective achieved, he must have thought. Surely peace could now be negotiated. Taylor even began to nurse a political ambition—himself for president. American newspapers were starting to play him up.¹⁸

B. The Return of Santa Anna

By November 1846, Taylor—and Polk—knew Mexico was not giving up. Santa Anna was raising a new army at San Luis Potosí. This was vexing because Santa Anna would not have been in Mexico at all had not Polk caused him to be smuggled back from Cuba. Polk thought he would take power again and bring Mexico to the table. Polk was only half-right. Santa Anna would take power again, first as general and later as president, but he was not ready to fold. Whether out of *amor patriae* or *amor sui*, Santa Anna would see to it that the fight went on.¹⁹

Taylor understood this and ordered General Worth forward from Monterrey but got a letter from Secretary of War Marcy. He was not to go beyond Monterrey. Taylor did not obey. After installing a garrison fifty miles to the southwest, at Saltillo, he sent a company further down the road to see if Santa Anna might come that way, across the desert from San Luis Potosí, 300 miles south. When he learned the Mexicans themselves had destroyed the water tanks along the road, Taylor concluded Santa Anna had other plans.²⁰

Taylor returned to Monterrey to quell unrest and shore up his supply line. Taylor then took steps to establish garrisons in Tampico (a port on the Gulf of Mexico), Victoria (150 miles southeast of Monterrey) and Parras (90 miles west of Saltillo), in addition to Monterrey and Saltillo. When Santa Anna learned Taylor was taking the bulk of his army to Victoria, he began a move to Saltillo. When Taylor learned of that, he turned back from Victoria and ordered all forces to Saltillo. By Christmas, General Butler had arrived at Saltillo from Monterrey and General Wool from Parras. Santa Anna got wind of this and took back his move to Saltillo. When Taylor learned Santa Anna had done that, he headed to Victoria again, in case Santa Anna now went that way. However, scouts advised that the Mexicans would not be able to haul their artillery across the pass from Tula. On January 4, 1847, Taylor completed his move into Victoria anyway. By then, the entire Mexican garrison, a single brigade of cavalry, had fled.²¹

C. Polk Downsizes Taylor

General Taylor by now had more serious problems behind his own lines. Back in Washington, Polk was furious. Mexico continued to wage war and Polk blamed Taylor. His unauthorized armistice at Monterrey (which Polk vehemently cut short) had left the Mexicans with the will to keep fighting. His maneuvering did not end the resistance either. Polk was nowhere near the deal he wanted. Taylor's domestic popularity irked Polk too. The penny press's lionization of Taylor imperiled the Democratic Party's agenda. Something had to be done.²²

Polk implemented Plan E. Taylor would not be taking part. Polk ordered Winfield Scott to take most of Taylor's troops for an amphibious operation to Veracruz, Mexico's main port far to the south. From there, Scott was to follow the path Cortés took in 1519 and conquer Mexico City. Polk and Scott would get all the glory while Taylor cooled his heels in a forgotten theater. Scott arrived on the Texas coast, assumed seniority and made the plan known. Taylor protested, to no avail. Scott sent an order directly to Taylor's subordinate, General Butler, in Monterrey. He was to send all his troops (i.e. Taylor's troops) to Scott. A copy of the letter was dispatched to Taylor in Victoria. On January 13, the courier and his escort were nearing Victoria when the courier insisted on walking by himself into a small town for provisions. He was lassoed and murdered. The letter was taken to Santa Anna. Meanwhile, a second copy reached Taylor. He did not know what happened to the first copy for several days. Taylor was apoplectic. Scott would leave him with a handful of regulars and a few thousand untested volunteers to face a Mexican army of 20,000. Nine thousand of Taylor's best troops would join Scott.²³

Taylor's concerns abated when he learned Scott's plans had been intercepted. Taylor correctly presumed that Santa Anna now knew about the plan to invade Veracruz. Taylor reckoned Santa Anna would abandon the north and hasten to prepare the defense of Veracruz. It did not make sense for Santa Anna to take Mexico's only remaining army north across 250 miles of desert, to strike at what had become a minor force, while leaving Veracruz, 750 miles to his rear, wide open to the enemy's main force.²⁴

D. Santa Anna Marches on Taylor

Taylor even began to consider moving south himself but thought better of it and assembled all the forces left to him at Saltillo once again. Soon it began to appear that Santa Anna might come north after all. Reports of cavalry on the move came in. Scott ordered Taylor to abandon Saltillo and hole up in Monterrey, but Taylor ignored that order. Taylor advised the War Department that unless it insisted he fall back, he was going to hold his position. If Santa Anna came his way, he could not be allowed to reach Saltillo and replenish his army after the trek across the desert. If Taylor retreated to Monterrey, he would be vulnerable to a siege. Taylor prepared to make do with several hundred regulars and 5000 volunteers. He left General Worth in Saltillo with a few hundred men to guard his line of supply against a cutoff by Mexican cavalry and sent the rest under General Wool down the road to Agua Nueva, a well-provisioned site in the middle of a plain, twenty miles beyond Buena Vista.²⁵

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, after all, was not to be trifled with. Once a prisoner, later an exile, never a coward, here he was again. The most ambitious man in Mexico, he was energetic, opportunistic, greedy, vain, corrupt, ruthless and reckless. He fancied himself the Napoleon of the West. Although the disaster of Texas had been his doing, he had repelled a Spanish invasion in 1829 and a French invasion in 1838, where he lost a leg below the knee, buried the limb with honors and returned to power. He had already been president of Mexico eight times. To defeat Taylor would advance his political fortunes once again, even if it did not make sense militarily. Besides, maybe it did make sense. He knew Scott had taken almost all the regulars from Taylor's army. He knew Scott's expedition would not get underway until spring. He knew he could get back to Veracruz in time if necessary (and did). But meanwhile his army would be far bigger than Taylor's. Victory was likely even if the Americans did have better artillery. With Taylor finished off, he could drive on to the Texas

border and beyond. Scott would have to cancel the Veracruz operation. Peace could be negotiated on better terms. Santa Anna would get the credit. He could not wait until spring anyway. Mexico City's support was flagging. Mexican newspapers were accusing him of conspiring with the Americans. His army had been difficult and expensive to raise and support and it would desert him if he did not use it now.²⁶

It was remarkable that Santa Anna put together an army at all. No government funds were available but Santa Anna seized 98 silver bars from the mines and melted them down to buy arms and supplies. What was left of General Ampudia's army was rounded up but to fill out the ranks, press gangs visited dance halls, bars and prisons. There was no time to train these wretches and the weaponry issued to them was poor. Nevertheless, Santa Anna assembled the troops in the plaza and gave a rousing speech. Privations awaited them but soon they would possess the enemy's riches. Pointing north, Santa Anna drew roars. On January 28, 1847, the army began to depart. Almost twenty thousand men fell into line—heavy infantry, light infantry, cavalry, lancers. The San Patricio brigade carried a green banner plus images of St. Patrick, the shamrock and the harp of Erin. Regimental bands played Adios. Hundreds of mules hauled 20 cannons and 21 ammunition wagons. On February 2, Santa Anna joined the column, accompanied by scarlet-clad hussars, several gorgeous courtesans and eight mules to draw his gilded carriage. Noncombatants, including women and children, brought up the rear. All went well enough for 100 miles but then, just as the troops entered the harshest terrain, a cold front struck. Wind, rain, sleet and snow pierced uniforms that were far too light. Though pickets had orders to shoot anyone trying to desert, men snuck off or fell by the wayside and died in droves. The attrition only worsened in the hot weather that followed, as many discarded rations and fell ill.²⁷

The march took three weeks and cost 4000 men. By February 20, the survivors reached La Encarnación, fifteen miles south of Taylor's army at Agua Nueva. By now the Mexicans were almost out of food and water. Santa Anna's earlier order to disable wells and scatter cattle had come back to haunt him but he had always planned to seize American supplies. He could not linger. He knew Taylor was at Agua Nueva, where he could be outflanked. By virtue of having made it, his surviving troops were his toughest. When Santa Anna pulled into camp, their shouts of viva echoed across the desert. Meanwhile, Taylor was still in the dark. He had sent some Kentucky cavalry south to investigate but none returned, for the Mexicans had captured them. Taylor next dispatched more formidable reconnaissance—Lieutenant Colonel Charles May's 300 dragoons, a battery of artillery and a company of Texas Rangers under Taylor's chief of scouts, Ben McCulloch.²⁸ Part II will begin with their adventure.

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¹⁰ Greenberg at 55-57, 67-68, 84-85.

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