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# Sufficient to make heaven weep: the American army in the Mexican War

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SUFFICIENT TO MAKE HEAVEN WEEP:  
THE AMERICAN ARMY IN THE MEXICAN WAR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in partial fulfillment of the  
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in

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by  
Brian McGowan  
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## **Abstract**

The Mexican War, 1846-1848, has often been overlooked in American history. Scholars have been more interested in assigning blame for the conflict, or assessing the role played by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in the coming of the Civil War. Only recently have scholars made any attempt to understand the motivations and attitudes brought to Mexico by American soldiers. This thesis focuses on how the racial and religious attitudes of American soldiers during the war were an implementation of the nationalism inherent in Manifest Destiny.

Americans used their perceived racial and religious superiority to further the goals of Manifest Destiny. Mexico was a country that could be the target of American aggression precisely because it did not conform to the proper standards of “civilization” Americans believed they enjoyed. American soldiers believed that God assigned them the duty of showing Mexicans how to worship properly, conduct a war, and practice republican government. Americans expressed their feelings in writing and through their contact with Mexican soldiers and civilians. American racial and religious attitudes drove their attitudes about Mexican women and allowed them to see Mexico as a failed republic that could be justifiably invaded by a nation espousing republican virtue.

## Introduction

### The Designs of Priestcraft

On February 7, 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson presented a lecture in Boston in which he extolled the unique greatness of America. Two years before the phrase Manifest Destiny first appeared in the lexicon, Emerson captured its essence. His talk, “The Young American,” seized on several important reasons why America had the “destiny” to lead the world. Emerson claimed such factors as democracy, free enterprise, education, and small-scale agriculture drove America to unprecedented levels of national power.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson’s belief in America’s greatness knew few bounds. He claimed that America should lead all other nations because it represented progress:

It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race. It is the country of the Future. From Washington, proverbially ‘the city of magnificent distances,’ through all its cities, states, and territories, it is a country of beginnings, of projects, of designs, and expectations.<sup>2</sup>

Emerson presented the idea of Manifest Destiny to large segments of the population. By the time war with Mexico broke out, in the spring of 1846, many of the men who would volunteer to fight had a powerful belief in the superiority of America.

America’s vast territorial resources provided the fuel for American growth, according to Emerson, but Americans required education to harness the potential of the land fully. He

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<sup>1</sup>“The Young American,” in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edward Waldo Emerson ed., 12 vols, (1903; New York: AMS Press, 1968), 1:363.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:371.

cautioned his audience about relying on an education that focused too much on “scholastic and traditional” themes because only a connection to the land “is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture.” One of the major reasons why Emerson sought an education system that avoided too heavy a reliance on scholastic learning was because he felt traditional education fostered the development of an aristocracy. To Emerson, the development of an American aristocracy would poison the progress of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Emerson’s lecture captured the feeling of American exceptionalism that so many American soldiers brought with them when they went to fight the Mexican War. Men from every state, and several territories, fought in the war for many different reasons. Some joined the army for adventure, others out of economic necessity, and still others simply because they wanted to kill Mexicans. Most of the soldiers, regardless of their region of origin, often expressed their beliefs in American exceptionalism. They did not all use language as eloquent as Emerson did, but they made the same points.

Many Americans in Mexico repeated Emerson’s claim that the lack of a feudal government in America allowed the nation to progress more rapidly than any other. They believed, like Emerson, that America held a certain genius for democracy that other nations could only imitate, never duplicate. In the minds of these soldiers, Mexico and its inhabitants could never achieve the exceptionalism that America enjoyed.

For many American soldiers in the Mexican War, they saw Mexicans as deficient in two primary categories: race and religion. The Anglo-Saxon race and Protestantism set America apart, and when mixed with democracy they allowed America to become the greatest nation on

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:365-366.



Earth, according to Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans. Because Mexicans were neither Anglo-Saxon, nor Protestant, Mexico had no chance of achieving the same status as America.

One American soldier, Sergeant Thomas Barclay, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, agreed almost entirely with Emerson's view of America. What Barclay saw in Mexico only confirmed in his mind what Emerson spoke about before the war:

Neither commerce, manufactures or agriculture flourish [in Mexico]. Large bodies of land are owned by individuals and worked by the Peons, the Indian race, the most degraded and ignorant the human species. These poor \_\_\_\_\_ and unfortunate beings, the descendants of the lordly Montezumas, are made the beasts of burden, are sold and transferred from master to master and undergo a slavery far more abject than the negroes of the north. Education, which in all civilized countries is cherished carefully, by government is here entrusted to the clergy, who, far from wishing to tutor their puppets according to the liberal and enlightened principles of the present day confine their minds to the narrow contracted views suited to the designs of priestcraft. Nothing noble can be hoped from the rising generation.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the optimism Emerson saw in future generations of Americans, Barclay saw only continued poverty and backwardness for future Mexicans. He claimed that Mexico failed in the areas in which America succeeded. Because Mexico turned its education system over to the Catholic clergy, it ensured that future generations of Mexico would become "puppets" of the Church. These puppets allowed the continuation of an aristocracy that operated an agricultural system that lacked any sense of freedom, according to Barclay. Because of their race and religion, Barclay saw no way for Mexicans to overcome their cultural inferiority. For the first time in their lives, American soldiers, like Barclay, encountered masses of people who worshiped differently, used a different labor system, interpreted gender roles differently, and who did not

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas Barclay diary entry Sept. 14, 1847 in Allan Peskin, ed., *Volunteers: The Mexican War Journals of Private Richard Coulter and Sergeant Thomas Barclay, Company E, Second Pennsylvania Infantry*, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1991), 181-182.

understand democracy. Americans responded to these differences in a variety of ways, but they all took the differences as further evidence of Mexican inferiority.

## Chapter 1

### Sufficient to Make Heaven Weep

Shortly after the Battle of Buena Vista, in late February 1847, Lieutenant Abner Doubleday, a West Point graduate from New York, arrived on the field. He saw first hand the remains of hundreds who fell. Years later Doubleday recounted the scene in his memoirs:

Upon these high tablelands of Mexico the mixed races of the septentrional had contended with the Anglo Saxon for a great prize . . . Yet there upon the greensward equal at last in death lay the swart Mexican and the white northerner, the weapons of destruction still grasped in their lifeless hands.<sup>1</sup>

Doubleday summed up the Mexican War as nothing more than a struggle of races. The pure white race found itself locked in deadly combat with the amalgamation of Mexican races for control of the continent. The natural inferiority of the Mexican was so great that they could only achieve equality with a white American after death.

Doubleday was certainly not alone in his views on the racial inferiority of Mexicans, but he did take a different track than many. Almost all American soldiers in Mexico described the Mexicans they encountered in derisive terms, but the terms varied. Americans, as a group, were never able to agree fully on what racial components combined to create a Mexican. Even individual soldiers changed their minds over the course of their stay in the country.<sup>2</sup> Most

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<sup>1</sup>Abner Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army: The Reminiscences of Abner Doubleday from the Collections of the New York Historical Society*, Joseph E. Chance, ed., (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>2</sup>The best example of this phenomena can be found in Ephraim Kirby Smith, *To Mexico with Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to his Wife*, Emma J. Blackwood, ed., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917). In an early letter Smith writes about the difficulty in distinguishing between Indians and Mexicans in Northern Mexico (82), and later he claims that Mexicans from Tlacatalpin, in central Mexico, “are at least half white” (131).

Americans, however, eventually came to a consensus that Mexicans fell somewhere between blacks and Indians.

One West Point graduate from Ohio described the citizens of Reynosa as ranging “from pure Indian to the white person,” but a volunteer officer from the same state, John Lowe, described Mexicans as “haughty Castillians in whose veins flowed the pure blood of Cortes, the yellow aztec, the stupid Indian and the decrepid negro [sic].”<sup>3</sup> Lowe drew an useful picture of the Mexican race. To him, and many of his fellow Americans, a Mexican resulted from miscegenation among European whites, Indians, and blacks. There were few things so disheartening to an American than walking into a country that lacked racial purity and stratification. All American soldiers, not just those from the South, sought to impose American values of racial identity on Mexico, and to their own army. It never bothered the soldiers that while Mexicans certainly viewed their own society as racially stratified, it did not match the American ideal of what society should look like. Americans used the experience they gained from living in a society partially built on slavery to understand Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have been writing about the Mexican War since even before it ended, but only recently have there been any attempts to understand the war as the soldiers and civilians involved experienced it. Books focusing on the political and diplomatic aspects of the war provide a

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<sup>3</sup>Rankin Dilworth diary entry, June 14, 1846 in Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance, eds., *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth, U.S. Army*, (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1996), 35; John W. Lowe to his wife, October 10, 1847, quoted in James M. McCaffrey, ed., “*Surrounded by Dangers of All Kinds:*” *The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 89.

<sup>4</sup>It appears that American soldiers from all regions viewed Mexicans much the same way. The soldiers that stand out are those from Texas. Texans generally despised Mexicans far more than other Americans, and they acted on their hatred often. Most of the ill will between Texans and Mexicans can be traced to the border conflicts and outright wars fought over the previous fifteen years.

necessary framework, but fail to address many of the larger social issues involved. Scholars have begun to turn their attention to examining the Mexican War within the larger context of American life in the mid-nineteenth century. Issues such as slavery, nativism, and the various Indian wars shaped the soldiers who took the fields of battle in Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

The Mexican War was the first major American war fought entirely in a different country, but not the first time Americans faced a non-white opponent. From practically the moment Europeans arrived in North America, conflict arose with the native inhabitants. Americans fought against Indians along the frontier as it moved slowly westward, and in wars between the colonial powers. Even the American Revolution saw a significant amount of Indian fighting. By the nineteenth century, Indian fighting became somewhat routine.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw no fewer than three significant military actions against Indians in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The majority of conflicts saw little or no fighting, but several of them erupted into major conflicts necessitating the mustering of militia. One of

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<sup>5</sup>The earliest histories of the war, some written with the American army still in Mexico, sought either to justify or condemn the action. Some of these still prove valuable to historians, including, Nathan C. Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War: Its Causes, Conduct, and Consequences, Comprising an Account of the Various Military and Naval Operation, from Its Commencement to the Treaty of Peace*, (1849, Chicago: Rio Grande Press, 1965). For decades the standard text on the war has been Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919). The best summary of the diplomatic writings on the War is found in the introduction to Gene M. Brack, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny, 1821 - 1846: An Essay on the Origins of the Mexican War*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1975). Recent scholarship into the lives of American soldiers and civilians was initiated by the redefining work Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). The best study of the U.S. Army as an institution is found in Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1997), and the best book on the soldiers who fought in that army is found in James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846 - 1848*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992). All of the recent books examine, to some extent, race related issues in Mexico during the War, but do not give the topic the attention it deserves.

<sup>6</sup>Mary Ellen Rowe, *Bulwark of the Republic: The American Militia in the Antebellum West*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), provides excellent background on the need for, and use of, militia regiments in the frontier states.

the largest Indian wars was the Second Seminole War. It raged in Florida from 1832 through 1845 as a series of lightning raids and double crosses by both sides. Slightly more than 10,000 regular army soldiers and about 30,000 militia served in this Seminole War.<sup>7</sup> The enemy they fought was elusive, and proved hard to catch in the open. Only by modifying their tactics, did the Americans manage to defeat their enemy. Most of the fighting took the form of guerrilla warfare, and pitched battles rarely occurred. Massive attacks on Seminole villages occurred frequently, and little evidence suggests that the army made any distinction between combatant and civilian.<sup>8</sup> Many regular army soldiers and officers received their first taste of combat in the Florida swamps, and the enemy they met in Mexico reminded them of the Indians they saw on the home front. While the situation in Mexico never degenerated to the point of the Second Seminole War, American soldiers treated Mexicans as they would have treated their racial inferiors in similar circumstances.

The American soldiers who saw Mexicans as Indians were not entirely wrong. Those who were entirely Indian, or of half-Indian, half-European descent formed most of Mexico's populace. By the outbreak of the war, few Mexicans remained who could claim pure Spanish ancestry.<sup>9</sup> American diarists were always careful to record when they encountered a Mexican who was not an Indian, or at least did not look like an Indian. To John Lowe, the volunteer officer from Ohio, Mexicans were originally composed of white blood, but they ruined their

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<sup>7</sup>John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War: 1835-1842*, (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1985), 325.

<sup>8</sup>Mahon, 321-324; K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 94-95.

<sup>9</sup>On Mexican demographics see Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword: The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 36-37.

chances for racial purity by intermixing with Indians and blacks. His ideas, if not his comments, were typical.

While differences did exist among American soldiers from different regions of the country, and different social standing, it is impossible to identify an American's region of origin based on his description of the "Mexican race." Many members of the regular army fought in the Second Seminole War, and a disproportionate number of volunteers came from the Western states.<sup>10</sup> Americans thought they knew an Indian when they saw one, and they found them often in Mexico.

Once they identified a Mexican as an Indian, American soldiers rarely wasted any time in branding them with all of the negative traits associated with Indians in America. The most common "Indian trait" assigned to Mexicans was their lack of civilization. A West Point graduate from Ohio found Mexicans "very far behind the civilized world," because they used a technique he thought was "ancient" to plant corn.<sup>11</sup> Several other soldiers blamed Mexico's social failures on the Indian background of its inhabitants. A West Point graduate who came from Massachusetts, but later married into a slave holding family in Louisiana, told his wife that "the majority of Mexicans seem rather to vegetate than otherwise."<sup>12</sup>

Captain Franklin Smith, a volunteer officer from Mississippi, learned from a New England born interpreter who resided in Mexico for the previous fifteen years everything he

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<sup>10</sup>According to Greg Hospodor 64.8 percent of volunteers came from the slave states, which at the time included most of the Western frontier. Gregory S. Hospodor, "Honor Bound: Southern Honor and the Mexican War" (Ph. D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2000), 36n.

<sup>11</sup>Theodore Laidley to Father, June 3, 1847 in McCaffrey, *Laidley Letters*, 94.

<sup>12</sup>Ralph Kirkham to Kate, June 1, 1847 in Robert Ryal Miller, ed., *The Mexican War Journal & Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), x-xii, 21.

thought he needed to know about how that the racial composition of its people undermined the entire social order of Mexico:

Every thing proves that the Mexicans as people are capable of any treachery bribery corruption fraud and robbery. There is and must be in every country any ways a civilized class that has pride of character - the men are honorable - the women virtuous but in Mexico this class must be smaller than in any other country called *civilized*.<sup>13</sup>

Smith acknowledged that there must be some Mexicans who exhibited the traits necessary to govern the country, but he believed them few in number, and he had not encountered any. About three weeks after making these observations Smith found himself at a fandango where he met some members of Mexico's upper class. The meeting did nothing to allay his fear, however. Smith wrote that the fandango only served to confirm the interpreter's observations.<sup>14</sup> True to his values, Smith even blamed one of his cases of diarrhea on fish and oranges he ate, which he described as "perfidious deceptious and false."<sup>15</sup> The race of their stewards even tainted Mexican foods.

Another major fact of life in antebellum America life made it easy for some American soldiers to scoff at their opposition, and in some cases, their own comrades. Nativism affected most of the nation at mid-century, and during the Mexican War a powerful anti-Irish sentiment was clearly evident in the army. The soldiers most likely to express nativist sentiments against

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<sup>13</sup>Franklin Smith journal entry, Oct. 27, 1847 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 89. Captain Smith moved to Mississippi sometime between 1839 and 1844. Both he and his wife were from Baltimore, Maryland.

<sup>14</sup>Smith journal entry, Nov. 15, 1847, *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>15</sup>Smith journal entry, Nov. 10, 1847, *Ibid.*, 108



European immigrants in the army's ranks came from the North, but many Southerners joined them in applying their insults to the Mexican population.<sup>16</sup>

About 47 percent of the American army under Taylor's command was foreign born.<sup>17</sup> Most of the foreigners were from Ireland, but Germans, Englishmen, and Scots made up significant minorities. When Abner Doubleday wrote his memoirs, he felt compelled to comment on the desirability of a soldier's nationality. He preferred Germans because "they have been accustomed to a stern military regime in their own country and hence are better fitted for service, than the others who are wholly undisciplined." The others to whom he referred were the Irish. Doubleday claimed he could count on Irish soldiers in battle, but "these qualities hardly outweigh the serious disorder he causes at times," primarily the result of whiskey.<sup>18</sup>

American born soldiers who discriminated against their foreign born comrades, like Doubleday, had little trouble transferring their verbal, and sometimes physical, attacks to Mexicans. Discipline in the army came swift and harsh, but officers did not apply it evenly. Soldiers of the regular army labored under stricter discipline than the volunteers, and immigrants in the regular army suffered worst of all. Harsh punishments for minor infractions were common, and charges were far more likely to be brought against immigrant soldiers.<sup>19</sup> When conducting drills, regular army officers treated their soldiers as if they were children incapable of

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<sup>16</sup>Determining an actual figure is not possible, but Northern diaries and journals show a greater propensity for nativist sentiments, probably because of the greater immigration into the North.

<sup>17</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 9.

<sup>18</sup>Chance, *Doubleday*, 23.

<sup>19</sup>Winders, 62. See also Paul Foss, *A Short Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 92, 125.

being motivated by anything but punishment. Instead of teaching their German soldiers enough English to understand basic drill commands, the officers beat them until they acted properly.<sup>20</sup> According to Abner Doubleday “many officers still think this power of summary punishment is essential to maintain order and discipline.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly not all officers punished their soldiers harshly, but ruthless punishment of regular army soldiers is generally considered as a major cause of desertion, and a leading factor in the formation of the San Patricio Battalion of American deserters who fought for Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

Zachary Taylor, whom the anti-immigrant Native American Party courted for a presidential nomination in 1848, had the difficult job of keeping the peace in Northern Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Starting from virtually the moment he took command, Taylor issued orders to respect the property and life of Mexicans, but he did little to enforce the orders.<sup>24</sup> Taylor believed, and the Polk Administration supported him, that the military had no authority to try a soldier for crimes

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<sup>20</sup>Foos, 103-109. The desertion rate in the regular army reached an astonishing 13 percent, far higher than in any other American war. Peter F. Stevens, *The Rogue's March: John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-1848*, (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1999), 3-4, attributes the high rate to a combination of harsh discipline and anti-Catholic feeling. There is little evidence, however, that Catholics had a significantly higher desertion rate than Protestants, so most other authors feel more comfortable blaming the desertion rate solely on harsh discipline.

<sup>21</sup>Chance, *Doubleday*, 20.

<sup>22</sup>The best treatment of the San Patricios is Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, the only other major account of their exploits is Stevens, *The Rogue's March*. Both authors focus on harsh discipline as a cause for desertion. About 21 percent of the San Patricios were American born, 39 percent were born in Ireland, and the rest were almost entirely from the European continent. Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 175.

<sup>23</sup>Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 223. Taylor rejected their overtures both because they were too controversial and he sought a non-partisan nomination at the time he was approached. The Native American Party abandoned its plans to nominate him and instead “recommended” Taylor for the Presidency. At least some of his support in the Northeast, which was critical to his election, came as the result of deals between the Whigs and Americans (241).

<sup>24</sup>General Zachary Taylor's Orders, Mexican War, General and Special Orders, National Archives Micropublication M29, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office 1780's-1917. Many authors comment on the lack of discipline among volunteers and regulars when it came to plundering Mexican civilians, but all agree that volunteers were far worse.

against a civilian. The army would have to turn over soldiers who committed these crimes to local civil authorities for trial. Fortunately for the soldiers concerned, no such authorities existed in occupied Mexico. It appears that the worst punishment a soldier could receive for crimes such as murder and rape, was to be sent home, but even this appears rare.<sup>25</sup>

While American soldiers generally committed crimes against Mexicans without any serious retribution, Mexican civilians did not escape punishment as easily. In at least one case a Mexican found himself arrested, and presumably executed for the murder of two Ohio volunteers.<sup>26</sup>

Vigilante attacks perpetrated by American soldiers occurred far more frequently than the official punishment of Mexicans by the army. More often than not, the army avoided official justice when American soldiers suffered at the hands of Mexicans, so the soldiers felt like they had to take the law into their own hands. One West Point graduate from Kentucky was with Taylor's army outside Monterey when a group of Texas Rangers sought to get even with a Mexican civilian they had previously met.<sup>27</sup> "Some of the Texans who were prisoners taken on the Mier expedition recognized a Mexican, whom they found in a house engaged in dictating or writing a letter, a man who had treated them with extreme cruelty in their passage through Mexico." The author describes a short chase as the Mexican tried to escape the Rangers, but they

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<sup>25</sup>K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War: 1846-1848*, (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 208-209.

<sup>26</sup>Chance, *Smith*, 146-147. It was common for Americans to call the death of a soldier outside of battle a murder, even if they were armed, in uniform, and on a military patrol. The circumstances of the Ohio volunteers remains unknown.

<sup>27</sup>Throughout this thesis the nineteenth century spellings of Mexican place names will be used. The modern spelling of Monterey is Monterrey.

caught up with him and “they beat him severely and probably would have killed him but for the interposition of some of our men.” In this case a dragoon denied the Rangers the summary justice they sought, and they had to settle for having the Mexican arrested as a spy. Before the Rangers caught him, the Mexican tore up the letter. That act became the only evidence recorded against him.<sup>28</sup>

Another example is more illustrative of the vigilante justice handed out by American troops. Just prior to the Battle of Monterey, Zachary Taylor received a letter from the Spanish consul in the city asking “if he would respect private property when he entered the city.” Taylor “replied that if he had to take [Monterey] by storm he would not be responsible for the excesses of his troops though he would endeavor to restrain them.”<sup>29</sup> Taylor’s response indicated that either he could only control his troops when no battles had recently occurred, or, more likely, he just sought to use the possibility of a lack of discipline as a powerful threat. In the end, the Mexican Army decided to fight for Monterey, and lost. And after the surrender, Taylor’s policy of non-restraint came to fruition. According to one eyewitness, a regular army officer from South Carolina, General William Worth ordered patrols in the city stopped to allow Texas Rangers to have the run of the city:

As a matter of course all restraint being thrown off, the foul spirit of mischief and depravity was not long in developing itself. Murder, rape and robbery were committed by the Volunteers in the broad light of day. They would have burned the City but nine-tenths

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<sup>28</sup>Philip Barbour Journal entry, Sept. 18, 1846 in Rhoda van Bibber Tanner Doubleday, ed., *Journals of the Late Brevet Major Philip Norbourne Barbour, Captain in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, United States Infantry, and his wife, Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour, Written During the War with Mexico - 1846*, (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1936), 105-106. The Mier Campaign was fought from 1842-1844 between Texas and Mexico. American soldiers occasionally encountered evidence that Texas soldiers who had been captured in the campaign were used as forced laborers or executed.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 105.

of the houses are fireproof. They, however, burnt the thatched huts of the miserable peasants.<sup>30</sup>

Taylor's prophesy became self-fulfilling. When the city chose to fight, and lost, one of his generals allowed the army to plunder and murder at will: Taylor's punishment for an uncooperative enemy.

American views of Indians and immigrants helped shape the views of men who took the field, but slavery in the American South shaped the views soldiers held of Mexicans even more. When Americans traveled to Mexico, what they saw often astonished them. Americans, from all walks of life and all regions of the nation, wrote about the splendid beauty they found around themselves. They saw land, mountains, cities, and people like they never had seen before. In order to understand their new surroundings, the soldiers simply applied American standards of race to Mexico.<sup>31</sup> Because they never made a serious attempt to understand Mexico on its own terms, many Americans imposed their own cultural values on the occupied nation. Many Americans, not just Southerners, saw slavery as the natural condition for blacks.

Soldiers were exposed to the institution of slavery in a variety of ways in the United States. Obviously, the volunteer soldiers from the South lived with slavery their entire lives. Officers who attended the Military Academy at West Point lived in a tightly controlled world that quashed sectionalism and promoted national unity, reinforcing slavery's hold on the Southern

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<sup>30</sup>Nathaniel C. Hughes Jr., and Timothy D. Johnson, eds., *A Fighter from Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, USA*, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 28. Hill wrote his journal as a narrative, and did not make individual entries by date. Only the page number will be cited for his journal entries.

<sup>31</sup>An excellent summary of American bewilderment at their arrival in Mexico can be found in McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 66-68.

cadets, and exposing Northern cadets to the institution.<sup>32</sup> Immigrant soldiers in the regular army had the least direct contact with the institution, but had to deal with the harsh reality of their own lives that they themselves were not as far away from slaves as they would have liked.<sup>33</sup>

Volunteer soldiers from Northern states also had little direct experience with the institution, but the press and other sources made them at least competent in their descriptions when writing about slavery.<sup>34</sup>

The descriptions of Mexicans quickly became the most common way in which experience with slavery affected the views of Americans. Many soldiers claimed that because Mexicans appeared at least partially black, they had more in common with slaves than with free white Americans. No group of Americans, North or South, enlisted or officer, fully resolved the Mexican racial question to the satisfaction of a majority of soldiers. No group of Americans wanted to simply call a Mexican a Mexican, they needed to classify them within the American racial hierarchy.

The closest Americans came to a consensus on the racial makeup of Mexicans demonized their enemy as a mixture of black and Indian. A few Americans added that Mexicans also shared Spanish blood, but that was the exception, not the rule. To the Americans intimately familiar

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<sup>32</sup>James L. Morrison Jr, *"The Best School in the World:" West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866*, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1986), 17-19, 129-131.

<sup>33</sup>Unfortunately, there are few first hand accounts by immigrants serving in the regular army. The best published account is Frederick Zeh, *An Immigrant Soldier in the Mexican War*, William J. Orr trans., William J. Orr and Robert Ryal Miller, eds., (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1995). Zeh avoids the subject of slavery almost entirely, however. The best view of regulars seeing themselves as slaves can be found in Winders, *Mr. Polk's War*, 62-63.

<sup>34</sup>The most complete account of a volunteer from the North is Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, William H. Goetzmann, ed., (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1996). Goetzmann edited the memoirs of Samuel Chamberlain who was originally from New England, but learned the nature of slavery during travels to Missouri, where he enlisted.

with slavery, the peculiar miscegenation that ruled in Mexico placed Mexicans lower than blacks on the racial hierarchy. Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, a West Point graduate from South Carolina, recounted an incident that captures the essence of what some felt.

Almost two months after the Battle of Monterey, on November 16, 1846, Lt. Hill entered Saltillo for the first time. After marching for about seven hours that day, his company arrived outside the city only to encounter a small group of American women. One of them, an immigrant from New Jersey, told the young lieutenant that she was pleased to see him because she had not seen a “white man in eight years,” and that man was “a negro from New Orleans.”<sup>35</sup>

That November day may have been the first time Hill ever heard a black man described as white. What is known, however, is that he did not mention arguing with the woman who made the claim. Perhaps it just struck him as a humorous aside, or perhaps he understood a deeper meaning in her words. While Hill does not show that he approved of her classification, other diarists agreed with her at least in part.<sup>36</sup>

Americans familiar with the institution of slavery tended to think of the lower orders of Mexican society as slaves, or sometimes even worse. Mexico abolished slavery in 1824, but it retained a system of debt peonage farming that historians have often compared to sharecropping in the post-bellum South. Americans who understood slavery quickly grew to see its similarities to the Mexican system, and did not hesitate to make the comparison.<sup>37</sup> Captain Ephraim Kirby Smith saw slavery in the American South as preferable to its Mexican counterpart. He described

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<sup>35</sup>Hughes, *Diary of Daniel Harvey Hill*, 38.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 36-37. Winders, *Mr. Polk's War*, 175.

the peasants, called peons, as slaves “who are under the worst kind of bondage, belonging to their masters until they get out of debt to him, which he takes care they never shall do. These poor creatures under an overseer are turned out to work before daylight.” Several days later Smith wrote a letter to his wife commenting on the similarity between peon huts and the slave quarters on a Louisiana plantation.<sup>38</sup>

One officer, Abner Doubleday, wished to hire a Mexican peon as a cook, and a Mexican he had befriended, named Carlos, recommended a boy named Sancho. Unaware of how the system of debt peonage worked, Doubleday had Carlos explain it to him:

Sancho was a peon or slave after the Mexican fashion which was a very different system from that of the U.S. being founded on debt and not on color. Nor did it necessarily imply any inequality between the master and peon other than that of creditor and debtor. Sancho was beginning to go through the usual process in such cases. A man had loaned him \$4 to go to a country fair. He agreed to work for his creditor until the amount was paid. While doing so he was to be charged heavily for clothing board etc. and tempted with fresh loans which it would take years to liquidate. In this way he would be bound to service all his life.<sup>39</sup>

Doubleday accurately described the Mexican system of debt peonage, reflecting the common American view that debt peonage resembled nothing more than a form of slavery with minor modification.

The American army reinforced that belief through its policies. The army also permitted officers to bring along a certain number of their slaves depending on their rank.<sup>40</sup> Some officers, like Doubleday, who did not own slaves or were not fortunate enough to bring slaves of their

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<sup>38</sup>Smith to his wife, May 3, 1847, and Smith to his wife, May 12, 1847 in Blackwood, *To Mexico with Scott*, 148-149, 159. Ephraim Kirby Smith was the brother of Edmund Kirby Smith, the future Confederate general.

<sup>39</sup>Chance, *Doubleday*, 69-70.

<sup>40</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 24.



own from the United States, occasionally chose to use Mexicans. The advantage in using a Mexican instead of a black slave was that the officers did not have to buy the peon, they just had to rent one from a hacienda owner.<sup>41</sup> A disadvantage did exist, however; Americans found it difficult to treat them completely as slaves.

The army prevented its officers from disciplining peons, and even tried to prevent them from being hired at all. General Taylor issued an order in June 1846 stipulating that American officers could not hire any Mexican “servants” who fled to American lines. He justified his order by writing that these “servants” received their pay in advance, so officers must return them to their masters if claimed.<sup>42</sup> The “servants” to whom Taylor refers were certainly peons, and as such, they did not receive pay at all. The general probably confused the initial incurring of a peon’s debt with payment. The army under Taylor never sought to undermine, or even upset, the social structure of Mexico. By returning peons to their masters, the army reinforced the slave-like status of peons in the minds of its soldiers.

Taylor issued many orders trying to keep his soldiers under control, but rarely enforced them. In 1846 alone he issued seven general orders to the army reminding his officers and men that they must respect the Mexican citizenry, approaching them with the “proper courtesy and dignity.”<sup>43</sup> The actual enforcement of these orders left much to be desired, however. In most of the orders, Taylor began by stating that he issued them because of “the many outrages that have been recently committed . . . upon the persons and property of Mexican citizens,” or because

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<sup>41</sup>Chance, *Doubleday*, 70.

<sup>42</sup>General Taylor’s Orders, NARA M29, roll 1, General Order 77, June 17, 1846.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, General Orders 1, 30, 38, 62, 94, 146, 149, quotation from General Orders 38, April 1, 1846.

“the Commanding General is pained to find himself under the necessity of issuing orders on the subject of plundering private property.”<sup>44</sup> While acknowledging the fact that “outrages” and other crimes against civilians were common enough to require seven general orders from the commanding general, Taylor did remarkably little to stop such crimes. General Winfield Scott believed that Taylor allowed his army to commit various depredations in order to further his chances of being elected president. Scott reacted harshly to the lack of discipline in Taylor’s army:

Our militia & volunteers, if a tenth of what is said be true, have committed atrocities—horrors—in Mexico, sufficient to make Heaven weep & every American, of Christian morals *blush* for his country. Murder, robbery & rape on mothers & daughters, in the presence of the tied up males of the families, have been common all along the Rio Grande. . . As far as I can learn, not one of the felons has been punished, & very few rebuked. . . .<sup>45</sup>

It remains unknown if presidential ambitions had any effect on Taylor’s lax discipline, but his policies clearly furthered the notion of many of his soldiers that peons were slaves, and could expect appropriate treatment.

On December 8, 1846, a volunteer enlisted man from Kentucky whipped a peon for not following the orders of some officers. The day before the whipping, the peon attempted to throw a rock at the soldier, but refused to leave when ordered to do so by the officers. The diarist who recorded the incident did not mention if they ordered him to leave in Spanish or English, but the peon did not leave until his mistress arrived and told him to do so. After the whipping “a woman came out and demanded who did it.” Soldiers on the scene pointed out the Kentucky volunteer

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, General Orders 146, November 27, 1846, and General Orders 62, May 17, 1846.

<sup>45</sup>Charles W. Elliot, *Winfield Scott the Soldier and the Man*, (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1937), 448.

as the culprit, and “she scolded and berated him as a woman only can.” Naturally she yelled at the soldier in Spanish and he could not understand her, but some other Americans in the area recounted the substance of her speech: “[T]he whipped Mexican was her Peon that she and her husband were responsible for his good conduct that if her husband had been applied to he would have punished him if he deserved it but that it was very wrong and base to be whipping a poor slave etc.”<sup>46</sup> If the volunteer received any punishment other than a lecture he could not understand, no record of it has survived. According to the diarist who recorded the incident, the peon was beaten for refusing to obey the commands of white officers.

American officers who chose to employ Mexican peons as servants caused additional tensions to arise because of the differences in the two societies. Pay posed the most obvious problem. In the minds of most Americans, paying a slave for doing his job was fundamentally incompatible with the existence of the institution. Society required a slave master to provide sustenance for his or her slaves, but paying them for their routine work was out of the question.<sup>47</sup> No American who believed in slavery would have paid anyone he viewed as a slave for work. In order to get around the supposed contradiction, Americans who employed peons paid their masters. General Robert Patterson, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, argued “that the master should have the money earned by the peon while in government employ until the debt was extinguished but not the person.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Smith journal entry, Dec. 8, 1847 in Chance, *Smith*, 131-132.

<sup>47</sup>Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, Revised edition, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); 111-118.

<sup>48</sup>Smith journal entry, Oct. 15, 1846 in Chance, *Smith*, 56.

The army officially sought to reenforce the Mexican institution of debt peonage, but some individual soldiers believe that the system ultimately harmed Mexicans. In some cases it appears that American soldiers felt a certain sympathy for the plight of the Mexican people, and peons in particular. One enlisted volunteer from the North claimed that he heard Mexicans singing as if they were “an oppressed race.”<sup>49</sup> But Ephraim Kirby Smith best characterized American sympathy:

There is no middle class in this country. The upper “ten hundred” not “ten thousand” possess all the wealth and are continually quarreling about the control of affairs and creating constant revolutions. The millions are steeped in ignorance, vice, and poverty, abject to the priests and trampled to dust by the wealthy. . . .<sup>50</sup>

Smith believed that Mexican peons did not actively participate in their own society. Smith did not explain his reasoning, but other Americans supplied theirs.

Ralph Kirkham, a West Point graduate, married into a slave-owning New Orleans family shortly after he began his career in the army. For a man who grew up in New England, he seemed exceptionally comfortable writing about the institution of slavery, and he attributed the “miserable” condition of the peons to their laziness.<sup>51</sup> Not all Americans commentators were as generous as Kirkham. Franklin Smith received a shock when he heard that Mexican guerrillas killed a friend of his because he considered Mexican guerrillas less than human. Smith damned the irregular soldiers who killed his friend, and by extension a large segment of the population: “there *is no life here* or any state of mind or body worth calling life[,] the scripture might have a

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<sup>49</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 165.

<sup>50</sup>Smith to his wife, May 6, 1846 in Blackwood, *Letters of E. Kirby Smith*, 154.

<sup>51</sup>Kirkham to Kate, June 1, 1847 in Miller, *Kirkham Letters*, 21.

new reading on its application in reference to the stragglers and small parties - instead of 'In the midst of life we are in death' it might read - 'In the midst of the Mexicans we are in death.'" In his next diary entry Smith claimed that Mexican officers who fought at Monterey realized the futility of fighting Americans and wanted to bow to their "superior . . . strength[,] skill[,] bravery[,] gunnery[,] etc."<sup>52</sup> Smith and Kirkham pitied the Mexican peon, but believed them incapable of anything beyond bound servitude, like slaves in America.

Other Americans offered similar views on the peons who formed the base of the Mexican social pyramid, but they had a peculiar bent to their sympathy. No American who recorded his sympathy for the Mexican peon advocated a social revolution, instead they made their comments in order to justify their own enlightened views of slavery. American owners believed themselves the world's most humane slave holders, and they found Mexican hacienda owners lacking.<sup>53</sup> American slave owners who fought in Mexico used what they saw around them as proof that they understood the proper way to hold slaves, and Mexican hacienda owners did not. Americans fed, clothed, provided medical care for their slaves, but as far as they could tell, Mexican hacienda owners offered no services to their peons. Americans kept their slaves in healthy, regulated communities, but Mexican hacienda owners appeared to allow their peons to wallow in filth.

Americans familiar with the institution of slavery believed that they could fill the void left by hacienda owners who treated their peons poorly. Lt. Harvey Hill thought that the American army could effect "so much good in Mexico" by educating the poorest members of

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<sup>52</sup>Smith journal entry, Jan. 16, 1847 in Chance, *Smith*, 176-178.

<sup>53</sup>Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 111-116.

society.<sup>54</sup> Hill's view on education did not command much support, but other soldiers thought the Americans could teach Mexicans some valuable lessons. Several officers thought the Mexican army treated its members so poorly, that they tried to help the peasants, and poor Indians who made up the majority of its ranks.<sup>55</sup> Major Barbour encountered some wounded Mexican soldiers who told him, in English, "that they were very poorly fed in the hospital" and "their Government took no care of them when they were wounded."<sup>56</sup> At least one American naval officer, Raphael Semmes, came to believe that American slaves would rather remain slaves after witnessing the system of debt peonage in Mexico. Semmes claimed that General William Worth asked two black servants working for him if they would trade places with Mexican peons. According to Semmes, they claimed they would prefer to "be the servants of gentleman, rather than consort with 'poor white trash,' and especially poor Indian trash."<sup>57</sup> The servants may well have uttered these words, but it is unlikely that they believed them. No clear estimate on how many slaves ran for freedom to Mexican lines exists, but at least six escaped, and probably vastly more.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of the exact number, American slave owners who fought in Mexico seemed oblivious to the irony.

Some of the Americans who fought the Mexican War saw it as a struggle for dominance of the North American continent between two races, one pure, the other contaminated. Not all

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<sup>54</sup>Hughes, *Diary of Lt. Harvey Hill*, 170.

<sup>55</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 13-14.

<sup>56</sup>Philip Barbour journal entry May 31 1846, Doubleday, *Barbour Journals*, 75-76.

<sup>57</sup>Raphael Semmes quoted in Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army*, 180.

<sup>58</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 24; Texas Rangers also claimed they frequently ran into runaway slaves in Mexico, Foss, 97-98.

Americans agreed, but their Americanized views on race intensely colored their views of the country, and most importantly those they found living in it. Their experiences with Indians, hordes of European immigrants, and most importantly, slavery significantly impacted their ability to understand Mexico and its society. Some American soldiers tried to understand the people they found around them, but as a group, Americans never attempted to see Mexicans as anything other than their racial inferiors.

One historian, Matthew Frye Jacobson, argues that Manifest Destiny “referred to a distinctly racial agenda.” Racial views certainly made up a significant part of Manifest Destiny’s agenda, but Jacobson ignores other important components.<sup>59</sup> Most importantly, the men who fought the Mexican War rarely had much to do with causing the war. Many high ranking officers, such as Colonel Jefferson Davis and Winfield Scott, served in political roles prior to the war and influenced its commencement, but these men did not represent to rank and file soldier. The desire to spread the Anglo-Saxon race across the continent may have caused the war, but the men who fought in it often served for other purposes. The men who donned uniforms and carried muskets into Mexico saw Manifest Destiny as more than just racial superiority.

One of the factors that led American soldiers to see themselves as racially superior to Mexicans, nativism, also fueled another critical part of Manifest Destiny: religion. Americans demonized Mexicans because they appeared less than white, but they attacked Mexican Catholicism in even harsher terms. Mexicans could do nothing about being born into a lower race, according to Americans, but they could overthrow the power of the Church and choose to

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<sup>59</sup>Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 206.

live a life free of priests and idol worship. Because Mexicans chose not to break the bonds of the Church, Americans soldiers felt even more strongly that a Mexican could never stand toe to toe with an American.



## Chapter 2

### Nil Admiran

On Christmas Day 1846 the commander of a picket guard near Saltillo raised a false alarm because of some stampeding wild horses. According to a witness, a group of volunteer soldiers used the confusion created by the alarm to “ravish the women of a rancho.” Several of the rancho’s men, who were hiding from the Americans in the mountains, heard of the assault and killed an Arkansas volunteer in revenge. The violence escalated when some of the dead soldier’s comrades found a few dozen Mexican civilians hiding in a cave near the rancho. One hundred and nine members of Colonel Archibald Yell’s Volunteer Calvary from Arkansas massacred around thirty Mexican civilians in retaliation for the murder of one of their own.<sup>1</sup>

One of the regular army soldiers who caught the volunteers in the act and arrested them, Samuel Chamberlain, left both a description and a watercolor painting of the scene. Chamberlain claimed that “nearly thirty mexicans lay butcherd on the floor, most of them scalped.” He and the other regulars could only find three men unharmed trying to protect an unknown number of women and children. Chamberlain does not aim his most descriptive prose at the attacks on the civilians. Instead, he chose to write about the attacks on religious symbols:

A rough crucifix was fastened to a rock, some irreverent wretch had crowned the image with a bloody scalp, the gore trickling down the pale features of the Saviour, while the light of two tallow candles brought out the ghastly scene in bold relief . . . It was a den of horrors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession, Recollections of a Rogue*, William H. Goetzmann, ed., (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 132-134.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.

The Arkansas volunteers did not just attack Mexican civilians hiding in a cave. They attacked the symbols of their faith.

Chamberlain's watercolor proves equally descriptive. The artist shows the moment when the regulars ordered the volunteers to cease and desist. The marauding volunteers form the center piece of the painting, not the regulars. He painted the regulars as generic characters, but he made the volunteers and their victims appear as individuals. A volunteer wearing a brown coat captures the viewer's eye as he holds up a bloody saber and scalp as if in triumph. Another volunteer fires a pistol into the back of a civilian, while a woman with a crucifix comforts a scalped Mexican. The most striking part of the image, however, is Chamberlain's depiction of the crucifix he described mounted on a small makeshift altar. Two Mexican women kneel in prayer toward the crucifix as a volunteer ominously finishes loading his musket immediately behind them. Clearly the women are praying for an end to their Hell.<sup>3</sup> Many of his comrades echoed Chamberlain's depictions of the direct attack on Catholicism by the volunteers.

Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century consisted almost entirely of Catholics, and the Church was the nation's wealthiest institution, and one of the largest landowners. When large numbers of American volunteers invaded the nation, many of them came face to face with Catholicism for the first time. Few reactions to Mexican Catholicism proved as powerful as what Samuel Chamberlain called the "Massacre of the Cave," but violence occasionally appeared. More common, however, American soldiers expressed a sense of disgust, or

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<sup>3</sup>There are four versions of Chamberlain's painting still in existence. The one I describe is in his text, and is presumably his last. It is in Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 133. A miniature version is in *ibid.*, 135. The other two versions are larger and rather similar to the one I describe, however, he changed some details or rearranged them in the paintings. These two versions are in William H. Goetzmann, ed., *Sam Chamberlain's Mexican War: The San Jacinto Museum of History Paintings*, (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1993), 96-98.

condescension. Some Americans even blamed Mexico's defeat on their inability to worship properly.<sup>4</sup>

The religious values of American soldiers were, of course, shaped in the United States. The recent growth in evangelical Protestantism and Catholic immigration created a climate in which nativism could thrive. Anti-Catholicism became one of the strongest tenets of nativism by 1846. Evangelical Protestants, by then a major force, according to one historian "harbored a deep suspicion of the international Catholic hierarchy," and they opposed "the religion's formalistic liturgy."<sup>5</sup> Ministers who sought to give the soldiers a holy mission in Mexico, reinforced these complaints.

A volunteer captain, who also acted as a Methodist minister from Louisiana, Richard Stewart, addressed some soldiers along the Rio Grande shortly after the war began in 1846. The minister paraphrased Jeremiah: "If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt. Then I will cause you to dwell together in this place, in the land I gave to your fathers for ever and ever."<sup>6</sup> Soldiers could interpret the minister's words a few different ways, but it seems clear that the

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<sup>4</sup>There are no full length studies of the role of religion in the Mexican War. The only book that gives the issue of religion a significant place is Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), revised edition, 174.

<sup>6</sup>Richard A. Stewart quoted in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, eds., *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846-1848, Accounts of Eyewitnesses & Combatants*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 316-317. Stewart paraphrased Jeremiah 7:6-7: "If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever."

soldiers who heard him understood the sermon to mean that God intended for Americans to spread across the lands currently occupied by Mexico.

A recent historian, Paul Foos, believes that the minister offered the volunteers a deal. If they acted righteously, God would give them Mexico as a reward. Foos further contends that the volunteers interpreted this deal to mean they were free to take what they wanted from Mexican civilians. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to support his interpretation. Volunteers who did plunder Mexicans did not write their crimes down, and the soldiers who left records about plundering volunteers never attributed their plundering to a misunderstanding of the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

The volunteer who recorded his reaction to the sermon, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, felt that the “soldier-preacher” said “it was the order of Providence that the Anglo-Saxon race was not only to take possession of the whole North American continent, but to influence and modify the character of the world.”<sup>8</sup> Thorpe’s reaction to the sermon more closely resembled what American soldiers generally seem to have believed than Foos’s interpretation. Captain Franklin Smith agreed that regardless of what men did “Americans will in a few years occupy both banks of this River [the Rio Grande] along the whole levee.”<sup>9</sup> Less than two months later Smith felt that perhaps the U.S. made a mistake by invading Mexico because “God delights in humbling the

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 86-87. Foos further hurts his argument by failing to provide any evidence to support his argument.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Bangs Thorpe quoted in Smith, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 317.

<sup>9</sup>Franklin Smith journal entry, Aug. 26, 1846 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 11.

proud and exalting the weak . . . The issue is with God.”<sup>10</sup> Smith believed that only God could prevent an American victory.

Stewart and Smith agreed with many of their fellow Americans when it came to Manifest Destiny. Many historians have seen Manifest Destiny as but one ingredient in sparking the Mexican War. As both Smith and Stewart make clear, however, the idea that Americans acted as the soldiers of God did not evaporate once Polk signed the declaration of war.<sup>11</sup> The war partially became a religious experience for its participants. Few Americans tried to convert, or even preach to Mexican Catholics, but many used the religious differences as further evidence of the inferiority of Mexicans.

The idea that God marched into battle with the American army was not limited to ministers or pious officers. A newspaper published in Matamoros by Americans carried an article titled “A Scriptural View of Soldiers.” The article cited several examples from scripture about how God holds soldiers above ordinary men. “He who undertakes an occupation of great toil and great danger, for the purpose of saving, protecting and defending his country, is a most valuable and respectful member of society,” claimed the article. The writer made no mention that the Mexican War was by no definition a defensive war, rather, he stressed how an American

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<sup>10</sup>Smith journal entry, Oct. 17, 1846, *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup>Most books on the Mexican War find some room for a discussion of manifest destiny, however they usually gloss over the subject. Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, ed., *The Mexican War: Was it Manifest Destiny?*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, inc., 1963), contains two valuable essays on manifest destiny by Albert Weinberg and Carlos Bosch Garcia. Richard V. Francaviglia and Douglas W. Richmond, eds., *Dueling Eagles: Reinterpreting the U.S.-Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2000) also offers several essays that touch on some of the complex issues of manifest destiny. Foos is one of the few authors who does write about Manifest Destiny after the outbreak of the war, but as I mentioned above, I do not find his arguments persuasive. Instead of arguing that soldiers misinterpreted patriotic virtues to allow soldiers to steal what they felt manifest destiny owed them, I intend to show that American soldiers used religion as one more way to show their superiority to Mexicans, which had a number of unintended consequences.

soldier could receive “the approbation of his God” by spreading “the virtues of a holy life.” The article served as a reminder to American soldiers that they were on a mission to spread America across a continent, and in the process teach a nation of Catholics the proper way to worship.<sup>12</sup>

The two parts of the U.S. Army, the regulars and the volunteers, had several significant differences that affected the ways in which American soldiers saw Catholicism in Mexico. The volunteers consisted of men who wanted to fight in Mexico. Immediately after the declaration of war calls for volunteers in went out in every state, and the entire nation saw an up swell in patriotic fervor.<sup>13</sup> Men who came forward to volunteer did it for several reasons, but many said they wanted to help liberate the Mexican people from the bondage of the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> Some Catholics volunteered, but these men made up a minority, and even they did not often sympathize with Mexican Catholics. Their motivation remains unclear, but they may have tried to hide their own Catholicism from a fiercely anti-Catholic establishment in the army. At least one Catholic volunteer thought “that God has fought upon our side, to chastise them for their sins.”<sup>15</sup> Volunteers filled their diaries and letters with rhetorical attacks on the opulence of churches, the corruption of the priesthood, the superstition of worshipers, and many similar ideas.

Regular soldiers, on the other hand, almost 50 percent immigrant, were far more likely to be Catholic, and had no choice about whether or not to fight in Mexico. Tensions in the regular’s ranks grew because almost all of the officers were Protestant. Catholic enlisted men often

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<sup>12</sup>*The American Flag*, September 11, 1847.

<sup>13</sup>Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 10-12.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword: The Saint Patrick’s Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 19-20.

<sup>15</sup>Julius Garesché quoted in Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 128-129.

complained of the harsh treatment they received from anti-immigrant officers, and they watched as the same officers applied their anti-Catholic views to Mexican Catholics.<sup>16</sup>

The Mexican Army itself knew of the Catholic backgrounds of many of the regulars. In an effort to win deserters to its side, the Mexican Army issued a number of handbills encouraging desertion aimed at regular army soldiers. Most of them offered monetary rewards, or promotions for desertion, but one was unique. Like other offers, the Mexican Army intended to publish it as a handbill, but they never distributed it because Mexico City fell before its publication. In it commander of a battalion of deserters in the Mexican Army, John Riley, appealed to the Catholicism of Irish born regulars:

My countrymen, Irishmen! I call upon you for I know your feelings on this subject well, for the sake of that chivalry for which you are celebrated, for that love of liberty for which our common country is so long contending, for the sake of that holy religion which we have for ages professed, I conjure you to abandon a slavish hireling's life with a nation who in even the moment of victory treats you with contumely & disgrace. For whom are you contending? For a people who, in the face of a whole world, trampled upon the holy altars of our religion, set the firebrand upon a sanctuary devoted to the blessed Virgin, and boasting of civil and religious liberty, trampled in contemptuous indifference all appertaining to the dearest feelings of our country.<sup>17</sup>

Mexican attempts, like Riley's handbill, never succeeded in encouraging many deserters to join the Mexican Army and fight Protestantism. While Riley's handbill never had the chance to win deserters to his side, it does show that both sides understood the religious undertones of the war.

The desertion rate during the Mexican War was the highest of any American war, but only the tiniest fraction of deserters took up arms against the Americans. From the testimony of the men who joined the San Patricio Battalion, it appears that none of them left the American

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<sup>16</sup>Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 156-157.

<sup>17</sup>John Riley quoted in Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 79.

Army specifically to fight against Protestantism. Army regulations prevented men on trial from using religion as a defense, so the accused men had to give other reasons for their desertions. American deserters most often claimed that they left the army because of drunkenness. In reality the massive desertion rate from the regular army probably resulted from a combination of factors including anti-Catholicism, harsh discipline, and promises of financial rewards from Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

Along with official attempts to encourage desertion with propaganda, some Mexican priests tried to convince Catholic soldiers to cease fighting for the Protestant cause. The priests did cause a few soldiers to desert, but these were so small in number the army never felt the impact.<sup>19</sup> The suspicious officer corps understood that Mexican priests might succeed in their attempts, so they put pressure on the secretary of war, William Marcy, to appoint some Catholic chaplains for the army. In May 1846, Marcy finally appointed two Catholic priests to tend to the spiritual needs of thousands of Catholic soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

Americans, already suspicious of Catholicism, did not welcome the new chaplains. One volunteer officer, Colonel Samuel Curtis, decided to record his “private opinion” on the matter in his diary. He wrote, “There is a kind of tempering whining policy in the position of our government in the matter of sending a Catholic priest into this barbarous Catholic Country. Does our government wish to Catholicise these Catholics, or is the government afraid of Catholicism

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<sup>18</sup>Peter F. Stevens, *The Rogue's March: John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-1848*, (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1999), 248-249. Almost all of the evidence regarding reasons for desertion comes from the trial testimony of the captured San Patricios. The Army's Articles of War, which stipulated the rules for courts-martial specifically prevented a defendant from using religion as an excuse for desertion, but Miller claims that religion must have played a central role. Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 155-163.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 157-158.

<sup>20</sup>K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974), 84.



and do they [do] this to flatter the church with our cause.”<sup>21</sup> The officer’s distrust of Catholicism allowed him no sympathy for the Catholics fighting side by side with him. Americans, the volunteers at least, marched off to war with a suspicion of Catholicism, even in their own army, and what they saw confirmed their worst fears.

Captain Franklin Smith was in the process of sending some sick soldiers back to the mouth of the Rio Grande so that they could recuperate, or die, when he discovered the awful truth about some of the volunteers’ names. “One that struck me as utterly profane ‘Christ Shene’ of the Ohio Volunteers - The idea of a man calling himself ‘Christ’ in a Christian land is utterly shocking,” Smith wrote. He continued with a nativist tone, “He seemed to be of some of the German tribes . . . He was a poor miserable scarecrow wretch doomed perhaps to answer for the sins of his parents in giving him such a name.” Believing the man’s name unique as well as blasphemous, Smith asked some clerks at the army post office about it. They replied that “there [were] no more common names among the Mexicans than Jesus and Christ.” After hearing their explanation, Smith wrote in his journal, “*Nil Admiran*,” a line from Horace that translates as “not to be awed to a stupor.”<sup>22</sup> Horace wrote the maxim as a note of caution against vanity, but Smith

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<sup>21</sup>Samuel Curtis diary entry Aug. 25, 1846 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *Mexico Under Fire: Being the Diary of Samuel Ryan Curtis, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Volunteer Regiment, During the American Military Occupation of Northern Mexico, 1846-1847*, (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1994), 30. Curtis was a West Point graduate who resigned his military commission in the regular army in 1832. He returned to the army as a volunteer colonel in 1846.

<sup>22</sup>Smith journal entry Sept. 7-Sept. 24, 1846 in Chance, *Journal of Captain Franklin Smith*, 20-21. Smith actually misspelled the phrase, or Chance transcribed it in error. It should be *Nil Admirari*, and is in Horace, Epistula VI: *Nil Admirari prope res est una, Numici, solaque, quae possit facere et servare beatum*. The whole line translates as: “Not to be awed to a stupor, Numicius, is almost the only / Notion conducive to winning and holding mankind to a happy / State of existence.” Translation from Horace, *The Complete Works of Horace (Quintas Horatius Flaccus)*, trans. Charles E. Passage, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1983), 269-271.

used it as a highbrow way to remind himself that nothing should surprise him, not even a person carrying the name of Jesus Christ.

Smith's two word dismissal of an entire culture may seem abrupt, but it accurately summarized what he and many of his fellow soldiers thought. Mexican Catholicism was indeed nothing surprising for them. Of all the charges Americans threw at the Church in Mexico their disgust at its opulence occurred most often.

Lieutenant Theodore Laidley, a West Point graduate, described the churches in Vera Cruz as "large churches with steeples or domes, built with considerable architectural pretensions." He used almost the same words to describe the churches in Puebla a month later: "There is a very great number of churches and many of great architectural pretensions."<sup>23</sup> Franklin Smith was less judgmental in his first impression of a Mexican church when he described it as "one of the most beautiful buildings I ever saw."<sup>24</sup> Laidley and Smith, like many Americans, thought that Mexican churches were magnificent structures, unlike anything they had seen in America. Both of the officers tried to tour as many churches as possible, and they were just as amazed by what they saw inside.

Smith reported "the back of the church behind the altar glittering with gold gilding and paintings. The large pulpit or altar is like a Grecian temple in miniature."<sup>25</sup> Another soldier drew a distinct comparison between his own "simple virgin" image of Mary and a statue he found in a

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<sup>23</sup>Theodore Laidley to Father, April 2, 1847 and Laidley to Father May 19, 1847 in James M. McCaffrey, ed., *"Surrounded by Dangers of All Kinds:" The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 56, 87.

<sup>24</sup>Smith journal entry Dec. 2, 1846 in Chance, *Journal of Captain Franklin Smith*, 125.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

church “decked out in gold and purple and tinsel and brass with cheeks of wax bedaubed with rouge and eyes of glass.”<sup>26</sup> To this soldier, and many of his Protestant comrades, Christianity should reflect humility and simplicity, but they found nothing humble or simple in Mexican churches.

The icons Lieutenant Daniel Harvey Hill found in one church in Vera Cruz appalled him. In it “a Cherub [is] catching in a cup the blood that is spurting from the bleeding side of our savior,” while “the Virgin is looking on at the Crucifixion with the infant Jesus in her arms.” The discontinuity of the scene did not bother Hill as much as the irreverence of the crucifix he found in the city’s Cathedral. Behind its altar Hill “saw a negro Christ with the African crispy hair.”<sup>27</sup> Samuel Curtis had a more visceral reaction to what he witnessed during a Christmas mass:

[The priest] was seated in a stooped position, holding on his lap was a wax baby about a foot long in state of nudity. –Ladies and Senioras were in succession approaching the altar and kneeling at the feet of the Holy father kissing this wax baby! –The performance was in every way shocking to my nerves. I was immediately repelled, and left the scene mortified and disgusted.<sup>28</sup>

What they perceived as idolatry offended both Hill and Curtis, but other American soldiers found even more troubling issues with Catholicism.

The Church in Mexico became more than just a symbol of opulence and pretension to some American soldiers. It also oppressed Mexicans more than any other institution. The

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<sup>26</sup>William B. Taliaferro quoted in James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 71.

<sup>27</sup>Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr., and Timothy D. Johnson, eds., *A Fighter from Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, USA*, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 94.

<sup>28</sup>Curtis diary entry Dec. 25, 1846 in Chance, *Mexico Under Fire*, 84-85.

massive amount of wealth concentrated in the hands of the Church struck Jacksonian Era Americans as fundamentally incompatible with freedom and democracy.<sup>29</sup> Samuel Curtis thought the Church acted “despotic and monarchistic.” To Curtis, the Church acted so oppressively that he saw the presence of two Catholic chaplains “as encroaching on our Constitution liberty.”<sup>30</sup> Samuel Chamberlain, a fierce anti-Catholic, did not see the Church as a threat to his own freedom, but he blamed the Church for Mexico’s problems. “The country is cursed by its religion, the most bigotted Catholicism,” he wrote. Continuing, he emphasized the powerful economic resources controlled by the Church: “Mexico, with immense mineral resources, excellent agricultural soil in many places, is poor and impoverished, while the church is said to possess property amounting to \$100,000,000.”<sup>31</sup>

Witnessing a Catholic mass was something of a novelty. Major Philip N. Barbour noted in his diary that a friend named Mr. Todd went “to the Cathedral to see the Catholics worship.”<sup>32</sup> Lieutenant Ralph Kirkham, a West Point graduate, attended a Catholic mass in Jalapa in April 1847. Later that day he wrote about it to his wife:

This morning I went to the cathedral and heard mass. I believe I should become a strict Catholic should I live in a Catholic country, for I do like an everyday religion. I wish you could have been with me this morning and heard the solemn tones of the organ and seen

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<sup>29</sup>Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 166-167.

<sup>30</sup>Curtis diary entry Aug. 25, 1846 in Chance, *Mexico Under Fire*, 30.

<sup>31</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 123.

<sup>32</sup>Philip Barbour journal entry June 7, 1846 in Rhoda van Bibber Tanner Doubleday, ed., *The Journals of Major Philip Norbourn Barbour and his wife Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour Written During the War with Mexico - 1846*, (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1936), 86.

the hundreds [of people] kneeling on the stone floor. I came near going with the rest, but made several good resolutions which I hope I shall keep.<sup>33</sup>

Kirkham was one of the few Americans who had a positive view of the Catholic mass and Mexican parishioners. Soldiers were more likely to dismiss the Catholic mass as “an unmeaning mummerly.”<sup>34</sup>

One officer described Catholicism as “a religion that addresses itself to the senses.”<sup>35</sup> Another officer, Ephraim Kirby Smith, claimed Catholics were “awfully addicted to ringing bells,” which he could not stand. Smith sympathized with what he perceived as the ignorant Catholics of Mexico, because the Church maintained their veil of ignorance. “It is painful to know that these people actually do not comprehend the reason of their acts,” he wrote. When he asked a man why he crossed himself the man replied, “Because it is twelve o’clock.” About a month later Smith wrote to his wife about a woman he saw in the main square of Saltillo. “I saw a woman, poor superstitious creature,” he wrote, “going on her knees with a lighted candle in her hand. She crawled across the plaza and down a paved street in this way as far as I could see. It was undoubtedly a penance ordered by the padre.”<sup>36</sup> Kirkham and Smith alluded to an issue that many other Americans noticed as well. The dichotomy between the opulence of churches, and

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<sup>33</sup>Kirkham to Kate, April 29, 1847 in Robert Ryal Miller, ed., *The Mexican War Journal & Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>34</sup>Hughes, *Journal of Daniel Harvey Hill*, 44.

<sup>35</sup>Laidley to Father, April 26, 1847 in Chance, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 76.

<sup>36</sup>Smith to his wife, Nov. 23, 1846 and Smith to his wife, Dec. 16, 1846 in Emma Jerome Blackwood, ed., *To Mexico with Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to his Wife*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 78-79, 82.

the destitute qualities of worshipers served as proof to anti-Catholic Americans that the Church oppressed the masses.

Mexican parishioners were not spared from the intense criticism of Americans. Even though the Church served as the primary oppressor of the people, the Mexican laity itself shouldered some of the blame for their oppression. American soldiers believed that Mexicans had somehow lost the ability to be free because of the Church. Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth thought that “Anyone who possess power can mould [Mexicans] to their will.”<sup>37</sup> No one in Mexico, according to Americans, possessed more power than priests. While the Church stifled the growth of republicanism in Mexico, it also led Mexicans down a path of immorality, according to American observers.

Americans often attacked priests for the corruption which inevitably led their flock down a path of sin. Samuel Chamberlain relates a story in which “a fat greasy Dominican Monk” who served “as a pimp” to the Americans occupying Saltillo demonstrated his power over Mexicans. Chamberlain wrote that after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war, a magnificent celebration broke out in Saltillo. In the city’s main square the Dominican stood on the fountain and “denounced” all the women in the city who showed too much favor to the Americans. The impressionable Mexicans searched the city for any women they suspected of disloyalty and on the monk’s orders tortured and executed them.<sup>38</sup> In Chamberlain’s rendition of the incident, the

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<sup>37</sup>Rankin Dilworth diary entry June 14, 1836 in Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance, eds., *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Rankin Dilworth, U.S. Army*, (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>38</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 273.

Mexican civilians were not to blame because the monk controlled them. He held the monk responsible for unleashing the civilians' brutality.

As in the "Massacre of the Cave," Chamberlain painted a watercolor of the ghastly scene. He titled it "Fiends and Fireworks: Saturnalian Orgies in the Grand Plaza of Saltillo to Commemorate Peace." The irony of the title would be amusing if it were not for the horror of the scene Chamberlain painted. Images of Catholicism dominate the painting. An imposing view of the cathedral serves as the focal point, and a large fountain crowned with the image of a saint rests in the foreground. Around the foot of the fountain the Mexicans stand while slaughtering the unpatriotic women of Saltillo. The men have stripped the women naked and are in the process of torturing them, all at the direction of the monk. "Padra Olitze," as Chamberlain called him, stands in the middle of the men holding his right hand in the air as a puppeteer might. Chamberlain's message is unmistakable: with the American army leaving, the Church would resume its brutal oppression of Mexico.<sup>39</sup>

Americans did not attempt either to convert Mexican Catholics, or reform the existing Church. Only mildly more common were direct attacks on Church property or priests. Americans seem to have believed that the onus was on the Mexicans themselves to overthrow their oppressors. One volunteer lamented in a letter to a Protestant minister that he desired "the power to strip their churches . . . to bring off this treasure hoard of gold silver and jewels, and to put the greasy priests, monks, friars and other officials at work on the public highways as a

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<sup>39</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 272-273.

preliminary step to mending their ways.”<sup>40</sup> Captain Ephraim Kirby Smith saw the Church working hand-in-hand with an oppressive government to keep Mexicans from enjoying the freedoms he thought they lacked. He wrote that Mexicans “are lost in the most groveling superstition and ignorance and are under a government that tramples them to the dust.” Like most Americans, Smith thought the invasion would benefit the Mexican people, and possibly allow them to overthrow the bondage of the Church. “I trust a better day is about to dawn on this benighted region,” Smith continued, “and that another generation under a better government may abandon their idleness and popish idolatry.”<sup>41</sup> American soldiers in Mexico often thought like Smith. A humorous aside in one of the newspapers published by American entrepreneurs in Mexico would probably have met with Smith’s approval, had he lived to read it:

Wanted immediately—A government in Mexico qualified to do general housework, sign documents, or at least make its mark. Such a government, which can furnish satisfactory recommendations from its last place may procure a situation by addressing post paid James K. Polk, Washington, or by applying personally to General Winfield Scott, Hall of the Montezumas, second door below the grand plaza. N.B. No Protestant need apply.<sup>42</sup>

Not all Americans linked the Church with the government as an oppressor. Some, like Smith, were likely to see the “sinful” behavior of Mexicans as something too entrenched to change in the immediate future. Whereas others, such as Laidley, came to the sad conclusion

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<sup>40</sup>Robert Patterson quoted in Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 128. Foos argues that Patterson’s statement proves that American volunteers saw the Church as “the main enemy and obstacle to freeing up the hoarded wealth of Mexico.” Like his previous arguments, I find this one unconvincing. Foos fails to provide evidence that any plundering of Church property resulted from of the greed of volunteers.

<sup>41</sup>Smith to wife, Nov. 2, 1846 in Blackwood, *Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith*, 69.

<sup>42</sup>Mexico City *North American*, January 29, 1848 quoted in Chance, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 143.



that the Church had led its people so far astray that there was little Americans could do to help them.

The seeming inability of Mexicans to treat the Sabbath and other holy days with their proper respect deeply disturbed American observers. Theodore Laidley claimed “the Mexicans do not observe it [the Sabbath] as it is in the U.S.” He continued by writing:

Their Churches are open and many attend and seem very devout, but they do not proclaim it a day of rest and rejoicing by their dress, by shutting their shops, by abstaining from all labor & etc.— their dress is as usual on other days—most of the shops are open as on other days, the people seem to be engaged, bringing articles to Market and other acts of Labor very much as usual. In the morning they ride or walk in the public walks, visit public places of amusements and at night they regularly have their music and dancing which is kept up till a pretty late hour.<sup>43</sup>

Laidley’s criticism of the Mexican observation of the Sabbath was mild, but it underscored a key cultural difference between the two nations. Laidley saw Mexican Catholicism as hypocritical because the worshipers went to mass, but failed to extend their religion into their lives. If a Mexican could not do something as simple as closing a shop on Sunday, Laidley had little expectation that they could do much more.

A newspaper article published in Mexico City in 1847 generally agreed with Laidley’s views. The article claimed “an American visiting this magnificent city for the first time, would be apt to come to the conclusion that but little attention was paid to the sacred observance of the Christian Sabbath.” Like Laidley, the article notes that shops remained open, and people did not seem to act significantly different. Unlike Laidley, however, the article stressed the devout nature of Mexicans, and did not contend that they are hypocritical. In fact, the article chastises

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<sup>43</sup>Laidley to Father, Oct. 24, 1847 in Chance, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 118.

American soldiers for failing to uphold the necessary religious standards of the Sabbath.<sup>44</sup> The publishers of the newspaper showed an open mindedness lacking in many American diarists because they intended to sell papers to Mexicans as well as American soldiers. Mexico City had two English newspapers, so the publishers printed articles for the benefit of local, Mexican, readers and even published part of the papers in Spanish.<sup>45</sup> The article sought to explain that while Mexicans worshiped in different ways, Americans should recognize Catholicism as essentially the same faith. Like many other Americans, the writer treated the Catholic ceremony as pointless. He stressed that “the worship of the HEART is the true Christian worship.”<sup>46</sup> Americans such as Ephraim Kirby Smith and Theodore Laidley would have agreed with the paper.

Only weeks after writing to his father about the inability of Mexicans to act properly on Sundays, Laidley wrote again decrying the behavior of Mexicans on All-Saints Day and the Day of the Dead.<sup>47</sup> Laidley noticed that most of the shops closed, something that probably pleased him, but the Mexican celebrated with methods the young lieutenant found unacceptable. He found it absurd that Mexicans made offerings to the dead, even finding the practice of lighting candles for the dead ridiculous. What really upset Laidley, however, was the amount of drinking and fighting that occurred. “On this day,” Laidley wrote, “it is customary to visit the Church

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<sup>44</sup>*The American Star*, November 21, 1847.

<sup>45</sup>Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, (College Station, Texas A&M Press, 1997), 132.

<sup>46</sup>*The American Star*, November 21, 1847.

<sup>47</sup>All Saints Day is November 1, and the Day of the Dead is November 2. Catholics celebrate All Saints Day throughout the world, but the Day of the Dead celebration only occurs in Mexico. It is a combination of Catholic ritual and pre-Columbian Indian tradition. Because the feast has no corollary in the U.S., it was one of the few parts of Mexican Catholicism that must have been entirely foreign to Americans.

Yards and take with them all kinds of good things to eat and plenty of Pulque, and get drunk and in the evenings fights and quarrels are plenty and many are killed every year.” He ended by stating condescendingly, “this is the way they celebrate their great feast days.”<sup>48</sup>

Daniel Harvey Hill was in Mexico City during the Christmas season in 1847. He was pleased that the war subdued Holy Week celebrations more than normal, presumably because he found the fireworks too loud. On Christmas Eve, he wrote, “The Mexicans usually celebrate two masses on this night, the Mass of the Cock at 12 at night and the Mass of the Shepherds at 3 in the morning, and [to] give greater gaiety many blows are given, wounds inflicted and assassinations committed.”<sup>49</sup> Hill and Laidley both thought that Mexicans failed to treat holy days with their proper reverence. Mexican Catholics drank, took part in superstitious rituals, and committed grave acts of violence on the days reserved for solemnity and prayer.

American soldiers also criticized Mexican for their drinking habits. Temperance became a major issue of religious reformers in the U.S. in the 1830's. One historian argues that it became “the key to social and moral perfection,” in the decade before the Mexican War.<sup>50</sup> While there was no doubt that few American soldiers abstained from alcohol, they did not hesitate to attack Mexicans for their impropriety. Ephraim Kirby Smith provided his wife with detailed instructions on how to harvest the maguey plant to get the juice to produce pulque, and many

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<sup>48</sup>Laidley to Father, Nov. 5, 1847 in Chance, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 123-124. Pulque is an alcoholic beverage fermented from the maguey plant (sometimes called agave). It has a consistency similar to sour milk and is certainly an acquired taste.

<sup>49</sup>Hughes, *Diary of Daniel Harvey Hill*, 155.

<sup>50</sup>Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), 98-99.

officers enjoyed a strong drink with Mexicans.<sup>51</sup> Theodore Laidley briefly lived with a Mexican family in Puebla and enjoyed experimenting with their cooking. He wrote at length about their liquor to his father: “Their pulque I like very much and it is a very nutritious and healthful beverage; about as strong as a sharp cider or porter—but Mexicans get intoxicated on it very frequently.”<sup>52</sup> Laidley made a point of telling his father that pulque was not very strong, but Mexicans became intoxicated on it often. He conveniently skirted the issue of temperance. While he admitted to drinking liquor, he claimed it was no stronger than hard cider.<sup>53</sup>

When Americans, even the Catholics in the ranks, encountered Mexican Catholicism it appalled them. Many Americans attended Catholic masses and feast days, but they constantly complained about the lack of morality and reverence they found. As they saw it the Church oppressed the growth of republicanism in a nation that outwardly appeared similar to the United States.<sup>54</sup> Some Americans, like Ephraim Kirby Smith, hoped Mexico could learn from the Americans and seek liberty by overthrowing the bonds of the Church. Still Americans made no attempt to change the social, or religious, structure in Mexico. Another army of evangelical preachers did not follow the U.S. Army to convert Mexicans to Protestantism. Americans, both Catholic and Protestant, were satisfied with their damnation of Mexicans for their lack of Protestant virtue and were content to hold Mexicans as their spiritual inferiors. American’s

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<sup>51</sup>Smith to his wife, Nov. 23, 1846 in Blackwood, *To Mexico with Scott*, 79.

<sup>52</sup>Laidley to Father, Nov. 5, 1847 in Chance, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 124.

<sup>53</sup>Pulque generally is about 20-30 proof, so it is about twice as alcoholic as a hard cider. The drink has high levels of a few vitamins, but during the Mexican War he did not know this, so Laidley is repeating the traditional stories about the drink’s properties.

<sup>54</sup>Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 296.

views of Manifest Destiny required that they not only be racially superior, but also religiously superior.

## Chapter 3

### The Nursery Legends of the Country

In early August 1846 the auspiciously named Lieutenant Napoleon Jackson Tecumseh Dana, a West Point graduate from Ohio, attended a Catholic mass in Camargo. He wanted to witness the “mummery” and the “poor people, who are no better than idolators” for himself. In a letter to his wife written later that day, Dana described a curious contradiction. “They all wear shoes and stockings when they go to church, and when they squat on the floor they are very careful you shall not see even their feet, but they will bathe before us in the river and show themselves perfectly naked to the waist and sometimes lower,” Dana wrote. Continuing, Dana told his wife about the variety of women he watched bathe, “Some of them are beautiful indeed . . . They can all swim like ducks, but all the water and soap they use will not kill the ‘buggers’ for them.”<sup>1</sup> Dana’s juxtaposition of beauty and filth appears in many of the accounts of his contemporaries. The spectacle put on by the Mexican women at the river stunned the young lieutenant, but he explained, in lurid detail, the bathing habits of the women, some of whom he found quite attractive.

About a month and a half later, Dana received a reply from his wife. Not surprisingly, she chastised her husband for watching beautiful Mexican women bathe naked.<sup>2</sup> American soldiers commonly commented on Mexican women, but not all of them proclaimed their beauty

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<sup>1</sup>Napoleon Dana to Sue, Aug. 2, 1846 in Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Monterrey is Ours! The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Dana, 1845-1847*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 104-105.

<sup>2</sup>The letter from Dana’s wife, Sue, no longer exists, but the nature of Dana’s apologies to her makes it clear that she was upset about Dana’s descriptions of the women. Sue was so upset that she told her uncle about Dana’s impropriety, an action Dana found unbecoming for a woman. Dana to Sue, Oct. 5, 1846, *ibid.*, 142.

in their letters to their wives. Some Americans wrote about how ugly they thought Mexican women appeared. Others commented on how “black” they looked.<sup>3</sup> When Dana wrote back to his wife, to apologize, he stressed that no attractive Mexican women lived anywhere in Mexico he had traveled. “I would look at them as I would look at so many wild beasts, orangutans, for they had no more beauty . . . These are only the lower classes who are so public. They are quite dark and most excellently ugly,” Dana claimed to his wife, a stiff departure from his initial letter.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Dana felt greater concern about repairing any damage done to his marriage than for accurately describing the citizenry of Camargo, but his letters do reveal some fundamental views American soldiers applied to Mexican women.

Dana clearly believed that Mexican women fell into classes that he could determine by their racial appearance, a trait Dana linked to their beauty. In a second letter defending himself to his wife Dana claimed “every one I saw [bathing in the river] was truly disgusting, almost sickening. They were the low people, very dark and exceedingly ugly.” A few paragraphs later, however, Dana added “There were two very pretty women at church last Sunday, right fair and white. They were evidently not Mexicans but Castilian ladies.”<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding Dana’s attempts to remain in good company with his wife, the young lieutenant’s desire to link racial appearance with a Mexican woman’s beauty was hardly unique.

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<sup>3</sup>James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 77-79. McCaffrey’s book contains only short sections on the views of American soldiers toward Mexican women, but it remains the only serious attempt to study the matter.

<sup>4</sup>Dana to Sue, Oct. 5, 1846 in Ferrell, *Monterrey is Ours!*, 142.

<sup>5</sup>Dana to Sue, Oct. 12, 1846 *ibid.*, 144.

Ralph Kirkham agreed that Mexican women came in two distinct classes, upper and lower, that he could determine by their appearance. Kirkham wrote to his wife, “You rarely see the better classes in the streets, excepting when they go to mass, or on Sunday evening when they ride in the public gardens.” “Some of the ladies dress with considerable taste,” he wrote, “but they never wear bonnets. The only covering for their head is a rebozo or a mantilla.” While he described the upper class as “graceful,” the lower classes received harsher treatment. Kirkham wrote, “The women go barefooted and bareheaded and wear a shawl over their shoulders.”<sup>6</sup>

Ephraim Kirby Smith, who had no love for Mexico or its people, believed that women of the upper class could consort with him. While in Puebla, Smith received a kiss from the niece of a Mexican general. He wrote in his diary that “she is a very sweet young lady as I testified by my admiring looks.” Smith usually dismissed the lower classes as nothing but “filthy Mexicans.”<sup>7</sup>

Race constituted the major distinguishing factor between the two perceived classes of Mexican women. Each American soldier had a lifetime of experience in classifying people by race. Dana claimed the pretty women he saw in church appeared “Castilian.” A volunteer from Alabama described an officer’s Mexican bride by saying “She was of pure Castillian blood.” Because Mexico expelled all Spaniards from the country in 1829, the women Americans thought

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<sup>6</sup>Ralph Kirkham to Kate, June 1, 1847, in Robert Ryal Miller, ed., *The Mexican War Journal and Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 20-21. A *rebozo* and a *mantilla* are both a long shawl traditionally worn by Mexican women. Presumably Kirkham used the names to refer to the quality level of the garment.

<sup>7</sup>Ephraim Kirby Smith to his wife, May 27, 1847 and Smith to his wife, July 7, 1847 in Emma Jerome Blackwood, ed., *To Mexico with Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to his Wife*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), 174, 183.



appeared Spanish, were more likely *mulattos*, a mixture of black and white, or *mestizos*, a mixture of white and Indian.<sup>8</sup>

Just as they had preconceived ideas about race and religion, American soldiers brought ideas about gender and gender roles with them to Mexico. American views about Mexican gender roles stemmed from their preconceived notions of race and religion. Because American soldiers saw Mexicans in general as their racial and spiritual inferiors, it stood to reason that they would see Mexican women in precisely the same light. When Mexicans violated what Americans saw as the proper behavior for their gender, the soldiers routinely attributed the error to their race or religion.

When Dana drew his contrast between the behavior of Mexican women in church and while bathing in the river, he attacked their inability to absorb the lessons of religion. Ralph Kirkham told an even more direct story to his wife. While in Mexico City, Kirkham lamented about how the Catholic church led Mexican men to betray their nation's women:

I often say to myself, "What a beautiful and happy country this might be if there were good laws and the people virtuous." But I suppose there is no nation on earth where there is so much wickedness and vice of all kinds. There is little incentive to virtue here. How little of that pure and holy religion which our blessed Saviour taught is to be found in this country. No one could believe how low and depraved these people are, and instances are common of men selling their wives and sisters, and often their mothers and daughters.<sup>9</sup>

Because Kirkham saw the Catholic Church itself as corrupting and unable to impart the appropriate social values on Mexicans, men commonly sold their women. Kirkham married into

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<sup>8</sup>Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 174-175. Certainly not all Spaniards left Mexico, but they were far fewer in number than Americans believed.

<sup>9</sup>Kirkham to Kate, Nov. 6, 1847 in Miller, *Journal and Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham*, 78.

a slave-owning family from Louisiana, and complained several times in his letters and journal about not having any slaves with him, so presumably the practice of forced prostitution horrified him rather than the commodification of Mexican women.<sup>10</sup>

Ephraim Kirby Smith blamed the combined religious and racial failings of Mexicans for the failings of their women. On patrol in Puebla in late July 1847, Smith stumbled upon a funeral service unlike anything he had ever seen. He entered a house he described as “inferior,” and saw a room “in a blaze of light from many candles.” In the middle of the room lay the body of a girl he thought to be about seventeen wearing the best clothing the family could muster, “surrounded by gilded ornaments, probably borrowed from the churches.” He continued describing a scene that seems more appropriate for Shakespeare’s London than Mexico:

In one corner of the room was a group of old women, perfect hags, squatted round a furnace where a feast was cooking. They looked like so many witches round a cauldron. In the opposite corner was a display of liquors and drinking cups, which the appearance of the inmates proved had not been suffered to stand idle. Immediately around the corpse were several couples dancing a fandango to the merry fiddle, while ever and anon the witches round the cauldron, with their shrill, cracked voices, howled a chant in the Indian, Tlascalan-language. The whole was evidently a strange commingling of the Romish superstitions and the ancient Indian funeral rites. . . .<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Kirkham married into the Mix family from New Orleans. It is not clear if he ever bought a slave himself, but he and his wife had a least one prior to the Mexican War. In one letter to his wife, Kirkham claims that he feels bad about asking an enlisted man serving to do things that he would only expect a slave to do, because he neglected to bring a “black boy from New Orleans.” In another letter, Kirkham wonders if his slaves in Louisiana “wish for their old master and mistress again.” Kirkham to Kate, June 1, 1847; Kirkham to Kate, Nov. 10, 1847 *ibid.*, xii, 21, 80.

<sup>11</sup>Smith to his wife, July 19, 1847 in Blackwood, *Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith*, 186-187. Smith misspelled Tlascalan, it should be Tlascalan. It is also highly unlikely that he encountered any Indians speaking Tlascalan around Puebla. They were far more likely to be speaking Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, who predominated in the region around Puebla. It is further unlikely that any American soldier could have differentiated between the two languages.

Smith thought the women engaged in improper behavior, but principally they drank liberally, and did not conduct themselves properly for a funeral service. Instead of grieving, the women danced and chanted. Unlike Kirkham, however, Smith did not let all the blame fall entirely on the shoulders of the corrupt Catholic Church; he blamed the racial makeup of the women as well. If they did not have any Indian blood in them, perhaps they could understand the gravity of a funeral and refrain from drinking and dancing.

Certainly not all Americans thought Mexican women looked like “hags” or “negro wenches.”<sup>12</sup> Some, like Abner Doubleday, found Mexican women who looked white enough to fall into their standards of conventional beauty, and these Americans sometimes also assumed that these “white” Mexicans would fit their standards for gender roles. After the Battle of Buena Vista, in February of 1847, Northern Mexico did not see any major combat. Doubleday, stationed in the North for the duration of the war, grew bored with garrison duty in Saltillo and arranged to conduct a long patrol to Parras, about one hundred miles away. The group with whom Doubleday traveled, stopped at a ranch for a rest when he “saw two young ladies and a girl who were white enough to be Americans.” He claimed it “was a phenomena I did not expect in such a place where it is rare that one meets anything but Indians.” Doubleday, who spoke Spanish fluently, jokingly addressed one of the women in English. He asked her ““Young lady cant you bring me a glass of water.”” She shocked the lieutenant when she answered him in English. It turned out Doubleday’s assertion about her whiteness was partially correct. While

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*; Charles H. Brough quoted in McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 77.

the woman had no American blood, her parents were Irish. The other “white” woman originated from New Orleans and relocated to Mexico as a child.<sup>13</sup>

Doubleday’s ability to speak Spanish fluently made him a unique observer of Mexican culture among American soldiers. While no one can estimate the number of American soldiers who spoke Spanish, the number must have been extremely small.<sup>14</sup> Doubleday often acted as an interpreter, and he used his skills to great effect during the encounter with the young women and the other members of their party. While conversing, in Spanish, with the Irish woman he learned that Mexican husbands expected total obedience from their wives. The woman claimed “if it is mid day and your husband says the sun has just risen the wife must say so too.” He did not pass judgement on the woman’s claim in his memoirs, but his actions show that he held the practice in contempt. After the American woman’s Mexican husband joined the group on their patrol, the husband made it clear that he did not want his wife talking to Doubleday. Even after becoming aware of the man’s discomfort, Doubleday would not leave the woman. He saw, and treated, her as he would an American woman. He had no respect for what he saw as the extremely subservient role her husband intended for her, and almost paid the ultimate price. Doubleday only stopped talking to the woman when it became clear that her husband would kill the

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<sup>13</sup>Abner Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army: The Reminiscences of Abner Doubleday from the Collections of the New York Historical Society*, Joseph E. Chance, ed., (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1998), 136.

<sup>14</sup>No historian has yet attempted to make an estimate of the number of Spanish speaking American soldiers, but circumstantial evidences inevitably leads to the conclusion that bilingual officers, such as Doubleday, were extremely rare. American soldiers filled their diaries and letters with Spanish words and phrases, often badly misspelled, indicating that they made some attempts to learn the language. See McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 77, and Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army*, 176-177.

American if the opportunity arose. Doubleday's assumption that an American gender role fit a Mexican woman if she looked "white enough" almost cost him his life.<sup>15</sup>

The gender roles that American soldiers most often thought Mexican women violated surrounded sexual norms. Prostitution existed in all parts of the U.S., so Americans were familiar with the institution regardless of their region of origin, or social status.<sup>16</sup> The practice certainly saw its share of condemnation from religious and secular reform groups, but the institution never became endangered. When American soldiers arrived in Mexico, they encountered prostitution there as well. Americans did not find Mexican prostitution objectionable in totality. Generally they only found it objectionable when Mexicans did not follow American cultural norms regarding gender.

American soldiers held marital fidelity as one of the most important parts of womanhood, and they did not always find Mexican women who fit the model. Franklin Smith encountered a large number of Mexican women at a fandango and claimed:

the married women only want the opportunity to cuckold their husbands—One fact speaks volumes[,] a proposal to a married woman if there be any cause to prevent her acceding to it *is never regarded as an insult but always as a compliment to her charms*. If she takes a fancy to you or thinks you will pay her well your suit is greater[,] if she takes a different view she is at least complimented and her respect for you heightened.<sup>17</sup>

American soldiers experienced other cases of Mexican women violating American cultural norms. Immediately after the Battle of Monterey, Abner Doubleday found himself in the

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<sup>15</sup>Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army*, 136-139.

<sup>16</sup>Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 218-240.

<sup>17</sup>Franklin Smith journal entry Nov. 15, 1847 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 114.

presence of a Mexican colonel's family and several people seeking refuge from the battle with them. One of the young women in the group "who bore fair claims to be considered pretty" asked Doubleday not to harm them. After assuring the young woman of their safety, he turned his attention to a young girl and told her she was pretty. The girl's mother overheard the remark and asked Doubleday about his marital status. When he revealed his bachelor status, the woman asked if the girl "pleased" him. He replied that the girl did please him, and the woman said, "you may have her when she grows up."<sup>18</sup> American soldiers did not always look on Mexican women with scorn, many Americans found in Mexican women, a suitable substitute for American women, at least sexually.

Some American soldiers found themselves far away from home for over three years because of the war, and most saw a tour of duty beyond one year.<sup>19</sup> During these extended absences from friends, family, and American women, soldiers often found comfort in their Mexican counterparts. The rate of venereal disease in the army remains difficult to ascertain, but one volunteer surgeon claimed that "Venereal disease [is] prevalent to an extent that could not be imagined in our land of steady habits where this gross licentiousness is restrained by a wholesome condition of public opinion."<sup>20</sup> The surgeon blamed the spread of venereal disease through the American ranks on the failure of Mexican republicanism to maintain proper hygiene in its women.

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<sup>18</sup>Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army*, 96-97.

<sup>19</sup>See K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. inc., 1974), esp. 18-20 and 388. A complete study on regimental movements does not currently exist, but Richard Bruce Winders claims a monograph is forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup>John N. Dunlap quoted in McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 104.

American soldiers often met Mexican women at fandangos, where they would dance and drink the nights away. Samuel Chamberlain described his first fandango as a “night of wild fun and unlicensed debauchery wine and aguadenta, cheap and abundant, the women fine shaped, black flashing eyes and very accomodating!”<sup>21</sup> Chamberlain, like many of his contemporaries, rarely complained that the women he met at fandangos did not meet his expectations, while women he met on the streets or in church often received his scorn. Franklin Smith attended a fandango in Mier where he “saw some two or three dozen Mexican women well dressed after the American fashion . . . They danced well and were a sort of Aristocracy to any thing I had yet seen. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

Even at fandangos American ideas of race did not take a backseat to the pleasure some Americans found in dancing with women for the first time in months. Samuel Curtis stumbled across a fandango at which he described the Mexicans in attendance as “only a medium class of the city, many of the men and women displayed the darkest outline of indian features.” Curtis served as the military governor of Saltillo when he made his comments, and he did not appreciate such events because he thought they would tempt his men. Before he left, however, the colonel tried to dance with the women. He attempted dances he described as “quadrills and waltzes very much like those danced in the states.”<sup>23</sup> Some Americans applied their preconceived ideas about

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<sup>21</sup>Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession, Recollections of a Rogue*, William H. Goetzmann, ed., (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 68. Sam misspelled aguadenta, it should be *aguardiente*. It is the Spanish word for brandy. *Ibid.*, 352 n137.

<sup>22</sup>Smith journal entry Dec. 8, 1847 in Chance, *Diary of Franklin Smith*, 131.

<sup>23</sup>Samuel Curtis diary entry Dec. 26, 1846 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *Mexico Under Fire: Being the Diary of Samuel Ryan Curtis, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Volunteer Regiment, During the American Occupation of Northern Mexico, 1846-1847*, (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1994), 85.

race to the Mexican dances. One officer disagreed with Curtis when he claimed that the dances appeared more like “a Maryland negro dance than anything I can compare it to.”<sup>24</sup> Lieutenant Dana attended a fandango out of curiosity and left unimpressed:

There were about forty of our officers there and about twenty Spanish girls. I inquired particularly if there was not a mistake in the place but was told no, that was the high-flung fandango. If that was it, I would like to see a common one for curiosity sake. I believe I have felt fleas on me ever since. They are vulgar, disgusting places, and I believe I would rather go to a nigger breakdown.<sup>25</sup>

Dana related his story about the fandango to his wife before she chastised him for paying too much attention to Mexican women, but like Curtis, the concept of race always lurked in the background.

Fandangos represented the only times when Americans and Mexicans could mix in an environment completely removed from the war. Even still, men such as Curtis and Dana show that the racial, and sometimes even the religious, ideas Americans brought with them did not relax in social situations. Both Dana and Curtis continued to link Mexicans with a lack of hygiene, a racially based charge that appears absurd coming from professional soldiers in an army that saw its numbers decimated by diseases born of poor sanitation.<sup>26</sup>

Ralph Kirkham held Mexican men in contempt because they sold their wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers into prostitution, a practice that clearly conflicted with his notions of proper gender roles. Not only did Mexican women fail to meet American expectations, Mexican men

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<sup>24</sup>Levi White quoted in McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 103.

<sup>25</sup>Dana to Sue, June 19, 1846 in Ferrell, *Monterrey is Ours!*, 91.

<sup>26</sup>Winder's, *Mr. Polk's Army*, 144-151. The casualty rates among the volunteers were significantly higher than the regulars. Most regulars attributed the difference to better discipline and sanitation.



fell far short of the mark as well. American soldiers filled their diaries and letters with stories of their own virtues and the shortcomings of Mexican men. No author describes his own chivalric intentions better than Samuel Chamberlain.

Chamberlain often wrote of how he saved woman after woman from the clutches of a menacing Mexican man. One time he dueled with sabers for the affections of a young woman, and another he murdered a fellow American soldier who besmirched the honor of a Mexican woman. In all of these cases, however, Chamberlain left no doubt that he was the proud, chivalrous hero. Chamberlain's stories often have an unbelievable air about them, but many other Americans in Mexico understood his underlying point that their military mission came with a mandate to protect women.<sup>27</sup>

Chamberlain delighted in filling his memoirs with stories of his great deeds on behalf of Mexican women, but none rival his story of Carmeleita. During a heavy night of drinking, Chamberlain heard the screams of a woman and went to investigate. He found "a young and lovely female in a nude state a girl as fair as any Anglo Saxon lady" standing in a yard, threatened by an old "greaser" with whom Chamberlain had previously sparred. The old man cursed at the woman and threatened her with a rawhide whip. Chamberlain understood enough of the man's verbal assault to know that they were married, and the old man sought "to exercise conjugal authority on her for running away on the day of their marriage." Not one to stand by when he knew of a woman to save, Chamberlain drew his pistol and announced his presence.

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<sup>27</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 10-13. Chamberlain's memoirs contain several stories about his adventures, or misadventures, with Mexican and American women. He also painted several watercolors of fandangos and his "rescues" of women. One in particular shows him jumping his horse over a low wall with saber in hand to rescue three Mexican women and an old man from two American attackers. *Ibid.*, 179.

The old man ran, and Chamberlain did not have the heart to shoot him “in cold blood, and woo his widow afterwards like another Richard III.”<sup>28</sup> Chamberlain intended his reference to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, to re-enforce his virtue. He wanted his readers to see him as the Henry Tudor-like hero, not a man apt to kill simply for the affections of a woman.

Chamberlain and Carmeleita, naturally, fell instantly in love, and he brought her back to camp. They lived in pure bliss until the old man returned to seek the return of his wife. Chamberlain appealed to the American officers to help him, but they refused to interfere. Chamberlain tried to shoot the old man, but observers managed to subdue him before he could fire. As the old man took Carmeleita away, she yelled to Chamberlain “Farewell my husband, farewell king of my soul, come, come quick to me in heaven.” Chamberlain quickly commenced a search for his love, but he only found the tragic story of her death. A guerrilla-priest Chamberlain knew told him the old man “carried Carmeleita to a lone ranche on ‘Canales’s arroyo’ where she was outraged by the whole gang of demons and then cut to pieces!” Chamberlain’s grand story of chivalry now had the most important element, the antagonist. And as a proper hero, Chamberlain spent the rest of the war searching for the old man, whom he called “El Tuerto.”<sup>29</sup> The story of heroism, love, and heartbreak served as more than just amusement for his readers. Chamberlain sought to portray himself, and sometimes his fellow soldiers, as gentleman warriors who would protect Mexico’s women from predatory men.

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 231-236. Chamberlain’s spelling was bad, and his spelling of Spanish words was atrocious. Carmeleita should be spelled Carmelita. He gave all of his children, born after the war, names of three women he claimed were his mistresses in Mexico, which he misspelled: Carmeleita, Dolorios, and Franceita.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 238. El tuerto is Spanish for “the one-eyed.”

While no other soldier who left a diary claimed to protect Mexican women with the ferocity of Chamberlain, they often tried to help when they could, and felt disgusted when they failed. Historian Robert Johannsen argues that Americans on the home front saw an avalanche of war related material, notably books, plays, poems, and short stories. All of these proclaimed the war as a just affair, and many of them tried to portray the war as a noble endeavor. In these accounts American soldiers played the role of virtuous knights. They conquered Mexico without destroying the nation, pillaging its wealth, or raping its women. While isolated accounts such as Chamberlain's may be true, the reality of the situation for the majority of Mexicans bore little resemblance to the fanciful accounts read by Americans at home.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of personal honor prevailed in the antebellum South, but the extent of its presence in Mexico is negligible. A recent historian has argued that James K. Polk successfully appealed to the wounded honor of Southerners to win support for the war. Polk deliberately tailored his war message to Congress so that he could stir up support among Southerners.<sup>31</sup> In Mexico, however, the practical application of Southern honor is far more difficult to see. Soldiers such as Doubleday and Chamberlain understood that they had a basic duty to protect women, but their actions did not come from any concept of Southern honor. Both soldiers came from the North. Americans' concept of chivalry operated independently of any regional claim to honor.

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<sup>30</sup>Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 31-32.

<sup>31</sup>Gregory S. Hospodor, "Honor Bound: Southern Honor and the Mexican War," (Ph. D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2000).

The idea of American chivalry in Mexico reflected the deeply held view of America as the ideal state fulfilling God's mandate. American soldiers saw themselves as something more than just professional combatants fighting a just war. They saw themselves as crusaders for American values. They saw the world in terms of American values on race and religion, and through these values they created an image for themselves. The ideal American soldier had more in common with Samuel Chamberlain and his over the top gallantry than he did with a career soldier like Winfield Scott.

The first hand accounts of soldiers routinely discuss direct attacks on civilians and their property in Mexico. Most accounts by regular army soldiers direct the blame at volunteers, and volunteers tend to direct the blame at other volunteers. The most common attacks involved theft and property damage, but murder and rape appear often as well. While they often had little power to stop the attacks, many commentators lamented how short the volunteers fell of the nation's good intentions. Theodore Laidley spoke for many regulars when he wrote to his father:

No wonder the people should think highly of the volunteers when they fill the newspapers with their own stories exaggerated so that they would not be known by those who were participators in their glorious actions. But the other side of the story is not heard. How [the volunteers] rob houses, steal, sack churches, ruin families, plunder and pillage. No, this is not heard of. But the poor sufferers know and hear it. The outrages they have committed, here, will never be known by people of the U.S. They would not believe it if they did hear of it—But enough.<sup>32</sup>

The Texas Rangers generally received the most notoriety from American soldiers.

Rankin Dilworth, a regular, claimed "The Mexicans dread the Texians more than they do the

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<sup>32</sup>Theodore Laidley to Father, Oct. 24, 1847 in James M. McCaffrey, *"Surrounded by Dangers of All Kinds:" The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 120.

devil, and they have good reason for it, if all the reports that we hear are true.”<sup>33</sup> While few Americans would suggest that Mexicans held the same rights as Americans, they often shuddered at the atrocities committed against them. The American popular press did not accurately capture the nature of the war with its trumpeting of chivalric values, but some American soldiers tried to keep the war a noble affair fought between armies. Abner Doubleday seemed pleased when he managed to convince a newly arrived regiment of militia to cease harassing every Mexican civilian that came within range of their camp.<sup>34</sup> Franklin Smith, a volunteer, did not condone violence against Mexican civilians, but he claimed the U.S. government caused the violence with its inefficiency. “Our troops are not paid—then they have conceived an idea that they are to kill the Mexicans and rob,” wrote Smith.<sup>35</sup> Direct attacks on women usually created even more outrage from soldiers who saw protecting women as part of their duty.

One such incident occurred the morning after Samuel Chamberlain witnessed the Dominican monk direct the men of Saltillo to torture and kill any women who consorted with the Americans. The morning after the atrocity, a company of Texas Rangers returned from an expedition. When they stopped to water their horses, they found the bodies:

Here they came upon the horrid sight of over twenty naked bodies of females, terribly mutilated, with dogs fighting as they devoured all that was left of what was once so beautiful and charming. The rangers were horrified. These iron men, who for years had participated in all the sanguinary scenes of frontier and Indian warfare, shed tears as they realized all the frightful details of the night. And then cries of rage and revenge burst forth and with brandished arms they looked around for the authors of so fiendish crimes.

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<sup>33</sup>Rankin Dilworth diary entry June 4, 1846 in Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance, eds., *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth, U.S. Army*, (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>34</sup>Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army*, 67.

<sup>35</sup>Smith journal entry Nov. 14, 1847 in Chance, *The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith*, 110.

The Rangers soon found a large group of Mexican men stumbling out of the local bars, and attacked. “Goaded to madness” the Rangers fired into the group and a fight commenced. With shouts of “Remember the Alamo” the Rangers shot at Mexican men armed only with knives. The Mexicans, likely drunk after their long night, tried to defend themselves, but until they found firearms they could only offer weak resistance. Once the Mexicans obtained rifles, the Rangers broke off the engagement.<sup>36</sup> The Rangers, who rarely showed any sympathy for Mexicans, found the torture and murder of so many women an anathema. They avenged the dead women because they saw them as the passive victims of a brutal and inferior race which had no respect for the code of chivalry.

Texas Rangers had a long history of bad blood with Mexicans, dating back to the War of Texas Independence. Mass atrocities on both sides took the place of most formal combat, but in Mexico the Rangers occasionally respected the noncombatant status of women and children, as in the Saltillo incident. Chamberlain, along with other commentators, provided some examples in which Rangers killed or raped women. The Rangers received the eternal scorn of Chamberlain because they refused to act consistently in the same chivalrous manner that he did.

The more typical face of the Rangers’ activities in Mexican resulted from an attack on American supply lines. Shortly after the Battle of Buena Vista, forty or fifty teamsters died while trying to surrender in a major guerrilla raid on a U.S. wagon train. The guerrillas captured a girl, the sixteen-year-old daughter of an American sutler, and according to Chamberlain, forced her to sit nude on their table during a meal. Although they released the girl, and returned her to Monterey, General Taylor still forced the inhabitants of Northern Mexico to pay almost \$100,000

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<sup>36</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 273.

for the damage to U.S. property. Chamberlain no doubt included the story of the young girl to make his account more dramatic, and to make the subsequent actions of the Rangers more palatable. In reality, the girl returned to Monterey with \$20 given to her by the guerilla leader as compensation for the death of her father. No evidence has survived that suggests Chamberlain's tale about her sitting nude on the table is correct.<sup>37</sup>

According to Chamberlain, Taylor collected the money and "let loose on the country packs of human blood hounds, called Texian Rangers." Chamberlain's view of the atrocities committed by the Rangers paralleled the majority of his contemporaries. He claimed the exploits of the Rangers would "always remain fresh in the memory of Mexicans, as the fearful atrocities committed by them now form part of the Nursery Legends of the country." During their reign of terror, the Rangers raped women and murdered men. In one incident depicted by Chamberlain, the Rangers rounded up all the inhabitants of the San Francisco Ranch. One by one, they placed all men "capable of bearing arms" against a post and shot them. The women and children had half an hour to retrieve their possessions before the Rangers torched their houses. Chamberlain thought the guerrillas committed acts just as atrocious, but he did not expect better from them, after all, they made no pretensions toward chivalry. The Rangers, on the other hand, should have acted like proper American soldiers. Chamberlain summed up the guerrilla war by writing "the conflict was no longer war but murder, and a disgrace to any nation calling themselves Christian."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 203, Bauer, *Mexican War*, 218, and 229 n37, and Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 166.

<sup>38</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 203. The guerrilla war in Northern Mexico after the Battle of Buena Vista is one area deserving of far more study. There are no full length volumes or articles that pay enough attention to what was obviously a brutal and punishing campaign on the civilians. Diarists stationed in the North usually fill their

Volunteer soldiers who saw little or no combat, such as Rangers stationed in Northern Mexico after February 1847, tended to get in more trouble with civilians than those soldiers in the thick of the fight.<sup>39</sup> Bored soldiers spent more time at fandangos, more time drinking, and consequently more time causing trouble than soldiers in combat. Samuel Chamberlain claimed that newly arrived volunteers lacked any sense of discipline and caused “many depredations and outrages on the inhabitants.” His unit found itself used as a police force to prevent American volunteers from attacking Mexicans, and he claimed they did their duty efficiently.<sup>40</sup>

The need to have units, such as Chamberlain’s, protect the Mexican population from the indiscriminate attacks of volunteers should have constituted proof to Americans that their army had no monopoly on chivalry. Even in the face of an ever growing body of evidence, Americans convinced themselves that they were in every way cultural superiors to the Mexicans. American soldiers sought to portray themselves as protectors of women because they believed by doing so they could make the war a noble affair. Ideas about race and religion allowed Americans soldiers to march into Mexico and believe that they could show Mexicans how to worship properly, conduct a republican government, and treat their women with deserved respect. When Mexican men failed to care for their women, American soldiers might avenge them as the Rangers did at Saltillo. More often, however, American soldiers had to try and repair damage done by other Americans. To many American soldiers the Texas Rangers came to symbolize everything that

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writings with comments similar to Chamberlain, and all agree that the Texas Rangers’ brutality was unequalled.

<sup>39</sup>Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army*, 197-199.

<sup>40</sup>Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 176.



Americans found unchivalrous about the war, precisely because they failed to hold themselves to the appropriate standards of conduct dictated by their race and religion.

## Chapter 4

### Contemplating the Trials of Cortez

January 8<sup>th</sup> 1847 came and went in Camargo without any celebration of the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans. Captain Franklin Smith found the slight offensive to the memory of such a profound figure as Jackson. "No salute is fired[,] no drum beat[,] no cannon roars in honor of the glorious anniversary," Smith wrote in his diary. Expressing his frustration further, he continued "his name will flourish in amaranthine vitality when the names of Scott and Taylor will be forgotten—their bodies rot and their memories perish along with the ten thousand small potato heroes who have preceded them."<sup>1</sup> Smith's calls for a proper celebration of the battle fell on deaf ears, but his reasons for deifying Jackson found allies throughout the American army.

Franklin Smith volunteered in the army for the same reasons that many other Americans did. He sought glory for himself and his country. Smith, and many of his contemporary Americans, regarded the personality and career of Andrew Jackson as the embodiment of personal and national glory.<sup>2</sup> If Andrew Jackson represented American nationalism to American soldiers, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna represented Mexican nationalism. The two men, in the minds of Americans, symbolized their nations.

Jackson and Santa Anna had more in common than many might realize at first. They both made their fame as generals, served as president of their respective nations, and they both

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<sup>1</sup>Franklin Smith journal entry January 8, 1847 in Joseph E. Chance, ed., *The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith*, (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 167.

<sup>2</sup>John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1955), xiii-14.

saw ambition as a moving target. The similarities end there, however. Jackson, regardless of what his political enemies argued, never overthrew the American government, but Santa Anna toppled the Mexican government nine times prior to 1846. Jackson held democracy in the highest esteem, but Santa Anna rarely let elections alter his plans.<sup>3</sup>

The realities of the two men held little relevance to American soldiers. Americans saw Jackson as the embodiment of American democracy. They held him in such high esteem partially because he proved, at New Orleans, that a poorly trained volunteer army could defeat a highly trained professional force.<sup>4</sup> The battlefield saw use as a campground for volunteer soldiers on their way to Mexico, and many men going to war for the first time used their time on the field as a way to commune with a great general. While camped there, at least one volunteer toured the field and carried away a musket ball as a souvenir.<sup>5</sup>

Jackson also strongly supported the goals of Manifest Destiny. When James K. Polk came to power, Jackson expressed his support for the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico. American soldiers saw Jackson as strong, adventurous, courageous, and patriotic.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, they saw Santa Anna as precisely the opposite. Santa Anna acted only for himself, never for Mexico; he could not match the martial skill of Taylor let alone Jackson. Most importantly,

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<sup>3</sup>Biographical details on the life of Andrew Jackson come from Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*, and details of the life of Santa Anna come from Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power, a History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, trans. Hank Heifetz, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), esp. 135-140.

<sup>4</sup>Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 56-57.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Barclay diary entry Jan. 18, 1846 in Allan Peskin, ed., *Volunteers: The Mexican War Journals of Private Richard Coulter and Sergeant Thomas Barclay, Company E, Second Pennsylvania Infantry*, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 203-204.

Americans saw Santa Anna as a cowardly leader who embodied the lack of patriotism they thought Mexicans had for their nation. Mexicans could never experience patriotism the same way that Americans did because, as American soldiers saw it, they owed their allegiance to the person of Santa Anna instead of the state. Nationalism, the force behind Manifest Destiny could never exist in Mexico as long as a dictator ruled.

The reasons why Jackson and Santa Anna came to symbolize their respective nations, to men in uniform, stemmed from the racial and religious values American soldiers learned before the war. American soldiers saw the anti-democratic nature of the Catholic Church in Santa Anna as well as the Mexican people. Men, such as Samuel Chamberlain, who believed the priesthood held the Mexican populace hostage, saw Santa Anna as the logical conclusion of the system.<sup>7</sup> Santa Anna acted as a priest who had his unquestioning flock do his bidding. Other Americans, such as Franklin Smith, saw the dictator as a slave-master. He led a nation of “cowards and slaves,” according to Smith.<sup>8</sup> Slaves and Catholics both had one thing in common: they lacked free will. The whole nation of Mexico, according to many American soldiers, found itself bound to the will of Santa Anna. As a result Mexicans could never experience the patriotic virtues that the American citizen-soldier held so dear.

American soldiers firmly believed that Mexico could do little to win war, not because it lacked the resources or manpower, but because it lacked proper leadership and martial courage.

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<sup>7</sup>Chamberlain consistently expressed his belief that the Mexican people functioned as virtual slaves to the priests. In one remarkably telling watercolor he painted a scene in which Santa Anna appears to be blessing his officers with the same gesture he paints a priests blessing the Mexican troops before the Battle of Buena Vista. William Goetzmann, *Sam Chamberlain's Mexican War: The San Jacinto Museum of History Paintings*, (Austin, TX: The Texas State Historical Association, 1993), 116-117.

<sup>8</sup>Smith journal entry Jan. 9, 1847 in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 167-168.

Theodore Laidley wrote a letter to his father from the Texas border in which he seemed exasperated that Santa Anna could not defeat Taylor. “A very few troops could retake Matamoros and this place [Brazos Santiago], thereby gaining enough provisions to last [Santa Anna’s] Army for the next year. . . . There is but a company of forty, and no fortifications, and the whole of this line is perfectly exposed, too much so, and if we were fighting against any other nation it would be ruinous to us,” Laidley wrote.<sup>9</sup> Once Laidley witnessed battle, during the siege of Vera Cruz, he explained to his father why Mexicans could not defeat the American army in combat, no matter how poorly the army disciplined volunteers or how incompetently American generals prepared their defenses:

[Vera Cruz] is a pretty strong place and if it had been defended with any vigor, it would have cost us dearly to have taken it, but they are a great set of cowards as all of the battles have sufficiently proved. The French consul told us that the gunners had to be tied to the pieces before they capitulated. They never made a single sortie upon our trenches or otherwise molest[ed] us in the night except by an occasional shell.<sup>10</sup>

Laidley returned to his theme of cowardly Mexicans over and over again in his letters home. On his way into the interior of the country, Laidley’s unit approached a tight mountain pass. The Mexican soldiers holding it ran before the Americans arrived, and Laidley wrote “A resolute band of men judiciously placed would [have], nevertheless, greatly impeded our progress and much diminished our ranks in passing those great strong holds of nature.”<sup>11</sup> Another soldier, a volunteer from Louisiana, wrote “if the Mexicans possessed any of their Boaster Courage an

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<sup>9</sup>Theodore Laidley to Father, Feb. 26, 1847, in James M. McCaffrey, ed., “*Surrounded by Dangers of All Kinds:*” *The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 39-40.

<sup>10</sup>Laidley to Father, April 2, 1847, *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>11</sup>Laidley to Father, May 3, 1847, *ibid.*, 79.

hundred times in the gorges of mountains we could have been cut to pieces.”<sup>12</sup> Many other American soldiers agreed with his assessment of the martial courage of the Mexican Army.

Writing only a week before Laidley, Ralph Kirkham seemed equally amazed at what he perceived as the lack of Mexican valor. He told to his wife about a highly fortified bridge that the Mexican army abandoned instead of making a stand. “It is a wonder to me that we were able to get past here. If the Mexicans had any bravery, we certainly should have had to fight pretty hard for it.”<sup>13</sup> Several months later after the fall of Mexico City, in autumn 1847, Kirkham dismissed rumors of a major uprising in the city by arguing that such an action was impossible for Mexicans:

We have now been in the city a week, and it is growing daily more quiet, although hardly a day passes without one or more of our soldiers being assassinated. They get intoxicated and wander into bye streets and almost invariably are stabbed. We hear rumors of the introduction of a large body of armed men into the city, who are to rise and overpower the guards, murder us all, etcetera. But a cowardly race who cannot defend its capital will never do this.<sup>14</sup>

Kirkham describes Mexican soldiers as nothing more than bar brawlers. Because of the “cowardly” nature of their race, they had no choice but to attack drunken Americans in dark alleys. Ralph Kirkham attributed Mexican cowardice to their racial status. Other Americans, such as Franklin Smith, offered an even more specific reason for why the Mexican Army appeared incapable of stopping the American onslaught.

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<sup>12</sup>Henry Farno to Dearest Mable, Dec. 7, 1846, Farno (Henry) papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

<sup>13</sup>Ralph Kirkham to Kate, April 26, 1847 in Robert Ryal Miller, ed., *The Mexican War Journal & Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1991), 7-9.

<sup>14</sup>Kirkham journal entry Sept. 21, 1847, *ibid.*, 68.

Like the majority of American soldiers, Franklin Smith never tasted combat. Instead of being a front-line infantry officer, Smith spent the war as a quartermaster far away from the front. While forwarding supplies to troops he considered more fortunate than himself, Smith used his time to bemoan his situation, write poetry, second guess the American war effort, and explain why Mexico could never defeat the United States.<sup>15</sup> The Mexican army's lack of martial valor had an obvious explanation to Smith. He felt that Mexican martial failures stemmed from Santa Anna's poor leadership, but also from his belief that the Church and undemocratic leaders enslaved the lower classes that made up the Army. Unlike Kirkham, Smith stressed the lack of freedom Mexicans had:

[I]f Santa Anna were indeed a Napoleon[,] a Tell[,] a Washington[,] Marion[,] or a Morgan instead of being as he is a tyrant and a villain—or even being as *he is* with so large an army[,] [U]se that army bravely he would descend down upon the unorganized and sheltered troops in the neighborhood of Victoria and sweep them from the face of the earth—then wheel along that comparatively unprotected line[,] destroy the detachments and garrisons *seriatim* and be ready for a Bannockburn at Vera Cruz. He holds a central position[,] he could do these things were he a brave man and a patriot fighting in a just cause and his army composed of freemen!!!<sup>16</sup>

Smith's use of the Battle of Bannockburn revealed his thoughts about Santa Anna's situation. Bannockburn saw the final defeat of the English by the Scottish during the Scottish Civil War. Robert Bruce led a ragtag army of Scottish peasants against a much larger, and better equipped, English force. Bruce's defeat of the English ensured that Scotland would retain its independence

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<sup>15</sup>Franklin Smith's journal is filled with examples of his frustration at being left behind the front. Samples of his poetry can be found in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 152, 168.

<sup>16</sup>Smith journal entry Jan. 4, 1847 entry , *ibid.*, 160. Ciudad Victoria is the capital of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, one of the states bordering Texas. *Seriatim* is italicized by the editor as if it were a Latin word, it is not. It is an archaic English word meaning "in series."

and not become an oppressed piece of England, like the rest of the British Isles.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not Smith intended to use Bannockburn to symbolize the Battle of New Orleans and Bruce to symbolize Jackson cannot be determined, but his obsession with historical parallels suggests that he may have. Santa Anna could never turn into the next Bruce, or Napoleon, because the slave-like status of his soldiers prevented him from attaining any such lofty standards. Jackson had a more powerful weapon in his ranks of free, citizen soldiers than anything Santa Anna could muster. Many other Americans agreed with Smith's characterization of Santa Anna and the Mexican army. They often attacked Santa Anna for acting as if he controlled Mexico like a malevolent slave-owner controlled his slaves.

When the American army entered Mexico City, in late autumn of 1847, the soldiers got their first glimpse of the Market of Mexico. The Market contained more shops in one place than many American observers ever saw before. They commented on the Market's size, the racial makeup of its patrons, and the large statue of Santa Anna in the center. One American newspaper published in Mexico City, declared the Market "one of the finest in the world." The statue, on the other hand, represented Santa Anna more accurately than the Market. "The statue of Santa Anna, looking down upon the whole with its green eyes most dejectedly because it cannot, like the original, eat up their substance," the paper wrote.<sup>18</sup> The writer's pun only makes the criticism of Santa Anna more powerful. Santa Anna, according to the paper, got fat off the labors of others, a peculiar attack coming from a society that supported slavery. The paper could launch

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<sup>17</sup>My discussion of the Battle of Bannockburn is derived from Moray McLaren, *If Freedom Fail: Bannockburn, Flodden, the Union*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), 115-194.

<sup>18</sup>*North American* (Mexico City), November 16, 1847.



its attack against Santa Anna because of its belief that unlike a great American like Jackson he never cared about either his country or his countrymen.

Sergeant Thomas Barclay, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, toured Mexico City in September 1847. While in the Market, he examined the statue and compared it to the far larger statue of Charles IV of Spain in the courtyard of the National University. Barclay thought the equestrian statue of Charles IV, erected by a Spanish viceroy, “is one of the Wonders of the Western World.” He admitted to knowing nothing about sculpture, but that did not prevent him from declaring that the work “strikes the eyes as a most perfect specimen of workmanship,” and his unit “pronounced the work perfect save the want of *warts* on the legs.” He only had scorn for the statue of Santa Anna, however. Santa Anna’s statue stood considerably shorter than Charles IV’s, and it certainly lacked the pretensions of its subject. Barclay wrote “the Hero of Tampico looks very contemptible in his military suit,” and he decided that the artistic tastes of Mexicans appeared significantly weaker than those of the Spanish.<sup>19</sup> Almost every American who commented on the two statues, and many did, found it necessary to explain that the statue of Charles IV originated in Spain, not Mexico. They found Mexican art contemptible, or at least of a lower order than European art, precisely the same thing they thought about Santa Anna.<sup>20</sup>

Santa Anna represented all that Americans found distasteful about Mexico and Mexicans. While the fate of Mexico appeared linked inexorably to the dictator, some Americans believed

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<sup>19</sup>Barclay diary entry, Sept. 17, 1847 in Peskin, *Volunteers*, 188-189. Santa Anna was called the Hero of Tampico because he defeated a Spanish army near the city and helped ensure the independence of Mexico shortly after the revolution.

<sup>20</sup>One of the few diarists who did not know the statue was of European origin was Daniel Harvey Hill. He simply noted: “The whole is of bronze and said to be the work of an Indian Artist.” Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr. and Timothy D. Johnson, eds., *A Fighter from Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, USA*, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 130.

that the presence of the American Army could help Mexicans free themselves from their bondage. Americans chose their words carefully, because many American soldiers had their entire lives invested in the institution of slavery. Certainly, Americans expressed no sentiments they could have confused with abolition, but they did repeatedly call for Mexicans to overthrow their oppressive institutions, the Church and their government.

Philip Norbourne Barbour felt that the presence of General Winfield Scott would finally allow Mexicans in Matamoros to understand the depths of their oppression. He wrote that Scott's arrival would finally allow Mexicans to seize the reigns of their own destiny:

[Scott's arrival] is very well received by the Matamorians and doubtless will take generally with the people of Northern Mexico whose eyes will be opened by it to the degradation of their condition under the existing and former Governments and the contrast presented to them of what they might be under a Government of equal and just laws and free institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Barbour clearly differentiates between the legal condition of slaves in the American South and Mexicans. The oppression Barbour writes about has little to do with the legal enslavement of people to a master. Instead he decries the oppressive force of a government that fails to provide justice and ensure the freedom of institutions. In the United States even slaves had limited protection of the government, something he thought Mexicans lacked. Barbour called for the implementation of legal justice, not equality.<sup>22</sup> The perception many Americans had of Mexicans

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<sup>21</sup>Philip Norbourne Barbour diary entry, June 2, 1846 in Rhoda van Bibber Tanner Doubleday, ed., *Journals of the Late Brevet Major Philip Norbourne Barbour, Captain in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, United States Infantry, and his wife, Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour, Written During the War with Mexico—1846*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), 77.

<sup>22</sup>The legal issues involving slavery have received extensive work by scholars. The source I have found most illustrative is Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), esp. 30-40.

as a mixture of many races seemed to play little role in the cries for justice and freedom from institutional oppression.

Theodore Laidley agreed in principle with Barbour. Laidley wrote to his father that the citizens of Jalapa “All seem to be busy and flourishing from the presence of our Army.”<sup>23</sup> The two officers, both of them Southerners, strongly believed that the American army could provide an example to Mexicans. While they would certainly have abhorred any social revolution, they thought that the presence of a largely volunteer army fighting for what they saw as a just cause would allow Mexicans to cast away leaders like Santa Anna and replace them with a leader like Andrew Jackson. They saw no contradiction in the fact the Andrew Jackson owned slaves. Slavery could be just, in their minds at least. Certainly the powerful force of slave-owner paternalism sought to reenforce the notion of slavery as a just and proper institution.<sup>24</sup>

The example of Jackson fit perfectly for soldiers like Laidley and Barbour. Jackson’s most positive attributes, at least to them, appeared in the citizen-soldiers campaigning in Mexico. The vast majority of the army served as volunteers, and the soldiers in these units usually elected their officers.<sup>25</sup> Most regulars, however, generally despised the volunteers and looked down upon the democratic nature of selecting officers. Samuel Chamberlain claimed “volunteer officers were elected by their own men, and it was most generally the case that the man who could pay for the most whiskey got the most votes, his qualification for an officer not being a matter of

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<sup>23</sup>Laidley to Father, April 26, 1847 in McCaffrey, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 75.

<sup>24</sup>The most useful discussion of slave-owner paternalism is Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 111-132.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1997), 82-84.

any importance to these thirsty patriots.” Like many other regular soldiers Chamberlain thought the volunteer officers “were totally incompetent and a disgrace to their profession.”<sup>26</sup> Many regular officers, like Philip Norbourne Barbour, believed that too many abuses of the volunteers would turn the local population against the Americans.<sup>27</sup> In several cities his fear came to fruition. Soldiers who believed that the American army could teach Mexicans how to create a better government had to balance their wishes with the excesses of the volunteers. Poorly disciplined volunteers held more in their hands than just the lives of Mexican civilians. According to regulars they held the fate of Mexico as well.<sup>28</sup>

Officers who held their commissions at the pleasure of the soldiers in their commands, appeared extremely democratic, but regular officers agreed that democracy had limits. Just like the issue of racial equality, equality within the army proved impossible for some officers to swallow. Some of these men, like Chamberlain and Daniel Harvey Hill, never expressed any hope that Mexico could learn from the American way of life. For them, the degradations of the volunteer corps gave the United States a black eye, but had no real impact on the prospects for progress in Mexico. Theodore Laidley and Philip Barbour, on the other hand, remained true to their beliefs that Mexicans could use the American army as a tool to further any democratic ambitions they might harbor.

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<sup>26</sup>Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, William H. Goetzmann, ed., (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 116.

<sup>27</sup>Barbour diary entry July 31, 1846 in Doubleday, *Barbour Journals*, 92.

<sup>28</sup>Examples of volunteers attacking civilians were rather common, one excellent example is Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 201.

It appears that no Americans made any serious attempt to help Mexicans achieve justice, except participate in the invasion. Like Barbour, they often wrote about how Mexicans should seize the initiative once the American army arrived. While Mexico did change presidents three times during the war, none of these changes proved a harbinger for democracy. The failure of Mexicans to halt the American army's advance, and their failure to implement a less oppressive type of government or religion caused Americans to react bitterly.

Some Americans maintained modesty when trying to explain the seemingly unstoppable march of the American army and blamed inept leadership, poor training, or just the absolute superiority of American skill. On the other hand, the massive success of American arms, seemed to point toward something more important than simple martial skill. Some Americans, like Franklin Smith, claimed God, acting through Manifest Destiny, prevented the Mexican army from resisting.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of why they thought the army could not be stopped, American soldiers often invoked the spirit of Mexico's first conqueror when writing about themselves.

General Winfield Scott's invasion of the central part of Mexico began at Vera Cruz in the spring of 1847. By the end of summer his relatively small army stood at the gates of Mexico City. Many soldiers in his army noted that their route of invasion followed the line of Cortés closely. As the American Army approached Mexico City, many Americans wrote in their diaries, or to loved ones, about the surreal experience of following in the footsteps of the conquistador. The splendor of the mountains surrounding the valley, and the rings of lakes caught the eyes of the invaders, but nothing seemed to match the experience of walking in the footsteps of Mexico's first conqueror.

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<sup>29</sup>Smith journal entry Jan. 19, 1847 in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 179-180.

When Theodore Laidley first saw the valley, he wondered how his experience differed from Cortés’:

It must have been a terrible time for Cortez when he stood where we were then standing under such different circumstances—Surrounded on all sides by so numerous and desperate an enemy, a mere handful and far from any succouring help. Had our opposing force had the courage, and perseverance of their ancestors we should never have been standing there contemplating the trials of Cortez.<sup>30</sup>

Cortés appears as the central figure in the genesis of both Mexico and the Mexican race, according to Laidley. The important feature of Laidley’s view lies in that he thought Mexicans lost their martial courage sometime in the past. He believed that if a nation descended from such a brave individual, it should retain that courage. Of course, the Mexican army never defeated the American army on the field of battle, so it must have squandered Cortés’ courage. A people that truly loved their nation would have fought harder to defend it, therefore, soldiers like Laidley thought, Mexicans did not deserve Mexico. In order to make his point even more forceful, Laidley wrote “Cortez had no newly made Generals and no valiant volunteers to fight his cause and of course he failed on this occasion.”<sup>31</sup> Laidley thought if only Cortés had the American citizen-soldier fighting for him against a cowardly, ragtag army, perhaps he too, could have conquered Mexico without losing a battle.

One issue of the *North American* published a poem written by a regular from the 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, Daniel Harvey Hill’s unit. His poem, “On the Battle of Contreras,” sought to glorify the soldiers from that battle. The author wrote about the “fearful night” when the small,

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<sup>30</sup>Laidley to Father, April 6, 1848 in McCaffrey, *Letters of Theodore Laidley*, 155-156. In this quote Laidley clearly believes that Cortés represents the beginning of Mexican civilization. The Aztecs apparently neither had any courage, nor were they capable of founding a lasting nation, as far as Laidley was concerned.

<sup>31</sup>Laidley to Father, April 6, 1848 in *ibid.*, 156.

seriously outnumbered American army prepared to attack the hill. The American soldiers dreamed of being back home where they “breathed Columbia’s air,” but they never feared they would lose the battle. The anticipation of the battle never approached the reality, because “Mexicans by hundreds die” or, more often, they ran away.<sup>32</sup> The poem agreed with Laidley’s position because a truly spirited, patriotic, enemy would never have run from inferior numbers when it had the advantage of the terrain.

American soldiers linked courage on the battlefield with patriotism. Because Mexicans had no real nation, at least in the eyes of many American soldiers, they could never experience anything like the patriotism Americans enjoyed. Thomas Barclay wrote in his diary what so many of his contemporaries believed:

Mexico torn by civil internal convulsions, pressed by a foreign war, the center of her territory invaded and in the possession of the foe[,] can only preserve her nationality by sacrificing territory to her affectionate sister of the north. By such sacrifices Mexico will for a time have a place on the map and be ranked among the nations of the world. But her downfall is inevitable. It will not take place at present but the time is approaching and the young of the present generation may see the day when the “Stars and Stripes” which now float in triumph over the City will be the banner under whose folds the inhabitants of all Mexico will find shelter and protection.<sup>33</sup>

Barclay’s ominous prediction for the future of Mexico seemed like the appropriate way to treat the issue. Neither Barclay, nor the majority of his contemporaries, found any contradiction in the idea of America as an “affectionate sister” that invaded its neighbor. By thinking that the racial and religious superiority of Americans gave them the authority to seize Mexican territory at will, Barclay became the embodiment of Manifest Destiny.

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<sup>32</sup>“On the Battle of Contreras,” W. G. B., Company H., 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, *The Daily Star*, November 19, 1847.

<sup>33</sup>Barclay diary entry, Sept. 14, 1847 in Peskin, *Volunteers*, 180-181.

Barclay believed that the two largest factors that enabled the American victory in Mexico, race and religion, would lead to Mexico's ultimate submission to the United States. He claimed "the same people who have driven before them the various Indian tribes and have in Texas come in contact with the Spanish race will soon hang like a wave over the province of Mexico." Nothing, Barclay believed, could prevent Americans from overrunning Mexico. Treaties, armies, and weapons could not stop Americans because "a contest between the races will follow and the Anglo Saxons have never been conquered." The Catholic Church bore the responsibility for preventing Mexico's progression. Barclay claimed that while "civilized" nations seek progress, "Those who rule Mexico endeavor to keep down every feeling of progress or improvement." The rulers of Mexico were the corrupt leaders of the Army and the Church. Barclay left his most venomous prose for the priests:

The holy fathers who like the locusts of Egypt darken the land [and] are content with vast possessions in real estate, with treasures amassed by a system of robberies for centuries and with palaces both as residences and places of worship which in gorgeous magnificence recalls the fairy palaces of Arabian tales. Clothed in silk they fare sumptuously every day and they require from all that submission and respect which they consider themselves entitled to as the vice of Christ upon earth and woe to the Mexican who incurs their displeasure.<sup>34</sup>

According to Barclay, without the Catholic Church and corrupt leadership from men like Santa Anna, Mexico could progress like most other nations. It could never progress like the United States, however, because it lacked the most essential ingredient for progress: Anglo-Saxon blood.

Barclay and some of his contemporaries often linked the history of Greece and Rome with that of the United States. Like Rome, Barclay believed, the U.S. had to expand across the

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 181, Barclay probably meant that the priests called themselves "vicars of Christ."



known world. Franklin Smith felt no anxiety about the pending Battle of Buena Vista, because he knew that history had already decided the outcome. He wrote, “what a dreadful calamity would befall us should Worth and Wool be severally conquered but it is not so written—they will unite and make the pass near Saltillo another Thermopylae.”<sup>35</sup> Hardly a page in Smith’s journal lacks a reference to Roman or Greek history. Every event that occurred while he was in Mexico had a parallel in a classical civilization. The Siege of Vera Cruz was the new Carthage, and America faced the same pressures as ancient Rome.

Smith, who never saw battle, spent the entire war wondering if he should resign his commission and return to his family in Mississippi. As the war lasted longer and longer, and he saw more of the terrible and bloody guerrilla conflict that enveloped the Northern part of the country, Smith became disenchanted with the war, the army, and finally with the fundamental tenants of Manifest Destiny.

Smith’s failure to see combat brought him immense despair. Several times in his journal he wrote about his intention to resign, but as long as he could see glory in his country’s cause, he could not bring himself to betray the legacy of his proud forefathers. During the Siege of Vera Cruz Smith wrote a short poetic parody about himself and his distance from the front:

When a man of forty stoops to folly  
And sells his soul to Moloch’s shrine  
What charm can soothe his melancholy  
And with fresh hopes his heart entwine  
The only charm to soothe his sorrow  
To free him from remorse and pain  
Is to rush to the battle on the morrow  
And die, or live in glory’s train  
But if the right to him’s denied

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<sup>35</sup>Smith diary entry Dec. 19, 1846 in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 139.

Either to fight or run away  
To quarter master's duties tied  
From such a scrape where lies the way?  
Resign!<sup>36</sup>

His humorous poem likely found its inspiration in the various English-language newspapers published for the benefit of soldiers in Mexico. They always included the most recent rumors, and sometimes even extremely detailed accounts of battles and heroes. And many issues included poems praising those soldiers who died in the service of their nation.<sup>37</sup>

The Mexican War saw 13,768 Americans die during the war. It remains the bloodiest war in American history as a percentage of total soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Philip Norbourne Barbour joined the ranks of the dead when he became one of the 120 killed during the Battle of Monterey on September 21, 1846. Like almost all Americans killed in the war, his comrades buried him near the battlefield where he died. Two months later his men disinterred his body and placed it in a new cemetery created specifically for the dead American officers.<sup>39</sup> Unlike most other soldiers killed in the war, the state of Kentucky had his body removed from Mexico and re-interred it in a cemetery in Frankfort, Kentucky. On the monument built at his final resting place, the state inscribed a brief tribute: "In token of the glory of his life and the chivalry of his death."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Smith journal entry Jan. 8, 1847 in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 168-169.

<sup>37</sup>Examples can be found in almost any issue of the *North American*, *The Daily Star*, or the *American Flag*.

<sup>38</sup>Brian Hammet, *A Concise History of Mexico*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155. Approximately 104,556 men served in Mexico during the war, making the percentage of those who died almost 13 percent.

<sup>39</sup>H. Bainbridge to Mrs. P. N. Barbour, Dec. 8, 1846 in Doubleday, *Barbour Journals*, 183-185.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, xiv.

Isaac Shelby, who wrote a newspaper article calling for the Kentucky legislature to “testify the public sense of the extraordinary merits of Philip Norbourne Barbour,” included an excerpt from a contemporary poem, “Marco Bozzaris:”

With the storied brave  
Greece nurtured in her glory’s time—  
Rest thee: There is no prouder grave  
E’en in her own proud clime.  
We tell thy fate without a sigh;  
For thou art Freedom’s son and Fame’s,  
One of the few, the immortal names  
That were not born to die.<sup>41</sup>

Although Shelby misquoted the poem, his the use of the poem remains insightful. Marco Bozzaris was a nineteenth century Greek revolutionary leader who fought for independence from the Ottoman Empire. Halleck’s poem is essentially an ode to his memory, and Shelby adopts it for Barbour. In an earlier part of his article Shelby uses the poem to supply a glorious scene of battle, but the true impact of the poem only comes at the end of his article. He wanted to make certain that the readers of the newspaper, which appeared in the state capital, linked Barbour to Greek history. Shelby sought to have Barbour memorialized as a warrior fighting in the proud tradition of Greek warriors. Barbour’s hope that the arrival of Winfield Scott in Mexico would allow Mexicans to seize the initiative and overthrow their oppressive institutions never came to fruition, but even after his death his mourners continued to believe that Barbour fought not just to conquer territory, but to spread the peculiar style of freedom that prevailed in mid-nineteenth century America.

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<sup>41</sup>Isaac Shelby quoted in *ibid.*, vii-xiii. Shelby edited the poem, written by Fitz-Greene Halleck, to suit his own purposes. He removed more than a dozen lines without the use of an ellipsis, and changed the word “Even” to E’en.” Rupert S. Holland, ed., *Historic Poems and Ballads*, (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & co., 1912).

Barbour died in combat, but his comrade Franklin Smith bemoaned his absence from the field of combat. While stuck far behind the front line, Smith soured on the war and began to question whether Manifest Destiny supported the greater good of the United States. Ideas that he believed so strongly in the beginning of the war slowly became preposterous to him. He never wavered in his idea that America inherited the legacy of Rome, but he started to wonder if it would become more like Imperial Rome than Republican Rome.

The same man who believed at the start of the war that Mexico could do nothing to prevent American control of the Rio Grande, began to question if that destiny were a good thing. “What if the object of the Administration was not so much to obtain redress for our insulted honor and just rights as to obtain territory,” Smith wrote in his journal. He thought that America had fought the war for no reason except to further the interests of “small potato statesmen.” “America was designed to be the defender not the oppressor of man—An asylum for truth, justice, and liberty!” Smith exclaimed, but he no longer seemed sure if the Mexican War upheld any of those values.<sup>42</sup>

Smith never wavered from the basic tenets of Manifest Destiny, however. He never thought Mexico could match the United States in a contest of arms, and he never had any doubt that America could conquer anything it desired. He only wished that his nation would return to the path of its Revolutionary founders. “Our government was founded in justice[,] and in right, virtue, truth, integrity, and the love of liberty are its pillars,” he wrote. America at its best, according to Smith, kept these ideas at the forefront. Almost a month earlier, he lamented that

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<sup>42</sup>Smith Journal entries, Jan. 11, 1847 and January 19, 1847 in Chance, *Journal of Franklin Smith*, 173, 181.

Americans in Camargo did not celebrate Andrew Jackson's great victory at New Orleans. If Americans spent more time remembering the man who embodied all of the virtues that made the United States different, perhaps America could avoid the fate of Rome, Smith thought. "Whenever we lose sight of these [virtues] we shall drift away amidst the rubbish of ruined empires—Like the rubble of Rome and the canaille of France we shall first conquer the world then fall by our own hands," Smith warned. Two months later Captain Franklin Smith resigned and left Mexico for Mississippi.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Smith journal entry, Jan. 11, 1847 in ibid., 174; Smith journal entry Feb. 6, 1847 in ibid., 210, xi. Thinking his fears of national ruin were coming true, he attempted to publish his journal in 1855. He thought that by showing people what the Mexican War was like, they would be wise enough to avoid a civil war he predicted would be far worse. Ibid., xi-xii.

## Conclusion

### Holy Alliance Against the Weak and Ignorant

Near the close of the Mexican War, William S. Hamilton, a planter from Louisiana, wrote an essay in response to several published attacks on General Winfield Scott. Scott saw his tremendous military accomplishment damaged by political opponents in Mexico and Washington, D.C. As a result, the army forced him to stand for a Court of Inquiry to answer for trumped-up charges designed, in part, to curtail any political ambitions he may have had. Many soldiers of his army came to his defense, along with powerful members of Congress, but William Hamilton probably proved the most eccentric of Scott's supporters.<sup>1</sup>

Hamilton's essay, "On the Mexican War and the Peace," rambles from point to point over the course of its twelve pages. He began by defending Scott's role in the drafting of the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo, which the administration criticized for not securing enough concessions from Mexico. After Hamilton's lengthy defense of the treaty terms, he turned his attention to the potential of guerrilla war breaking out in Mexico against the American occupation forces.

Abandoning his quest to exonerate Scott, Hamilton instead began to focus on a more general critique of the war. He speculated about the classical foundations of James K. Polk's education, because he felt that the president failed to appreciate the character of Mexicans.

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Mexican War and the Peace," undated, handwritten manuscript, William S. Hamilton, William S. Hamilton Papers, George M. Lester Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There is a handwritten date of 1849 on a cover page that was added later. The date appears to be in error because the author did not know the outcome of Scott's ordeal, nor had American troops fully left Mexico at the time the manuscript was written. The last American troops left Mexico in July 1848, making the likely date of the manuscript somewhere in the late spring of 1848. An excellent discussion of Scott's legal troubles at the end of the war is K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 371-374. Scott's accuser was Gideon Pillow, Polk's former law partner.

Instructors must have taught Polk, according to Hamilton, about Hannibal's invasion of Rome in the third century BC. Like Franklin Smith, Hamilton believed that American history had a direct parallel to Roman history. If only Polk had paid greater attention in his classes, according to Hamilton, he could have foreseen that the Mexicans would act like the Carthagians and not give up, even to a divinely appointed power. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hamilton supported the theory that democracy and freedom drove American progress.<sup>2</sup>

Hamilton's focus shifted yet again, and in the bulk of his essay he tried to determine the necessity and consequences of the war. He thought the greatest potential danger in initiating the war could have been the loss of "Republican Fame" both in the United States and abroad. Republics, in his mind, should not fight wars of aggression, or else they could damage their peaceful reputations. To solve his dilemma, Hamilton returned to themes that were so familiar to Americans during the war: race and religion.

In order to justify the war, Hamilton compared it with England's war in Afghanistan, France's war in Algeria, and the Punic Wars. According to Hamilton, the United States joined a "Holy Alliance against the weak and ignorant." England, France, and Rome all fought inferior races of people. His narrative wavering one more time, Hamilton concluded this section by claiming that the Mexicans served the same role to Americans as the Irish did to the English, an inferior race that needed civilizing. Like Franklin Smith, Daniel Harvey Hill, Abner Doubleday, Ephraim Kirby Smith, and countless others, Hamilton believed that making war on Mexico would make it a better place. The American army could tame the barbarians and release the

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 6-8. "The Young American," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., 12 vols, (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 1:363-395.

people from the bondage of an oppressive aristocracy and corrupt priests. Near the end of his essay Hamilton issued a warning to his readers. He cautioned that Americans should remember the fate of Rome. The once great nation now held the “seat of a crowned Ecclesiastic.” In Hamilton’s mind, nothing could have been worse than imagining America run by an aristocratic clergy.<sup>3</sup>

The tremendous victory the war brought the United States proved enough evidence for some that America could never fall victim to the forces that brought down Rome. Nathan Covington Brooks, who wrote one of the first full-length books on the war, claimed that the war “[was] productive of the most beneficial consequences.” Primarily, Brooks thought the Mexican War “has given our country a prominent rank among the nations of the earth.” He continued:

it has displayed to the eyes of the doubting monarchists the existence of a majestic power and energy, a youthful freshness of spirit combined with a manly vigour, which are well calculated to insure prolonged peace, by the respect which her ability has inspired, and the administration which has been elicited by the heroic conduct of her sons. The United States has not merely shown her ability for defensive war, but has successfully solved the problem of the capacity of a republic to engage in a foreign war.<sup>4</sup>

Brooks also claimed that the Mexicans living in the territory ceded by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo would learn from Americans and then rise “from their present ignorance and degradation, to all the blessings of rational liberty and a higher civilization.” Even the parts of Mexico that remained would benefit. “Relieved from the exorbitant exactions of her military and priesthood, her expenditures will be diminished, while increased attention to agriculture and

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<sup>3</sup>Hamilton, “On the Mexican War and the Peace,” 8-12.

<sup>4</sup>Nathan Covington Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War: Its Causes, Conduct, and Consequences: Comprising an Account of the Various Military and Naval Operation, from its Commencement to the Treaty of Peace*, (1849; Chicago, IL: The Rio Grande Press, 1965), 539.



manufactures will develop and augment her resources; and institutions of learning, after the manner of those of her northern sister, diffuse knowledge and virtue among her ignorant and half-civilized multitudes.”<sup>5</sup> Brooks and Hamilton, writing after Emerson, espoused all of his grand themes from before the war. Americans held within their hands the key to a stable and prosperous future, and conquering the continent remained a prerequisite. Emerson believed that the Young American must eschew aristocracy to continue the nation’s march of progress. Brooks and Hamilton believed that the Mexican War furthered that goal and helped lead Mexicans toward enlightenment. The ideals of Manifest Destiny did not abandon Americans when war arrived. Soldiers brought the ideals with them to Mexico, and historians and writers kept them alive after the war concluded.

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 540. See also Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 265-267.

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