

Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil Leaders

Kevin Dougherty

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Review

Dougherty, Kevin

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Lewis, Felice Flanery *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil Leaders*. University of Alabama Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8173-1678-5

Looking at the Pre-Civil War Proving Ground

Readers have benefited from several recent treatments of the Mexican War, including *A Gallant Little Army* (2007), Timothy Johnson's well-received chronicle of Winfield Scott's Mexico City Campaign. However, if the Mexican War has been largely overshadowed by other wars, Felice Flanery Lewis complains, "Modern historians, in emphasizing [Winfield] Scott's brilliance, have also tended to dismiss the significance of Taylor's campaign" (228). She sets out to correct this negligence in *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil Leaders*.

Lewis's book is thorough and detailed. It quickly reminds the reader of the growing dispute between the United States and Mexico and then traces Taylor's campaign from the formation of his Army of Observation through the key battles of Palo Alto, Resaca, Monterrey, and Buena Vista. Lewis asserts that Taylor has been "unfairly maligned," and her portrayal is decidedly sympathetic to Taylor (222). She successfully argues that common criticisms that Taylor was excessively critical of West Pointers and dismissive of Scott are unwarranted, but in other areas she is less convincing.

Taylor is routinely criticized for his inattention to detailed logistical planning, and an oft-cited example is the army's move to Corpus Christi. Lewis quotes the highly observant Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock liberally throughout the book, but fails to record his assessment that the landing at Corpus Christi was "little short of a miracle" and attributable to the "mere accident" of a calm bay (*Fifty Years in Camp and Field*, 194). She downplays the delay in the crossing of the Arroyo Colorado caused by a lack of bridging materials. Had the Mexicans

chosen to defend the crossing, Taylor would have been vulnerable. Likewise Lewis passes on the opportunity to explore Taylor's overextended logistics at Fort Brown.

In addition to a lack of detailed logistical planning, historians have questioned some of Taylor's tactical decisions. Again, Lewis attempts to parry these criticisms, most notably at Monterrey. She explains Taylor's failure to subdue the Citadel because he "lacked sufficient firepower," but neglects to mention Taylor had decided to leave his heavy artillery behind in Camargo (158). She also suggests Taylor had no intention that Major Joseph Mansfield, who she identifies as a mere "engineer staff officer," would directly lead the attack of John Garland, who she calls "an experienced infantry colonel" (143). It is unclear why Lewis finds such use of Mexican War engineers unusual since Captain Robert E. Lee similarly personally guided Brigadier General David Twiggs's attack at Cerro Gordo. Nonetheless, Lewis calls Mansfield and Garland "an unfortunate team for the job," seemingly to deflect responsibility from Taylor (141). Later, she only grudgingly admits historical criticism of Taylor for attacking with Garland's small, unsupported force "may have been a valid point" (158). Lewis also fails to scrutinize the wisdom of Taylor's armistice with Major General Pedro de Ampudia after Monterrey, and offers only a token analysis of Taylor's decision to move forward from his defensive position at Monterrey, a decision which led to what some historians consider the unnecessary battle of Buena Vista (180). Fans of Jefferson Davis will find Lewis's downplaying of the Mississippi Rifles' contribution to Buena Vista and her questioning of the "inspiration" of Davis's inverted V tactic challenging.

Lewis undoubtedly and openly admires Taylor, stating that he "deserves to be honored..." for his "remarkable record as commander of the Army of Occupation" (228). She set out to accomplish this task, and she has done it well. As she points out, there are numerous other sources available for the reader who wishes to find criticism of Taylor. Hers is a well-written, informative, and defensible argument on Taylor's behalf.

Historians have long generalized that the Mexican War was a formative experience for the junior officers there who would go on to be the generals of the Civil War. Recent works, beginning with John Waugh's *The Class of 1846* (1994), have added a certain amount of definition to this admittedly slippery subject. Lewis's subtitle states that her book aims to contribute to this discussion. While she carefully mentions the names of numerous Mexican War veterans

who went on to be Civil War leaders, the depth of her analysis is often slim and the result mixed. For example, the book specifically purports to offer "largely unknown aspects of the Mexican War service of Daniel Harvey Hill, Braxton Bragg, and Thomas W. Sherman" (as quoted from the book's dust jacket). Lewis indeed provides fresh information about Hill, but Bragg's Mexican War career is already one of the more commonly reported so this is an odd case to single out, and Lewis's coverage of Sherman is as casual as most other Mexican War histories.

Lewis downplays the significance of the role Mexico played in the evolution of the future Civil War leadership, arguing that prior to Mexico these men were "already well schooled in military skills," largely by virtue of their West Point attendance (xv). Surely Lewis must appreciate the difference between experience as a cadet and experience in combat. Instead, however, she argues that the significance of the combat experience is "unclear" and does little to advance the reader's understanding (220). Unraveling the connection is without a doubt a difficult task, because, as Lewis correctly notes that Mexico's influence was felt "indirectly rather than directly" (220). Still, recent authors such as Martin Dugard in *The Training Ground* (2008) have tackled the subject in a more straightforward, if still imperfect, manner, and Lewis's subtitle suggests she too should have been more forthcoming in her effort.

Trailing Clouds of Glory is an essential addition to any Mexican War library because of its focus on Taylor. It is also a useful addition to the growing effort to move beyond generalizations and determine the specifics of the influence Mexico had on Civil War leadership. On this front, Lewis has carefully chronicled where the future Civil War generals were on the Mexican War battlefield, and in some cases provided speculation of the impact. (For example, she identifies the possibility that John Magruder's witnessing a Mexican ruse at the Arroyo Colorado influenced his demonstration on the Virginia Peninsula in the Civil War (49). More such examples, even though speculative, would be welcome.) While Lewis significantly contributes to the understanding of the causal relationship between experience in Mexico and leadership in the Civil War, the definitive book on the subject remains unwritten.

Kevin Dougherty is an instructor in the Department of History at The University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience. His Weapons of Mississippi is forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi.

