**Mexican War Analysis**

SLIDE 2

Causes/Strategy

While no war is inevitable, the Mexican war does seem to be a war waiting to happen. Both countries had visions of where their boundaries should be and both had misconceptions about each other that directly contributed to armed conflict. Here are some of the issues/misconceptions that made war possible, and the strategy each planned to use to defeat the other:

United States

* Manifest Destiny was the belief that the United States should occupy the North American continent from coast to coast. President Polk, elected in 1846, certainly had this belief and felt that his election was a mandate by the people to do just that.
* Annexation of Texas – Just prior to his election, congress approved the resolution to annex Texas. Since Mexico never recognized Texas as a county since they broke away from them, the creation of Texas as a State, now brought Mexico in direct conflict with the U.S. Since the U.S. adopted the Texas interpretation of the border (the Rio Grande River) and Mexico felt the border was the Nueces River a disputed area had been created between the two rivers. Either country that entered this ‘no mans land’ would automatically become the invader of the other country (at least in their perception)
* Once aggressive actions began, Polk was looking to conduct a quick war. Although much larger than their own army, the Mexican Army was under-trained and under-paid. The Mexican government was relatively new and appeared to be near collapse (constant strife between two factions had been occurring since Mexican independence from Spain in 1821). This made Mexico appear to be an easy target. What the Americans failed to appreciate, however, was Mexico’s intense pride and national honor that would not permit the loss of Texas, or any other province, through negotiations.
* Negotiations, however, is exactly what Polk and Scott based their strategy on. The U.S. would put enough pressure on Mexico to force them to negotiate a solution, that would be beneficial to the US and satisfy her desire to occupy not only Texas, but New Mexico, and especially Upper California. The plan was to conduct a blockage and occupy not only New Mexico and California, but also the northern provinces just south of the Rio Grande (as outlined on Slide 1). When this strategy did not produce the desired results, the US shifted their plan to capture the Mexican capital via an amphibious operation at Veracruz.

Mexico

Mexico, on the other hand, also envisioned a winnable war. Their strategy was defensive in nature and would simply hold on to their current possessions and repel any American invading forces. They, however, also had misconceptions about the U.S. and their ability to win the war:

* They thought the U.S. was politically weak.
  + They believed the northern states would not support the war because the southern states would use it as an excuse to expand slavery.
  + They believed African slaves would rebel and American natives would seize the opportunity for revenge.
* Militarily, the Mexicans considered the U.S. Army too small and citizen soldiers worthless.
  + They believed an American invasion of Mexico would fail because of the difficulty of logistical support across the expanses of arid desert.
  + They thought amphibious invasion would fail because of the “tempestuous” waters off Mexico, bad roads leading inland, and coastal lowland threat of yellow fever.
  + Mexican privateers would wreak havoc on American maritime commerce.
* Mexico also believed it would receive European aid, especially from Great Britain since an Anglo-American war over Oregon seemed imminent.

**ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR INSTRUCTOR**

Comparison of American Commanders Taylor vs Scott:

These two commanders could not have been more different in their leadership styles, yet both were immensely successful in achieving their goals. Discuss with your cadets the strengths and weaknesses of Taylor, and then contrast them with Scott:

Major General Zachary Taylor:

Nicknamed “Rough and Ready.” He preferred to wear comfortable (sometimes described as “old and slovenly”) civilian apparel while on campaign, including a unique straw hat, instead of a standard military uniform. He also had a very blunt manner and speech that inspired confidence in his troops and made him a competent leader, but did little for his ability to command:

* Taylor did not have a gift for strategic thought or planning. He was unable to see the big picture, or see ahead to understand action-reaction. There are several examples of this throughout the war:
  + After the American victory at Resaca de la Palma 9 May 1846, Taylor failed to pursue and destroy the Mexican Army because he did not have sufficient bridging equipment to cross the Rio Grande. Although he had requested the equipment while at Corpus Christi, he failed to ensure the request was filled. He did not envision the follow on sequel to victory over the Mexicans.
  + Following his victory at Monterrey, (which was also poorly coordinated and executed despite his victory) Taylor agreed to an armistice and allowed the Mexican Army to retire with their weapons. He felt that this magnanimous gesture would be helpful in the negotiations process. However, the overall goal of the campaign was to put pressure on the Mexicans to force them to negotiate, not entice them to the table. Polk was furious at Taylor’s actions that were contradictory to his own goals and quickly rescinded the armistice.
* Taylor was inconsistent in enforcing discipline. He vigorously drilled his ill discipline volunteers during the fall of 18 46 in Texas, but let up once the winter weather set in. Since a large portion of his army was poorly disciplined volunteers, Taylor, not a disciplinarian himself, had a problem controlling their activities during occupation duties. There were many incidents and even atrocities that occurred, which Taylor did little to control. His rear areas were thus in constant threat of guerilla activity.
* Taylor’s strength lies in his battlefield presence. Exceptionally cool under pressure, he was an excellent tactician in fighting the battle within his eyesight. Leading from the front, sitting upright in the stirrups where all his troops could see him, he inspired his soldiers to have courage under fire. During a crucial period at the battle of Buena Vista, when a key staff officer reported the American line was falling apart, Taylor responded by saying “I know it, but the volunteers don’t know it. Let them alone and see what they do.”

Major General Winfield Scott:

Nicknamed “Ol’ Fuss and Feathers” Scott earned the nickname of "Old Fuss and Feathers" during the War of 1812 for his insistence of military appearance and discipline in the U.S. Army, which consisted mostly of volunteers. In his own campaigns, General Scott preferred to use a core of U.S. Army Regulars whenever possible. He was also extremely meticulous and professional in his planning and execution of those plans.

* Scott’s ability to comprehend strategy and operational planning was exceptional. Thought of as the best Army Officer to be produced between General Washington and the Civil War, he was a military professional who understood the importance of planning, strategy, and logistical support. A gallant tactical leader, he also emphasized the importance of thorough staff work. His through planning was demonstrated in an almost flawless amphibious operation at Veracruz (the first ever for the American Military). While Taylor’s men suffered greatly at the unhealthy base of Camargo, Scotts drive to move his troops away from the yellow fever belt was almost obsessive. While Taylor’s plans were often rudimentary and contained little maneuver or tactical ingenuity, twice Scott utterly defeated the Mexicans through the use of thorough reconnaissance and maneuver. (Scott had placed the Mexican army at *a disadvantageous position* at both Cerro Gordo and Mexico City *through flexible application of combat power*.)
* Scott’s disciplinary measures were also far more professional than Taylor. Not only did he keep better control of his troops in occupation duties, but Scott’s management of Mexico City resulted in a more secure city than it was prior to the American occupation. (*For more on the occupation of Mexico, there is an excellent analysis section in the CMH publication “The Occupation of Mexico” which can be found on line:* [*http://www.army.mil/cmh/brochures/Occupation/Occupation.htm*](http://www.army.mil/cmh/brochures/Occupation/Occupation.htm)*. This will allow you to build slides on occupation issues as well as compare and contrast Taylor/Scott)*
* In final analysis, Scott was a great example of the emerging professionalism that was beginning to permeate the Army. While Taylor was ultimately successful, in many cases, it was the West Point trained officers that surrounded him that gave him credibility as a commander and success in his campaign.

**Regulars, Volunteers, and Militia**

Regulars- Soldiers in the Regular Army during the Mexican War signed a contract to serve a particular number of years, much as soldiers in the active army do today. Soldiers were assigned to regiments with no regard to what their home state was. The federal government paid their wages. Many were foreign born. For example, 42% of Taylor’s regular soldiers were born in Ireland, 10% in Germany. These foreign born enlistees saw service as a quick way to U.S. citizenship and didn’t view military service with the disdain that many native born Americans did. Many Americans had a low opinion of the regular soldier because he often turned to the army when all his options in the civilian world were gone. They were, however, the best disciplined American troops at the outset of the war.

Militia – Militia units were the precursor to today’s National Guard. They received funding from the state they were located in and consisted of men drawn from the same local area. Their quality varied greatly, with many of them becoming little better than social clubs by the time of the Mexican War. Further, the federal government had no regulations to guide the states in the organization, training, and administration of the militia. If they were to serve outside the state borders, they were federalized by the government as volunteers. They also then received funding from the federal government as well. Officers were generally elected from within the unit. While over 10,000 Militia were called up for service in the Mexican war, their three to six month terms were too short for them to see action, and they proved more of a liability to logistics than an asset in combat. All were returned home before they saw action.

Volunteers – The federal government called upon the individual states to provide volunteer units in time of war. Funding was split between the federal and state governments, with the bulk coming from Washington, DC. During the Mexican War, on average, the Volunteers performed as well as the Regular units in battle. Their fighting spirit compensated for the disparity in training. However, Volunteers often proved to be a liability during occupation duties, due to their lack of discipline. They were often restless during those long periods of inactivity, and took out their frustration on the local population. Another great disadvantage of the Volunteer units were their willingness to head back home as soon as their enlistments were up, no matter what the current operational situation. For example, 3700 12-month volunteers left Scott’s force on its campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. They simply turned around at Jalapa and marched back to the transport ships on the coast. This cost Scott almost a month as he waited for reinforcements to reach him at Puebla.

**Junior officer leadership, the U.S. Military Academy, and the American Civil War**

Many junior American officers during the Mexican War went on to senior leadership positions during the American Civil War. Many were graduates of the U.S. Military Academy. Their outstanding performance during the Mexican War served to vindicate the worth of funding the Academy, which was under threat almost from its beginning.

The junior leaders proved their value in numerous ways, from the effectiveness of the artillery to the outstanding reconnaissance provided by engineers such as Robert E. Lee. Twice during Scott’s march on Mexico City, junior engineer officers found routes through rugged terrain that the Mexicans thought was impassible in order to flank their positions and continue to drive on the city.

The Regular Army was drastically reduced after the Mexican War. Once again, it was expected to fulfill far flung missions on the frontier with too few troops and resources. The expansible army, while good in concept, would once again be tried to its limit at the outset of the civil war.

**U.S. Combat and Non-Combat Losses**

While battle deaths amounted to only 1.5% of the troops (a total of 1721), those from disease (mostly yellow fever and dysentery) and other non-combat causes were nearly 10% (a total of 11,155). Almost 8% deserted. Nothing illustrates better the difficulties in maintaining the health of the troops under the conditions of the campaign and the state of medical knowledge than these figures. The high incidence of desertion eloquently bespeaks the unwillingness of the Mexican War era soldier to serve his nation at personal discomfort.

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|  | **Regulars** | **Volunteers** | **Totals** |
| KIA | 585 | 607 | 1192 |
| Died of Wounds | 425 | 104 | 529 |
| Disease, executions, accidents, and misc. | 4899 | 6256 | 11155 |
| Wounded in Action | 2745 | 1357 | 4102 |
| Discharged for disability | 2554 | 7200 | 9754 |
| Deserters | 5331 | 3876 | 9207 |

**Major Battle Losses**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Battle** | **Engaged** | **KIA** | **WIA** | **MIA** | **Total Losses** |
| **Palo Alto & Resaca de la Palma** (8 & 9 May 1846) | U.S.: 2288  Mex: 3709 | U.S.: 38  Mex: 256 | U.S.: 137  Mex: 334 | U.S.: 2  Mex: 182 | U.S.: 177  Mex: 772 |
| **Monterrey** (20-24 Sep 1846) | U.S.: 6220  Mex: 7303 | U.S.: 120  Mex: ~ 140 | U.S.: 369  Mex: ~227 | U.S.: 43  Mex: 0 | U.S.: 532  Mex: 367 |
| **Buena Vista** (22 & 23 Feb 1847) | U.S.: 4594  Mex: 14000 | U.S.: 272  Mex: 591 | U.S.: 387  Mex: 1048 | U.S.: 6  Mex: 1894 | U.S.: 665  Mex: 3533 |
| **Churubusco** (20 Aug 1847) | U.S.: 8497  Mex: ~10000 | U.S.: 133  Mex: ~694 | U.S.: 865  Mex: ~1000 | U.S.: 0  Mex: 1639 (POW’s) | U.S.: 998  Mex: ~3000 |
| **Molino del Rey** (8 Sep 1847) | U.S.: 3250  Mex: ~6000 | U.S.: 116  Mex:~1500 | U.S.: 665  Mex: ~500 | U.S.: 18  Mex: 685 | U.S.: 799  Mex: 2685 |

Recommended Reading:

Bauer, K. Jack, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1974.

The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War, *The Occupation of Mexico*. CMH Publication.