The Mexican–American War (or Mexican War) was an armed conflict between the United States and Mexico from 1846 to 1848 in the wake of the 1845 U.S. annexation of Texas, which Mexico considered part of its territory despite the 1836 Texas Revolution. American forces invaded and conquered New Mexico, California, and parts of what is currently northern Mexico; meanwhile, the American Navy conducted a blockade, and took several garrisons on the Pacific coast of Mexico—largely what is now California, but also farther south. Another American army captured Mexico City, which forced Mexico to agree to the sale of its northern territories to the U.S.

American territorial expansion to the Pacific coast was the goal of President James K. Polk, the leader of the Democratic Party. However, the war was highly controversial in the U.S., with the Whig Party and anti-slavery elements strongly opposed. Heavy American casualties and high monetary cost were also criticized. The major consequence of the war was the forced Mexican Cession of the territories of Alta California and New Mexico to the U.S. in exchange for $18 million. Mexico accepted the Rio Grande as its national border, and the loss of Texas. Meanwhile gold was discovered in California, which immediately became an international magnet for the California Gold Rush. The political aftermath of the war raised the slavery issue in the U.S., leading to intense debates that pointed to civil war; the Compromise of 1850 provided a brief respite. In the U.S., the conflict is sometimes referred to as the Mexican War or the U.S.–Mexican War.[2][3] In Mexico, terms for it include (primera) intervención estadounidense en México ((first) American intervention in Mexico), invasión estadounidense de México (American invasion of Mexico), and guerra del 47 (War of ‘47).

Background

Mexico was riven by bitter internal political battles that verged on civil war, even as it was united in refusing to recognize the independence of Texas. Mexico threatened war with the U.S. if it annexed Texas. Meanwhile the spirit of Manifest Destiny was focusing American interest on westward expansion.

Designs on California
In 1842, the American minister in Mexico Waddy Thompson, Jr. suggested Mexico might be willing to cede California to settle debts, saying: "As to Texas I regard it as of very little value compared with California, the richest, the most beautiful and the healthiest country in the world ... with the acquisition of Upper California we should have the same ascendency on the Pacific ... France and England both have had their eyes upon it." President John Tyler's administration suggested a tripartite pact that would settle the Oregon boundary dispute and provide for the cession of the port of San Francisco; Lord Aberdeen declined to participate but said Britain had no objection to U.S. territorial acquisition there.[4]

For his part, the British minister in Mexico Richard Pakenham wrote in 1841 to Lord Palmerston urging "to establish an English population in the magnificent Territory of Upper California," saying that "no part of the World offering greater natural advantages for the establishment of an English colony ... by all means desirable ... that California, once ceasing to belong to Mexico, should not fall into the hands of any power but England ... daring and adventurous speculators in the United States have already turned their thoughts in this direction." But by the time the letter reached London, Sir Robert Peel's Tory government with a Little England policy had come to power and rejected the proposal as expensive and a potential source of conflict.[5]

Republic of Texas

In 1810, Moses Austin, a banker from Missouri, was granted a large tract of land in Texas, but died before he could bring his plan of recruiting American settlers for the land to fruition. His son, Stephen F. Austin, succeeded and brought over 300 families into Texas, which started the steady trend of American migration into the Texas frontier. In 1829, as a result of the large influx of American immigrants, the Americans outnumbered Mexicans in the Texas territory. The Mexican government decided to bring back the property tax, increase tariffs on U.S. shipped goods, and prohibit slavery. The settlers rejected the demands, which led to Mexico closing Texas to additional immigration. However, Americans continued to flow into the Texas territory.

In 1834, General Antonio López de Santa Anna became the dictator of Mexico, abandoning the federal system. He decided to quash the semi-independence of Texas. Stephen F. Austin called Texans to arms; they declared independence from Mexico in 1836, and after Santa Anna defeated the Texans at the Alamo he was defeated at the Battle of San Jacinto and seemed to agree to Texas independence. Texas consolidated its status as an independent republic, winning official recognition by Britain, France, and the U.S., which all advised Mexico not to try to reconquer the new nation. With the one star flag, they became known as the Lone Star Republic. Most Texans wanted to join the U.S. but the Americans debated the wisdom on annexation, which Whigs largely opposed. In 1845 Texas agreed to the offer of annexation by
the U.S. Congress. Texas became the 28th state on December 29, 1845.[6]

Origins of the war

The Mexican government had long warned the United States that annexation would mean war. Because the Mexican congress had refused to recognize Texan independence, Mexico saw Texas as a rebellious territory that would be retaken. Britain and France, which recognized the independence of Texas, repeatedly tried to dissuade Mexico from declaring war. When Texas joined the U.S. as a state in 1845, the Mexican government broke diplomatic relations with the U.S.

The Texan claim to the Rio Grande boundary had been omitted from the annexation resolution to help secure passage after the annexation treaty failed in the Senate. President Polk claimed the Rio Grande boundary, and this provoked a dispute with Mexico. In June 1845, Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to Texas, and by October 3,500 Americans were on the Nueces River, prepared to defend Texas from a Mexican invasion. Polk wanted to protect the border and also coveted the continent clear to the Pacific Ocean. Polk had instructed the Pacific naval squadron to seize the California ports if Mexico declared war while staying on good terms with the inhabitants. At the same time he wrote to Thomas Larkin, the American consul in Monterey, disclaiming American ambitions but offering to support independence from Mexico or voluntary accession to the U.S., and warning that a British or French takeover would be opposed.[7]

To end another war-scare (Fifty-Four Forty or Fight) with Britain over Oregon Country, Polk signed the Oregon Treaty dividing the territory, angering northern Democrats who felt he was prioritizing Southern expansion over Northern expansion. In the winter of 1845–46, the federally commissioned explorer John C. Frémont and a group of armed men appeared in California. After telling the Mexican governor and Larkin he was merely buying supplies on the way to Oregon, he instead entered the populated area of California and visited Santa Cruz and the Salinas Valley, explaining he had been looking for a seaside home for his mother.[8] The Mexican authorities became alarmed and ordered him to leave. Fremont responded by building a fort on Gavilan Peak and raising the American flag. Larkin sent word that his actions were counterproductive. Fremont left California in March but returned to California and assisted the Bear Flag Revolt in Sonoma, where many American immigrants stated that they were playing "the Texas game" and declared California's independence from Mexico.

On November 10, 1845,[9] Polk sent John Slidell, a secret representative, to Mexico City with
an offer of $25 million ($632,500,000 today) for the Rio Grande border in Texas and Mexico’s provinces of Alta California and Santa Fe de Nuevo México. U.S. expansionists wanted California to thwart British ambitions in the area and to gain a port on the Pacific Ocean. Polk authorized Slidell to forgive the $3 million ($76 million today) owed to U.S. citizens for damages caused by the Mexican War of Independence[10] and pay another $25 to $30 million ($633 million to $759 million today) in exchange for the two territories.

Mexico was not inclined nor able to negotiate. In 1846 alone, the presidency changed hands four times, the war ministry six times, and the finance ministry sixteen times.[12] However, Mexican public opinion and all political factions agreed that selling the territories to the United States would tarnish the national honor.[13] Mexicans who opposed direct conflict with the United States, including President José Joaquín de Herrera, were viewed as traitors.[14] Military opponents of de Herrera, supported by populist newspapers, considered Slidell's presence in Mexico City an insult. When de Herrera considered receiving Slidell to settle the problem of Texas annexation peacefully, he was accused of treason and deposed. After a more nationalistic government under General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga came to power, it publicly reaffirmed Mexico's claim to Texas;[14] Slidell, convinced that Mexico should be “chastised”, returned to the U.S.[15]

Conflict over the Nueces Strip

President Polk ordered General Taylor and his forces south to the Rio Grande, entering the territory that Mexicans had claimed. Mexico laid claim to the Nueces River—about 150 mi (240 km) north of the Rio Grande—as its border with Texas; the U.S. claimed it was the Rio Grande, citing the 1836 Treaties of Velasco. Mexico, however, under the leadership of General Lorenzo Chlamon,[16] rejected the treaties and refused to negotiate; it claimed all of Texas. Taylor ignored Mexican demands to withdraw to the Nueces. He constructed a makeshift fort (later known as Fort Brown/Fort Texas) on the banks of the Rio Grande opposite the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Mexican forces under General Mariano Arista prepared for war. On April 25, 1846, a 2,000-strong Mexican cavalry detachment attacked a 70-man U.S. patrol that had been sent into the contested territory north of the Rio Grande and south of the Nueces River. The Mexican cavalry routed the patrol, killing 16 U.S. soldiers in what later became known as the Thornton Affair, after Captain Thornton, who was in command.[17]

Declaration of war
Polk received word of the Thornton Affair, which, added to the Mexican government's rejection of Slidell, Polk believed, constituted a casus belli (case for war).[18] His message to Congress on May 11, 1846 stated that "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil."[19][20] Congress approved the declaration of war on May 13, with southern Democrats in strong support. Sixty-seven Whigs voted against the war on a key slavery amendment,[21] but on the final passage only 14 Whigs voted no,[21] including Rep. John Quincy Adams. Congress declared war on Mexico on May 13, 1846 after only having a few hours to debate. Although President Paredes's issuance of a manifesto on May 23 is sometimes considered the declaration of war, Mexico officially declared war by Congress on July 7.

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna

Once the U.S. declared war on Mexico, Antonio López de Santa Anna wrote to Mexico City saying he no longer had aspirations to the presidency, but would eagerly use his military experience to fight off the foreign invasion of Mexico as he had before. President Valentín Gómez Farías was desperate enough to accept the offer and allowed Santa Anna to return. Meanwhile, Santa Anna had secretly been dealing with representatives of the U.S., pledging that if he were allowed back in Mexico through the U.S. naval blockades, he would work to sell all contested territory to the United States at a reasonable price.[22] Once back in Mexico at the head of an army, Santa Anna reneged on both agreements. Santa Anna declared himself president again and unsuccessfully tried to fight off the U.S. invasion.

Opposition to the war

In the U.S., increasingly divided by sectional rivalry, the war was a partisan issue and an essential element in the origins of the American Civil War. Most Whigs in the North and South opposed it;[23] most Democrats supported it.[24] Southern Democrats, animated by a popular belief in Manifest Destiny, supported it in hopes of adding territory to the South and avoiding being outnumbered by the faster-growing North. John O'Sullivan, the editor of the "Democratic Review", coined this phrase in its context, stating that it must be "Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[25] Northern anti-slavery elements feared the rise of a Slave Power; Whigs generally wanted to strengthen the economy with industrialization, not expand it with more land. Democrats wanted more land; northern Democrats were attracted by the possibilities in the far northwest. Joshua Giddings led a group of dissenters in Washington D.C. He called the war with Mexico "an aggressive, unholy, and unjust war," and voted against supplying soldiers and weapons. He said:
In the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil, or in robbing them of their country, I can take no part either now or here-after. The guilt of these crimes must rest on others. I will not participate in them.

Fellow Whig Abraham Lincoln contested the causes for the war and demanded to know exactly where Thornton had been attacked and American blood shed. "Show me the spot," he demanded. Whig leader Robert Toombs of Georgia declared: This war is nondescript .... We charge the President with usurping the war-making power ... with seizing a country ... which had been for centuries, and was then in the possession of the Mexicans .... Let us put a check upon this lust of dominion. We had territory enough, Heaven knew."

Northern abolitionists attacked the war as an attempt by slave-owners—frequently referred to as "the Slave Power"—to strengthen the grip of slavery and thus ensure their continued influence in the federal government. Acting on his convictions, Henry David Thoreau was jailed for his refusal to pay taxes to support the war, and penned his famous essay, Civil Disobedience.

Former President John Quincy Adams also expressed his belief that the war was primarily an effort to expand slavery in a speech he gave before the House on May 25, 1846.[28] In response to such concerns, Democratic Congressman David Wilmot introduced the Wilmot Proviso, which aimed to prohibit slavery in new territory acquired from Mexico. Wilmot's proposal did not pass Congress, but it spurred further hostility between the factions.

Defense of the war

Besides alleging that the actions of Mexican military forces within the disputed boundary lands north of the Rio Grande constituted an attack on American soil, the war's advocates viewed the territories of New Mexico and California as only nominally Mexican possessions with very tenuous ties to Mexico, and as actually unsettled, ungoverned, and unprotected frontier lands, whose non-aboriginal population, where there was any at all, comprised a substantial—in places even a majority—American component, and which were feared to be under imminent threat of acquisition by America's rival on the continent, the British.
President Polk reprised these arguments in his Third Annual Message to Congress on December 7, 1847,[29] in which he scrupulously detailed his administration's position on the origins of the conflict, the measures the U.S. had taken to avoid hostilities, and the justification for declaring war. He also elaborated upon the many outstanding financial claims by American citizens against Mexico and argued that, in view of the country's insolvency, the cession of some large portion of its northern territories was the only indemnity realistically available as compensation. This helped to rally Congressional Democrats to his side, ensuring passage of his war measures and bolstering support for the war in the U.S.

Opening hostilities

The Siege of Fort Texas began on May 3. Mexican artillery at Matamoros opened fire on Fort Texas, which replied with its own guns. The bombardment continued for 160 hours[30] and expanded as Mexican forces gradually surrounded the fort. Thirteen U.S. soldiers were injured during the bombardment, and two were killed.[30] Among the dead was Jacob Brown, after whom the fort was later named.

On May 8, Zachary Taylor and 2,400 troops arrived to relieve the fort. However, Arista rushed north and intercepted him with a force of 3,400 at Palo Alto. The Americans employed "flying artillery", the American term for horse artillery, a type of mobile light artillery that was mounted on horse carriages with the entire crew riding horses into battle. It had a devastating effect on the Mexican army. The Mexicans replied with cavalry skirmishes and their own artillery. The U.S. flying artillery somewhat demoralized the Mexican side, and seeking terrain more to their advantage, the Mexicans retreated to the far side of a dry riverbed (resaca) during the night. It provided a natural fortification, but during the retreat, Mexican troops were scattered, making communication difficult. During the Battle of Resaca de la Palma the next day, the two sides engaged in fierce hand to hand combat. The U.S. cavalry managed to capture the Mexican artillery, causing the Mexican side to retreat—a retreat that turned into a rout.[30] Fighting on unfamiliar terrain, his troops fleeing in retreat, Arista found it impossible to rally his forces. Mexican casualties were heavy, and the Mexicans were forced to abandon their artillery and baggage. Fort Brown inflicted additional casualties as the withdrawing troops passed by the fort. Many Mexican soldiers drowned trying to swim across the Rio Grande.

Conduct of the war

See also: Mexican–American War campaigns
After the declaration of war, U.S. forces invaded Mexican territory on two main fronts. The U.S. War Department sent a cavalry force under Stephen W. Kearny to invade western Mexico from Fort Leavenworth, reinforced by a Pacific fleet under John D. Sloat. This was done primarily because of concerns that Britain might also try to seize the area. Two more forces, one under John E. Wool and the other under Taylor, were ordered to occupy Mexico as far south as the city of Monterrey.

California campaign

Although the U.S. declared war against Mexico on May 13, 1846, it took almost two months (until the middle of June 1846) for definite word of war to get to California. American consul Thomas O. Larkin, stationed in Monterey, on hearing rumors of war tried to maintain the peace between the States and the small Mexican military garrison commanded by José Castro. U.S. Army captain John C. Frémont, with about 60 well-armed men, had entered California in December, 1845, and was slowly marching to Oregon when he received word that war between Mexico and the U.S. was imminent. So began his chapter of the war, the "Bear Flag Revolt."[33]

On June 15, 1846, some thirty settlers, mostly American citizens, staged a revolt and seized the small Mexican garrison in Sonoma. They raised the "Bear Flag" of the California Republic over Sonoma. The republic was in existence scarcely more than a week before the U.S. Army, led by Frémont, took over on June 23. The California state flag today is based on this original Bear Flag and still contains the words, "California Republic".

Commodore John Drake Sloat, upon hearing of imminent war and the revolt in Sonoma, ordered his naval and marine forces to occupy Monterey, the capital, on July 7 and raise the flag of the U.S.; San Francisco, then called Yerba Buena, was occupied on July 9. On July 15, Sloat transferred his command to Commodore Robert F. Stockton, a much more aggressive leader, who put Frémont's forces under his orders. On July 19, Frémont's "California Battalion" swelled to about 160 additional men from newly arrived settlers near Sacramento, and he entered Monterey in a joint operation with some of Stockton's sailors and marines. The word had been received: war was official. The U.S. forces easily took over the north of California; within days they controlled San Francisco, Sonoma, and the privately owned Sutter's Fort in Sacramento.
From Alta California (the present-day American state of California), Mexican General José Castro and Governor Pío Pico fled southward. When Stockton's forces, sailing southward to San Diego, stopped in San Pedro, he sent 50 U.S. Marines ashore; this force entered Los Angeles unresisted on August 13, 1846. With the success of this so-called "Siege of Los Angeles", the nearly bloodless conquest of California seemed complete.

Stockton, however, left too small a force in Los Angeles, and the Californios, acting on their own, and without help from Mexico, led by José María Flores, forced the American garrison to retreat, late in September. The rancho vaqueros who had banded together to defend their land fought as Californio lancers; they were a force the Americans had not anticipated. More than three hundred American reinforcements, sent by Stockton and led by Captain William Mervine, U.S.N., were repulsed in the Battle of Dominguez Rancho, fought from October 7 through 9, 1846, near San Pedro. Fourteen American Marines were killed.

Meanwhile, General Stephen W. Kearny, with a squadron of 139 dragoons that he had led on a grueling march across New Mexico, Arizona, and the Sonoran Desert, finally reached California on December 6, 1846, and fought in a small battle with Californio lancers at the Battle of San Pasqual near San Diego, California, where 22 of Kearny's troops were killed.

Kearny's command was bloodied and in poor condition but pushed on until they had to establish a defensive position on "Mule" Hill near present-day Escondido. The Californios besieged the dragoons for four days until Commodore Stockton's relief force arrived. The resupplied, combined American force marched north from San Diego on December 29 and entered the Los Angeles area on January 8, 1847,[34] linking up with Frémont's men there. American forces totalling 607 soldiers and marines fought and defeated a Californio force of about 300 men under the command of Captain-general Flores in the decisive Battle of Rio San Gabriel.[35] The next day, January 9, 1847, the Americans fought and won the Battle of La Mesa. On January 12, the last significant body of Californios surrendered to U.S. forces. That marked the end of armed resistance in California, and the Treaty of Cahuenga was signed the next day, on January 13, 1847.

Pacific Coast campaign

USS Independence assisted in the blockade of the Mexican Pacific coast, capturing the Mexican ship Correo and a launch on 16 May 1847. She supported the capture of Guaymas, Mexico, on 19 October 1847 and landed bluejackets and Marines to occupy Mazatlán, Mexico
on 11 November 1847. After upper California was secure most of the Pacific Squadron proceeded down the California coast capturing all major Baja California cities and capturing or destroying nearly all Mexican vessels in the Gulf of California. Other ports, not on the peninsula, were taken as well. The objective of the Pacific Coast Campaign was to capture Mazatlan, a major supply base for Mexican forces. Numerous Mexican ships were also captured by this squadron with the USS Cyane given credit for 18 captures and numerous destroyed ships.[36] Entering the Gulf of California, Independence, Congress and Cyane seized La Paz captured and or burned the small Mexican fleet at Guaymas. Within a month, they cleared the Gulf of hostile ships, destroying or capturing 30 vessels. Later on their sailors and marines captured the town of Mazatlan, Mexico, on 11 November 1847. A Mexican campaign under Manuel Pineda to retake the various captured ports resulted in several small clashes (Battle of Mulege, Battle of La Paz, Battle of San José del Cabo) and two sieges (Siege of La Paz, Siege of San José del Cabo) in which the Pacific Squadron ships provided artillery support. U.S. garrisons remained in control of the ports and following reinforcement, Lt. Col. Henry S. Burton marched out, rescued captured Americans, captured Pineda and on March 31, defeated and dispersed remaining Mexican forces at the Skirmish of Todos Santos, unaware the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been signed in February 1848. When the American garrisons were evacuated following the treaty, many Mexicans that had been supporting the American cause and had thought Lower California would also be annexed like Upper California, were evacuated with them to Monterey.

Northeastern Mexico

The defeats at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma caused political turmoil in Mexico, turmoil which Antonio López de Santa Anna used to revive his political career and return from self-imposed exile in Cuba in mid-August 1846. He promised the U.S. that if allowed to pass through the blockade, he would negotiate a peaceful conclusion to the war and sell the New Mexico and Alta California territories to the U.S. Once Santa Anna arrived in Mexico City, however, he reneged and offered his services to the Mexican government. Then, after being appointed commanding general, he reneged again and seized the presidency.

Led by Taylor, 2,300 U.S. troops crossed the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo) after some initial difficulties in obtaining river transport. His soldiers occupied the city of Matamoros, then Camargo (where the soldiery suffered the first of many problems with disease) and then proceeded south and besieged the city of Monterrey. The hard-fought Battle of Monterrey resulted in serious losses on both sides. The American light artillery was ineffective against the stone fortifications of the city. The Mexican forces were under General Pedro de Ampudia and repulsed Taylor's best infantry division at Fort Teneria. American soldiers, including many West Pointers, had never engaged in urban warfare before and they marched straight down the open streets, where they were annihilated by Mexican defenders well-hidden in Monterrey's thick adobe homes.[39] Two days later, they changed their urban warfare tactics. Texan soldiers had
fought in a Mexican city before and advised Taylor's generals that the Americans needed to "mouse hole" through the city's homes. In other words, they needed to punch holes in the side or roofs of the homes and fight hand to hand inside the structures. This method proved successful and Ampudia eventually surrendered.

Eventually, these actions drove and trapped Ampudia's men into the city's central plaza, where howitzer shelling forced Ampudia to negotiate. Taylor agreed to allow the Mexican Army to evacuate and to an eight-week armistice in return for the surrender of the city. Under pressure from Washington, Taylor broke the armistice and occupied the city of Saltillo, southwest of Monterrey. Santa Anna blamed the loss of Monterrey and Saltillo on Ampudia and demoted him to command a small artillery battalion. On February 22, 1847, Santa Anna personally marched north to fight Taylor with 20,000 men. Taylor, with 4,600 men, had entrenched at a mountain pass called Buena Vista. Santa Anna suffered desertions on the way north and arrived with 15,000 men in a tired state. He demanded and was refused surrender of the U.S. Army; he attacked the next morning. Santa Anna flanked the U.S. positions by sending his cavalry and some of his infantry up the steep terrain that made up one side of the pass, while a division of infantry attacked frontally along the road leading to Buena Vista. Furious fighting ensued, during which the U.S troops were nearly routed, but managed to cling to their entrenched position. The Mexicans had inflicted considerable losses but Santa Anna had gotten word of upheaval in Mexico City, so he withdrew that night, leaving Taylor in control of part of Northern Mexico. Polk distrusted Taylor, whom he felt had shown incompetence in the Battle of Monterrey by agreeing to the armistice, and may have considered him a political rival for the White House. Taylor later used the Battle of Buena Vista as the centerpiece of his successful 1848 presidential campaign.

Northwestern Mexico

On March 1, 1847, Alexander W. Doniphan occupied Chihuahua City. He found the inhabitants much less willing to accept the American conquest than the New Mexicans. The British consul John Potts did not want to let Doniphan search Governor Trias's mansion, and unsuccessfully asserted it was under British protection. American merchants in Chihuahua wanted the American force to stay in order to protect their business. Gilpin advocated a march on Mexico City and convinced a majority of officers, but Doniphan subverted this plan, then in late April Taylor ordered the First Missouri Mounted Volunteers to leave Chihuahua and join him at Saltillo. The American merchants either followed or returned to Santa Fe. Along the way, the townspeople of Parras enlisted Doniphan's aid against an Indian raiding party that had taken children, horses, mules, and money.

U.S. press and popular war enthusiasm
During the war inventions such as the telegraph created new means of communication that updated people with the latest news from the reporters, who were usually on the scene. With more than a decade's experience reporting urban crime, the "penny press" realized the voracious need of the public to get the astounding war news. This was the first time in American history when the accounts by journalists, instead of the opinions of politicians, caused great influence in shaping people's minds and attitudes toward a war. News about the war always caused extraordinary popular excitement. By getting constant reports from the battlefield, Americans became emotionally united as a community. In the spring of 1846, news about Zachary Taylor's victory at Palo Alto brought up a large crowd that met in a cotton textile town of Lowell, Massachusetts. At Veracruz and Buena Vista, New York celebrated their twin victories in May 1847. Among fireworks and illuminations, they had a "grand procession" of about 400,000 people. Generals Taylor and Scott became heroes for their people and later became presidential candidates.

Rather than reinforce Taylor's army for a continued advance, President Polk sent a second army under General Winfield Scott, which was transported to the port of Veracruz by sea, to begin an invasion of the Mexican heartland. On March 9, 1847, Scott performed the first major amphibious landing in U.S. history in preparation for the Siege of Veracruz. A group of 12,000 volunteer and regular soldiers successfully offloaded supplies, weapons, and horses near the walled city. Included in the invading force were Robert E. Lee, George Meade, Ulysses S. Grant, and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. The city was defended by Mexican General Juan Morales with 3,400 men. Mortars and naval guns under Commodore Matthew C. Perry were used to reduce the city walls and harass defenders. The city replied the best it could with its own artillery. The effect of the extended barrage destroyed the will of the Mexican side to fight against a numerically superior force, and they surrendered the city after 12 days under siege. U.S. troops suffered 80 casualties, while the Mexican side had around 180 killed and wounded, about half of whom were civilian. During the siege, the U.S. side began to fall victim to yellow fever.

Scott then marched westward toward Mexico City with 8,500 healthy troops, while Santa Anna set up a defensive position in a canyon around the main road at the halfway mark to Mexico City, near the hamlet of Cerro Gordo. Santa Anna had entrenched with 12,000 troops and artillery that were trained on the road, along which he expected Scott to appear. However, Scott had sent 2,600 mounted dragoons ahead, and the Mexican artillery prematurely fired on them and revealed their positions. Instead of taking the main road, Scott's troops trekked through the rough terrain to the north, setting up his artillery on the high ground and quietly flanking the Mexicans. Although by then aware of the positions of U.S. troops, Santa Anna and his troops were unprepared for the onslaught that followed. The Mexican army was routed. The U.S. Army suffered 400 casualties, while the Mexicans suffered over 1,000 casualties and 3,000 were taken prisoner. In August 1847, Captain Kirby Smith, of Scott's 3rd Infantry, reflected on the
resistance of the Mexican army: What stupid people they are! They can do nothing and their continued defeats should convince them of it. They have lost six great battles; we have captured six hundred and eight cannon, nearly one hundred thousand stands of arms, made twenty thousand prisoners, have the greatest portion of their country and are fast advancing on their Capital which must be ours,—yet they refuse to treat [i.e., negotiate terms]! In May, Scott pushed on to Puebla, the second largest city in Mexico. Because of the citizens' hostility to Santa Anna, the city capitulated without resistance on May 1. Mexico City was laid open in the Battle of Chapultepec and subsequently occupied. Winfield Scott became an American national hero after his victories in the Mexican–American War, and later became military governor of occupied Mexico City.