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The Role of Media During the Mexican-American War

The Mexican-American War was the first war that placed U.S. soldiers on foreign soil. This war also signified the introduction of mass media and its first-hand accounts of the conflict. Penny presses gave the American society a glimpse into the protracted struggle south of the border. Although this war was the first fought on foreign land and also the first war where technology was the deciding factor; the importance of this war also rested in the fact that it was the first battle “fought in the media.” [\[1\]](#) With the introduction of media in the Mexican-American War, how did the media portray Mexico and their army for the positive benefit of the U.S. and their society? War, historically, has been fought on two levels. One is the physical battle itself, while the other is the war among public opinion and perceptions. Mass media allowed newspapers, both British and American, to paint the picture of a weak and insufficient Mexican Army. Through various sources, the Mexican Army, government, and society were portrayed to be incapable of threatening the grandeur and power of the unstoppable American troops.

The evidence used to support this claim of media persuasion comes in both primary and secondary forms. The vast amounts of letters and dispatches from the war give great detail and evidence to the feelings and sentiments of the

people that were actually among the battle lines. Through diaries of soldiers, letters from officers and generals, and dispatches from correspondents, the picture of the Mexican-American War becomes more vivid. Most of these documents are contained in local penny presses of the American south. The *Times* (London) also used correspondents of its own and borrowed testimonials from the U.S. to cover the war abroad. The Mexican-American War was covered throughout the world, and “The *Times* of London...led a group of newspapers in establishing networks of correspondents capable of providing quick and reliable news from the Continent.” [2] Media’s role was greatly elevated during the Mexican-American War and it is for this reason why the role of media in shaping perceptions is a valuable tool.

The American and British media both focused on the Mexican Army. By analyzing the soldiers and officers, the newspapers sought to persuade their own readers that the insufficient army of Mexico had no chance against the stronger and wealthier United States Army. Although battles would tell the truth, American newspapers brought in images of patriotism and bravery when describing their own troops. However, when it came time to describe Mexican forces, they were often viewed as weak and feeble. Not only does this strengthen American society’s view of war, but also diminishes any chance of Mexico proving to be a threat.

Mexico’s standing army was three times the size of the United States forces. Although these powerful numbers could provide a threat, the Mexican

army lacked trained and experienced soldiers. The Mexican infantry was recruited by a levy system. Each region's government was required to send a certain number of men into the forces. The result was disastrous, "they sent the army their poor, their criminals, their political enemies." [3] These lower classes had not even seen or fired a gun before. The *Times* described the Mexican soldiery as having "fiery spirits and fear of cold steel." [4] Although they did possess courage, they lacked the resources and physical force necessary to defend their land. Not only were the Mexican Army portrayed in the media as desperate and insufficient, but their conditions also proved to be an advantage to the U.S. According to a letter by Paymaster J.B. Butler, printed in the *Niles Register*, he reported that "Santa Anna is destitute of all kinds of provisions, and that he cannot keep them together." [5] Not only did Butler feel that the army lacked in resources, but that the demoralization of the troops resulted due to the conditions and incapable leaders of the Mexican Army. In his own words, "I have no doubt of the dissolution of Santa Anna's army, morally and physically, and there will be no more fighting in this region, if there be any anywhere." [6] This gave Americans the perception that the Mexicans were poor and could easily be defeated. Most of the time, these descriptions of the horrid Mexicans were followed by the glowing and happy predicament of the U.S. soldiers.

Not only were the Mexican soldiers depicted in the dispatches and diaries, but also the generals and officers. Both the organizational and individual flaws of the upper command were described to be a severe obstacle that prevented Mexico from leading the war. In *The Times*, Mexican officers are

described “for the most part not good.” [\[7\]](#) Not only is there a lack of experience and expertise, but the commanding officers were constantly struggling among themselves for power. Unlike the American officers, who were portrayed as fighting for the ideals of patriotism, Mexican generals were motivated by power. This fight for power resulted in numerous displacements of valuable resources. For example, General Mariano Arista noted that his superiors added to his troops’ problems. “As they neither had shoes nor clothing nor transport, it was difficult to move them through a barren country. The commander at San Luis was General Paredes...who had intercepted money and clothing sent by the government for Arista on the frontier.” [\[8\]](#) There was a lack of unity among Mexican leaders, which would inevitably lead to their downfall. According to Otis A. Singletary, the Mexican army “was vitiated by flaws inherent in the Mexican military system, a system properly belonging to the eighteenth century, when aristocratic officers commanded soldiers from the depressed class.” [\[9\]](#) Not only were these problems found in the military structure as a whole, but also the individual Mexican generals were assaulted in the press due to their behavior and inability to lead the public.

Individual flaws of officers are also seen throughout the dispatches and letters. General Paredes was seen as “inactive, if not indifferent.” [\[10\]](#) Paredes was unable to present a challenge to the foreign invaders because he could not even unite his own country. Santa Anna was also portrayed by the mass media in a negative light. He was depicted as a gambler and participant of cock fighting. [\[11\]](#) Not only was the United States laughing about these incompetent

leaders, but Mexican society doubted them as well. Kendall makes note of these feelings in his own dispatch: “They say that the Lord and Santa Anna are to blame for all their misfortunes—their own lack of prowess or courage is not thought of. They say that Providence withheld the rains and gave the Yankees fair weather for their operations, while Santa Anna deserted them in their extremity, and gave up the city without even making terms for them.” [12] The press’ perception of the lackluster Mexican Army paved the way for an image of American strength and superiority. Even the *Times* fed into this American power, “the American triumphs were analyzed in terms of Mexico’s weaknesses.” [13] This is the first time in America’s history, where the penny presses were laying the foundation for the growing stature of the American Army and government.

Not only was the Mexican Army battered in the newspapers, but also the Mexican government. By critiquing each area of Mexican society, the American and British newspapers believed strongly that it was only a matter of time before Mexico would crumble. The disunity and instability of Mexico was often reported in the media. In the British press, “Mexican rulers [were said] to be at best ineffective and at worst despots...The *Times* was especially offended at the prospect of such a weak government refusing to give in and begin negotiations to conclude the war.” [14] The American and British newspapers portrayed an insufficient self-government that could not even control the internal discord in Mexico. The internal rebellion of Guadalajara illustrates this point, “Civil war continues to augment the woes of Mexico. The insurgents of Guadalajara are

besieged in the center of the city, from which the troops of the Government are unable to dislodge them.” [\[15\]](#) Mexican leadership was constantly changing, one minute it was Paredes, the next it was Santa Anna. There was a constant change in Ministers and other Government officials, leaving Mexican legislation in-flux. There was no hope for some sort of consistency or stability. One such example is Bravo’s speech to Congress when he took control of the government in September 1846. The ministers of Paredes resigned and the British press perceived this constant change of power and lack of legislation as the “great evil of Mexican legislation; nothing is permanent.” [\[16\]](#) The media elaborated greatly on this discord in Mexico. The press used letters from Havana to display the doubts of the Mexicans themselves, “that their government will very soon enter into negotiations for peace, from total inability to subsist and protract the struggle.” [\[17\]](#) With the instability of the Mexican government combined with the weak and disorganized army, Mexico was seen at all levels as incompetent and incapable of changing the course of the war.

The role of the mass media in the Mexican-American War is significant because it is the first time that the press has put their own spin on things. American penny presses sought to make Mexico look weak and inferior to the rising stature of American power. Also, this was the first war on foreign soil and employing correspondents and printing letters and journals gave the American people a first-hand account of this distant war. Currently, media has become almost like a fourth branch of government. Reporters work within a check and balance system. The press attempts to persuade public opinion and helps

support the perception of its own society. During the Mexican-American War, the British and American press portrayed the Mexican Army and government in terms of its disunity. This gave America an advantage, not only did the people at home believe they would triumph, but it broke the spirit of Mexico and helped the United States' image abroad. This was the beginning of American imperialism and grandeur. The press helped to develop and sustain this image.

Other resources that would be valuable in exploring this topic further would be how the Mexican press portrayed themselves. Diaries of Mexican soldiers and government officials would be interesting to see how they perceived the war. Although Mexican archives are limited, the Mexican perception could be a nice contrast to the American and British view. Researching other penny presses and perhaps the memoirs of the correspondents would also help explain why newspapers covered stories in particular ways. Modern time shows that the media's role continues to expand and it is for this reason why the Mexican-American War should be viewed as the first instance where journalism played a role in shaping public perceptions.

[1] Christensen, Carl and Thomas, *The U.S.-Mexican War*, Companion to the Public Television Series (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998), 4.

[2] Christensen 10.

[3] Christensen 60.

[4] "The Mexican Soldiery," *The Times* (London) , 2 September 1846 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 5F.

[5] "Letter from Paymaster J.B. Butler—Demoralization of Santa Anna's Troops," *Niles Register*, 3 April 1847 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 72.065.

[6] Ibid.

[7] "The Mexican Soldiery," *The Times* (London), 2 September 1846 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 5F.

[8] Christensen 53.

[9] Christensen 60.

[10] "Mexico," *The Times* (London), 16 September 1846 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 4D.

[11] "Mexico—Deferred Article," *Niles Register* , 13 March 1847 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 72.022.

[12] Nathaniel Lande, *Dispatches From The Front; A History of the American War Correspondent* (New York: Oxford Press, 1996), 85.

[13] William Mullins, *The British Press and The Mexican War: Justin Smith Revised* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1977), 218.

[14] Mullins 219.

[15] "The Affairs of Mexico," *The Times* (London), 5 September 1846 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm>, 6E.

[16] Ibid.

[17] "Mexico—Deferred Article," *Niles Register* , 13 March 1847 [on-line posting]; available from <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm> , 72.022.