

THE SIEGE OF VERACRUZ
History and Commentary

by

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The taking of Veracruz by United States forces was a major turning point during the Mexican war. Not only did it allow General Winfield Scott to secure a major port along the Mexican coast, but also it allowed an easy access to the national highway that could be used to travel west towards the capital, Mexico City. The inadequacy of Mexican forces to defend Veracruz lead to an uncontested landing and an easy victory for General Scott and the naval ships under his command. If Mexico had been able to defend Veracruz, the outcome of the war would have been significantly delayed at the least, and quite possibly the subsequent lack of American civilian support for the costly war may have forced Washington to slowly pull back and

agree to peace terms less favorable than those actually secured.

General Juan Morales led the Mexican military forces in Veracruz. Morales believed that his garrison would not be able to hold off an attack by a United States landing force. He had asked officials in Mexico City for reinforcements, but the bulk of Mexican troops were busy fighting against General Zachary Taylor in Buena Vista. Veracruz had a long history of successful defensive stands against invading forces. The British, Spanish, and French had all been unsuccessful in their attempts to take the Mexican port since Cortez first landed in 1519. But with his undermanned army, Veracruz faced its biggest test yet with the United States' approaching naval and land forces.

General Morales' garrison, which consisted of "3,300 troops in the city and 1,600 in the fort"¹, in addition to hundreds of civilians including elderly, many women and children, nervously awaited the inevitable United States attack. High walls and natural defenses surrounded the fortress city of Veracruz. Across the bay, "the Spanish had constructed the island fortress Castillo de San Juan de Ulua, with 135 guns trained to repel pirates attacking from the sea."² The natural defenses of Veracruz included "reefs and bars in the harbor that kept out large warships with

long range guns."² General Scott's army of 12,000 troops had been gathering on the Isle of Lobos.

U.S. naval ships sailed towards Veracruz in the first two months of 1847. Scott knew that even if his forces outnumbered those in Veracruz three to one, his strategy to win the battle would have to be carried out in a near perfect fashion. He had planned an amphibious attack, which would include assaults by troops landing on the shore and then heavy cannon fire upon the city from United States warships. The part of Scott's plan that Mexico could have used to their advantage (had General Morales been given reinforcements from Mexico City), was the deployment of United States troops from landing boats. If the garrison at Veracruz had been strengthened to a total of 10,000 or more, chances are Morales and his men could have withstood the American assault by ambushing the United States landing force with gunfire and artillery before they could establish defensive positions.

On March 9th, 1837, the American siege on Veracruz began.⁵ General Morales and his troops had prepared to defend the city and readied their guns as the United States naval warships appeared on the horizon. At 5:30 in the afternoon Scott ordered a cannon shot to signal the first wave of landing surfboats. The deployment of American

troops onto the shore was surprisingly uncontested, which virtually killed any chance of victory for General Morales and his undermanned defense force. The United States troops that landed on the beach were well out of range of Mexican guns and cannons along the city walls. This enabled Scott to deploy his full amount of troops onto the shore without any casualties. As a result, United States forces were able to devise attacks from both land and sea. Scott was able to deploy "more than 9,000 U.S. soldiers"³.

For the next three days the landing force began bolstering several positions with troops and equipment. General Scott "had his batteries in place in four separate attack sites"³. These actions carried out were also uncontested and increased the probability of a quick U.S. victory. General Morales, instead of ambushing the United States landing army, or striking first, waited within the city walls as Scott was able to surround Veracruz with mortars and thousands of troops. Not only did the United States have thousands of well-positioned troops with light artillery in four spots surrounding Veracruz, but also several Naval Warships with long-range heavy guns at sea if they were needed to inflict more damage on the natural and man-made defenses. Any chance of General Morales and his troops fending off the attack was very slim. General Scott

had far more men and artillery in well-fortified positions, not to mention the option to attack with army by land, navy by sea, or both. Only a large counter attack by fresh Mexican troops from Mexico City could have broken the siege, and, of course, Mexico City did not have sufficient troops in reserve for such a counter attack. Any troops that were still present in Mexico City were busy quelling the riots associated with the civil war going on in the capital.

Once all United States units were in position, General Scott offered an ultimatum to General Morales. Scott also offered "safe conduct to civilians in the city".³ Morales refused the U.S. offer and held his position along the city walls. Morales probably thought that history was on his side no matter how big the odds were against him. He figured that he had a chance since Veracruz had held off so many attacks for centuries by the likes of the British, French, and Spanish. However, Veracruz had never been tested by the United States army/navy. Morales should have surrendered when he was given the opportunity. His determination to stand up to the American challenge would end up costing the lives of hundreds of Mexican soldiers and civilians. The advantage of defending, having history on their side, and the determination of the Mexican

soldiers to defend their country on their own soil was not enough for General Morales to overcome being severely outnumbered and outgunned. He should have taken into account the large number of innocent civilians who were at risk of losing their lives, including women and children.

Soon after General Morales' refusal to surrender, the first U.S. shells were fired. Mexican troops then immediately returned their fire. Gun and artillery emplacements were "soon completely hidden by smoke."³ The American forces on the ground fired shells over the city walls that exploded over residential areas in Veracruz. Having been outnumbered, the Mexican forces along the walls could not keep up with the American bombardment as night fell. The shells that General Scott's army fired were not powerful enough to do any significant damage on the cities thick walls, but were devastating to the civilian population within Veracruz. United States army Captain Robert E. Lee, who later became one of the most significant and brilliant Generals during the American civil war, described the scene. "The shells thrown from our battery were constant and regular discharges, so beautiful in their flight and so destructive in their fall. It was awful! My heart bled for the inhabitants. The soldiers I did not

care so much for, but it was terrible to think of the women and children."⁴

Realizing that shells would not be able to penetrate the city walls, General Scott turned to his navy to deliver the next blow. United States Commodore Matthew Perry ordered 6 naval cannons to be delivered ashore by surfboats.⁶ These "three-ton naval guns - three firing thirty-two pounds of solid shot, three firing sixty four pound shells - might make an impact."³ General Scott realized that his army's mortar shells were not going to be effective against the city defense barrier. The heavy naval cannons potentially had enough destructive power to bring down the thick city walls that surrounded Veracruz. This would allow United States ground forces to storm through any opening in the wall that the huge naval guns created and capture the city.

Over six thousand shells were fired over the city over four days. General Morales' continued refusal to seek surrender terms consequently resulted in significant loss of civilian life. The naval cannons pounded barriers around the city. The three-ton cannons "had opened a fifty-foot-wide hole in the walls defending Veracruz and had demoralized its inhabitants".⁴ After being pressured to surrender by city officials, General Juan Morales resigned.

The next day Brigadier General Jose Juan Landero finally surrendered Veracruz and the Castillo de San Juan across the bay.

General Scott and his forces suffered only fifteen casualties during the assault on Veracruz. The United States victory had been a "textbook"⁴ siege. The main reasons why General Scott had an extremely swift and efficient victory with few casualties was the number of troops and artillery superiority he had over Morales, uncontested deployment of men and equipment on the shore, and uncontested positioning of mortars in four different spots around the city. Morales may have had a chance to defend the city if he had hidden groups of soldiers in defensive positions along the shores to ambush the United States landing force. This would have hampered General Scott's ability to surround Veracruz and fire at will upon the city. Although taking into account the amount of soldiers General Morales had to work with (a mere 3,300 in the city and 1,600 in the fort), even a well-executed ambush of Scott's landing force may not have been enough.

If Mexico had successfully defended the port of Veracruz, the United States may well not have had enough perseverance to follow through and win the war. It would surely have been recorded as a significant rebuff and a

major military defeat of United States forces. Support for the war back home would have suffered a setback and most likely average Americans would have wondered why the U.S. was sending such large numbers of American soldiers and sailors into the heart of Mexico when defense of the Texas border seemed to them to be the primary objective. A victory at Veracruz would have given Mexican forces a rallying cry, and probably resulted in large numbers of volunteers from throughout Mexico and nearby countries. Captured ships, equipment, and supplies would have bolstered the overall defense of Mexico, and the large number of captured United States troops could have been used as hostages or perhaps as exchanges for captured Mexican troops. One can imagine that a gradual Washington-directed closedown of United States military effort could well have resulted in a United States failure to completely subdue Mexican defensive forces near Mexico City. This likely would have resulted in a near standoff until the United States eventually agreed to peace terms without significant changes in the United States and Mexican borders that existed before the war.

Footnotes

¹ Christensen, Carol and Thomas, *The U.S.-Mexican War*, (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998), 167.

² Christensen, Carol and Thomas, *The U.S.-Mexican War*, (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998), 168.

³ Christensen, Carol and Thomas, *The U.S.-Mexican War*, (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998), 171.

⁴ Christensen, Carol and Thomas, *The U.S.-Mexican War*, (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998), 173.

⁵ World Book Encyclopedia, "Mexican War", (Chicago: World Book, Inc, 1998), 446.

⁶ "Siege of Veracruz", *London Times*, 5 May 1847, 6f.