

Donald Kane

The Taking of Mexico City

Since becoming its own country in the later part of the 18th century, the United States has had numerous conflicts with other nations; some conflicts had been settled by diplomatic means and some by coercion. Diplomacy is always the first course of action to be taken, but in some instances it fails to achieve a resolution, as the war the U.S had with Mexico in 1846 demonstrated. The war, which began in 1846, concerned major issues to both countries, especially the ownership and governing of certain territory within Mexican boundaries. This war, in the end, changed the course of these two countries forever. The war also set some landmark change in the media and its coverage of battles, and gave the US international recognition as a hegemonic superpower. Fortunately, the coverage of this war was enormous, compared to wars of the past. This war in addition brought about changes in the strategy of US military tactics. This war also demonstrated the adversities a country has to face when its leadership is fractioned and its military forces split up, as was the case with Mexico. The purpose of my paper is to illustrate the superior topographical knowledge about the exploitation of Mexican forces by the United States to reveal Mexican shortcomings that led the US to defeat Mexican forces and take Mexico City with minimal military coercion.

The extent of Mexican shortcomings was highly apparent toward the end of the war. Eventually, the capital was taken by US troops and Mexico was forced to negotiate. The fighting in the valley prior to the taking of Mexico City gave the US control of Mexican military installations that were crucial to the success of taking the capital. This approach to Mexico City started with the bypassing of El Peñon. Mexican general Anotnio López de Santa Anna had stationed 7,000 troops at El Peñon to wait for General Winfield Scott's army. Scott decided to avoid El Peñon and approach Mexico City from the south on a narrow, muddy track between Lakes Xochimilco and Chalco. This tactical move helped to avoid a battle at El Peñon and scared many families into leaving Mexico City. This tactic was also imperative as it set into motion future battles to take place on the southern side of Mexico City. This brought General Scott's army to San Agustin, near the Pedregal. While exploiting the weaknesses of the Mexican forces, the U.S. army was able to utilize the topography and towns located in the valley around Mexico City strategically in order

to take the capital with the least amount of military resistance. After the strategic move to avoid El Peñon was made, a scouting party was sent to the Pedregal, a five-mile-wide circle of hardened lava and thick brush, virtually impossible to cross by an army.^[1] Engineer Robert E. Lee directed the scouting parties and under his leadership a trail through the Pedregal was found. On August 19, 1847, Robert E. Lee and a 500-soldier party were sent out to improve the path Lee had found through the Pedregal, but were fired upon by General Gabriel Valencia and his troops. This catalyzed a confrontation between US and Mexican forces.

In Conteras the fighting first began between Valencia's army and Lee's scouting party. "On the 19th our division advanced upon the enemy in position at Conteras, their first work, defended by ten thousand men, with twenty-two pieces of artillery, and admirably entrenched."^[2] US reinforcements arrived shortly after. A severe storm halted battle as the fighting ceased until morning. Santa Anna, despite his admirable traits, abandoned crucial aid to General Valencia's army; he ". . . remained a simple spectator of the action, thus allowing it to be lost, though he could have been able to win and should have gained the victory, according to the rules of military science."^[3] During this battle US scouts found a ravine that would give them a rear attack on General Valencia's army. When Brigadier General Persifor Smith took his army around the back of General Valencia's army during the night, Lee led General Scott's troops across the Pedregal to Conteras to bring more reinforcements and stage a diversion. On August 20th the US forces attacked Valencia and his army from both the rear and the front causing many Mexican soldiers to perish. Colonel T.B. Ransom's Ninth Infantry attacked General Valencia's front, as Riley was to attack the rear. General Valencia's Army of the North had been defeated while US troops were now free to move and to attack Churubusco. This was also good battlefield tactics, as it would set the stage for the US army to occupy the southwest side of the Valley around Mexico City. "What has occurred is the result of...stupidity committed by the disobedient Valencia...and the inconceivable conduct of Santa Anna when he stood by as a motionless spectator watching the ruination of his rival. It is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that the criminal desire of generals to surpass one another results in the loss of nations."^[4]

In Churubusco Santa Anna and his troops fortified the bridge crossing the Churubusco River and the monastery nearby. American troops tried to take the bridge, but were decimated by the artillery and

position of the Mexican troops. "We pushed forward to this place in pursuit of the retreating enemy, when the lancers made a stand, and continued to fire upon us through the roads and field up to Churubusco, where the most terrible battle ever fought on this continent took place. This assault by the bayonet has redeemed the impeached valor of the Mexican army"^[5] It seemed the US troops were going to have to find another way to take the site. The bridge was water locked on all sides but that one, so the US army had a problem with its approach. The approach towards the bridge would have to be through another way. "This approach was defended by twenty-five thousand men, behind the most approved field works, of great strength, and seemingly impregnable. Of course they were carried, but the field and works, covered with between three and four thousand killed and wounded on both sides, showed the terrible cost. Fifty of our officers were killed and wounded."^[6] Instead of losing more troops, the US then assembled to attack the monastery. The Mexican troops within the monastery eventually started running low on ammunition. Santa Anna sent them munitions, but they were the wrong caliber for their weapons. After about three hours the American troops overwhelmed the forces fighting within the monastery and took it under its control. They had captured in this siege the traitorous San Patricio Battalion. This broke the Mexican army, which retreated. General Scott then gave Santa Anna and the Mexican government a chance to surrender. The day after the siege at Churubusco, Santa Anna sent a letter asking to hear proposals of peace by Mr. Nicolas Trist. This gave Santa Anna time to fortify Mexico City. "On September 6th General Scott demanded that Santa Anna surrender by noon the next day."^[7] Santa Anna refused and both sides prepared for battle again.

This next battle that took place was at a small site called Molino del Rey on September 8, 1847. General William J. Worth's troops began the fighting attacking a group of stone buildings, where, US intelligence had heard, the Mexicans were making cannon out of church bells. The artillery pounded the buildings, but the US forces were severely outnumbered. "If the cavalry had taken the position assigned to them at 4 o'clock in the morning, by order of Gen. Santa Anna, and if above all they had made the charge which was ordered at the moment that the enemy attacked the mill of El Rey, instead of flying precipitately, the action would have terminated early and the triumph would have been complete. But they did not take the position to which they were ordered, much less make the charge, because his subordinate officers refused an account of the ground being too uneven and broken for cavalry, as if it were not the

same for the cavalry of the enemy."[\[8\]](#) The battle lasted for about two hours and in the end there were many US casualties. The emplacements of artillery were critical for the US victory of this position as these pieces of artillery provided cover and decimated Mexican infantry guarding the foundry. The First Division, headed by Brevet Major General Worth along with other units were suppose to be the ones to take the site. Two 24-pound heavy guns were emplaced about 600 yards from the foundry, and then later moved to support troops storming the site." There were two artillery units set up on either side of the American lines. "On the right...an infantry attack supported by Drum's two-gun battery, drove the Mexicans from El Molino del Rey. On the left side a four-gun battery assisted in the firepower driving Mexican troops away from Casa Mata."[\[9\]](#) It seems that once these US artillery units were in place, the Mexican troops could not find cover for themselves and left position to take cover elsewhere. The Mexicans felt at the start of the battle that they could hold their positions, but the US strategy used once put into action was impermeable. "Again, this military action, so glorious for us despite its loss, should have been a victory if our commander-in-chief had been there and if the cavalry divisions had attacked at the opportune moment."[\[10\]](#) After being taken, Mexico City was virtually defenseless from the West. The next fortified target on General Scott's agenda was that of the castle of Chapultepec.

Being the last stronghold of the Mexican army before Mexico City, Chapultepec had to be taken to squash any opposition to US troops occupying the capital. During the night of the September 11th, Lieutenant George Pearce Andrews' artillery unit fired canisters down the road to prevent more Mexican troops from aiding the ones already positioned in and around Chapultepec.[\[11\]](#) On the morning of September 12th, US artillery began firing at the walls and rooftops of the Castle of Chapultepec. The artillery continued for 14 hours, but the Mexican army still occupied the castle. The Mexican troops needed reinforcements and more ammo to withhold the American overtaking of the castle; so, General Nicolas Bravo, the commanding officer of the troops within the castle, sent a request for more reinforcements. Santa Anna denied the request, as he felt it would only cause more Mexican troops to die without changing the outcome of the war. The next morning on September 13th, the US infantry attacked. Leading the way were 500 men who, called Forlorn Hope, carried ladders, muskets, and bayonets. They charged the castle, but had to get through the artillery and musket fire from the Mexican troops at the base of the castle. They charged up the sides of the castle and started to engage the Mexican troops in hand-to-hand combat. "Duncan's battery

circled the fortress, came to within four hundred yards of the escape route, and fired on the retreating Mexican troops"...while "Lieutenant Jesse Lee Reno pushed his mountain battery forward until it was almost muzzle-to-muzzle with the Mexican guns."[\[12\]](#) By 9:30 AM the battle was over and the US flag was raised over the castle

The causeways were the last problems the US army faced. "There are two routes from Chapultepec to the capital - the one on the right entering the same gate, Belen, with the road from the south, via Piedad; and the other obliging to the left, to intersect the great western, or San Cosmé road, in a suburb outside of the gate of San Cosmé. Each of these routes (an elevated causeway) presents a double roadway on the sides of an aqueduct of strong masonry and great height, resting on open arches and massive pillars, which together afford fine points both for attack and defense. The sideways of both aqueducts are, moreover, defended by many strong breastworks at the gates."[\[13\]](#) The US army battled up the causeways towards the Gates of San Cosme and Belen, entrances to Mexico City. The Mexican troops could not hold back the US troops and finally retreated. This was probably in part to the fact "that the enemy had expected us to fail in the attack upon Chapultepec, even if we meant anything more than a feint; that, in either case, we designed, in his belief, to return and double our forces against the southern gates - a delusion kept up by the active demonstrations of Twigs and the forces posted on that side; and, that advancing rapidly from the reduction of Chapultepec, the enemy had not time to shift guns - our previous captures had left him, comparatively, but few - from the southern gates." [\[14\]](#) Simply stated, the Mexicans had not prepared a strong defense as they did not think US troops would make it that far; thus, they did not even worry about the causeways themselves.

The US troops entered the city only 6,000 strong. "At the end of another series of arduous and brilliant operations of more than forty-eight hours' continuance, this glorious army hoisted, on the morning of the 14th, the colours of the United States on the walls of this palace."[\[15\]](#) Santa Anna fled the city and Manuel de la Peña y Peña was named acting President. At 4:00 AM the next morning on September 14, 1847 a delegation of city officials surrendered the city to General Scott.

While exploiting the weaknesses of the Mexican forces, the U.S. army was able to utilize the topography and towns located in the valley around Mexico City strategically in order to take the capital with the least amount of military resistance. This was true in part due to the heroics of many such as engineer Robert E. Lee, Colonel T.B. Ransom's ninth infantry, and many others who risked and gave their lives for the sake of victory. This was also true due to good use of artillery and batteries aiding the infantry and the cavalry. Many of these batteries were placed in highly strategic places utilizing the geography around certain battlefields, as was the case with the placement Drum's two-gun battery at Molino del Rey. Finally, the friction between Mexico's leadership especially their generals led to many problems with their strategy, as they were not unified against a common enemy. It seems they were so concerned with quarreling amongst themselves that they let strategic positions get taken by the US army that led to the taking of their capital and the loss of the war. The US exploited this weakness and took vantage points and tactical positions as a result. Maybe if these aspects of the war had been different, the outcome of the war may have been very different. It seems this war would bring about many things for the US including international recognition and new military tactics that would shape the way wars were fought for years to come.

[1] Christensen, Carol and Thomas. *The US-Mexican War* (Bay Books and Tapes, Inc.: San Francisco, 1998), 200.

[2] **73.075, Col. 2 October 2, 1847 Letter From an Officer About the Recent Battles in Mexico.** Niles Register. <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm>

[3] Cecil Robinson, ed., *The View from Chapultepec: Mexican Writers on the Mexican-American War* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), 48.

[4] Manuel Gomez Pedraza, in Christensen, *The US-Mexican War*, 202.

[5] **73.075, Col. 2 October 2, 1847 Letter From an Officer About the Recent Battles in Mexico.** Niles Register. <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm>

[6] Ibid.

[7] Christensen, *The US-Mexican War*, 206.

[8] **73.088 October 9, 1847 Battle At Mill El Rey, (King's Mill).** Niles Register. <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/history/arnold/USMxWar/timeswebpage.htm>

[9] Houston, Donald E. "The Role of Artillery in the Mexican War," *Journal of the West* 11/2 (1972): 283.

[10] *The View from Chapultepec*, 48.

[11] Houston, "Artillery," 283.

[12] Houston, "Artillery," 283.

[13] Decendants of Mexican War Vetrans web-site. Scott's entrance into Mexico.
<http://www.dmwv.org/mexwar/nebel12.jpg>

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.