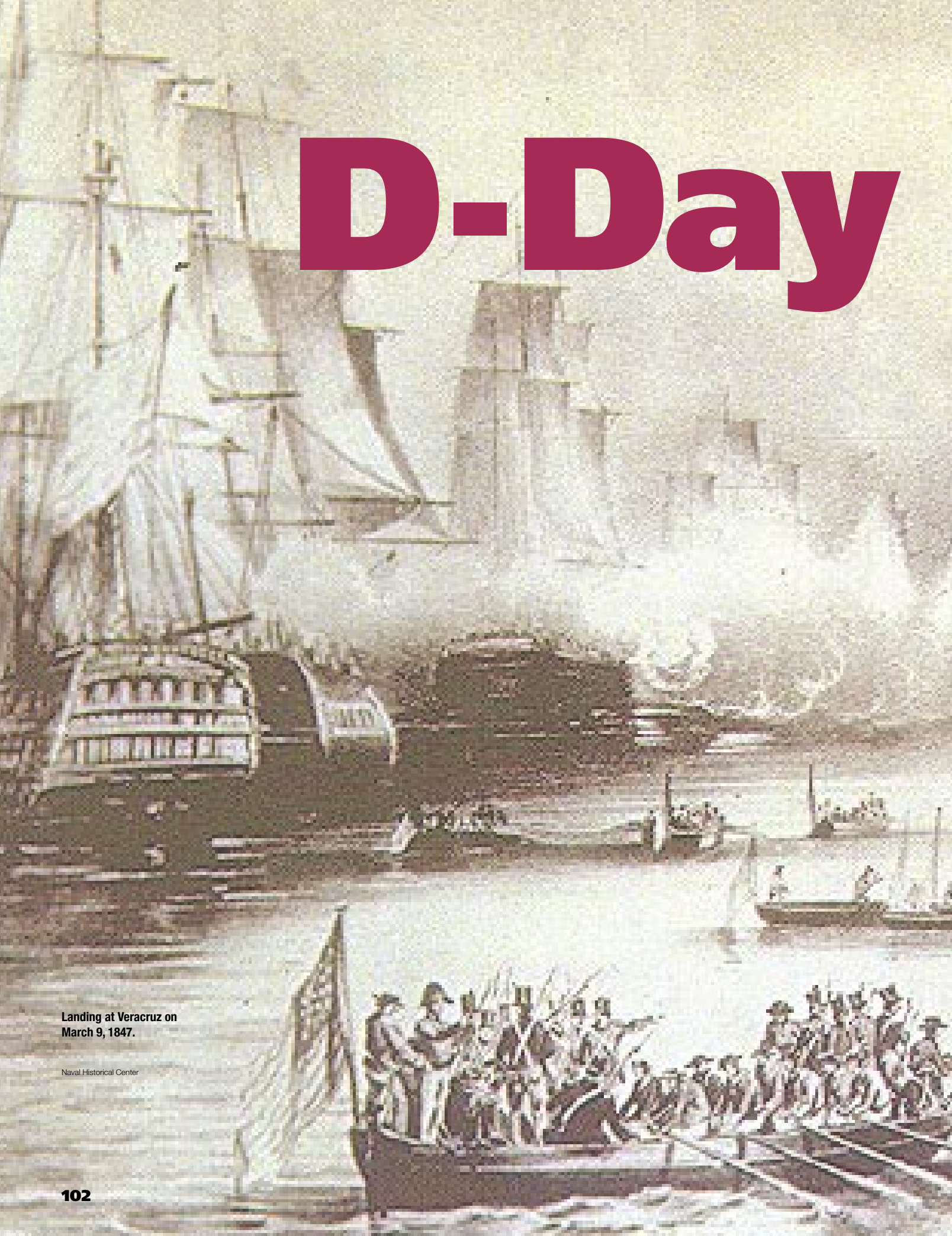


D-Day



Landing at Veracruz on
March 9, 1847.

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Report Documentation Page

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Veracruz, 1847– A Grand Design

By PAUL C. CLARK, JR., and EDWARD H. MOSELEY

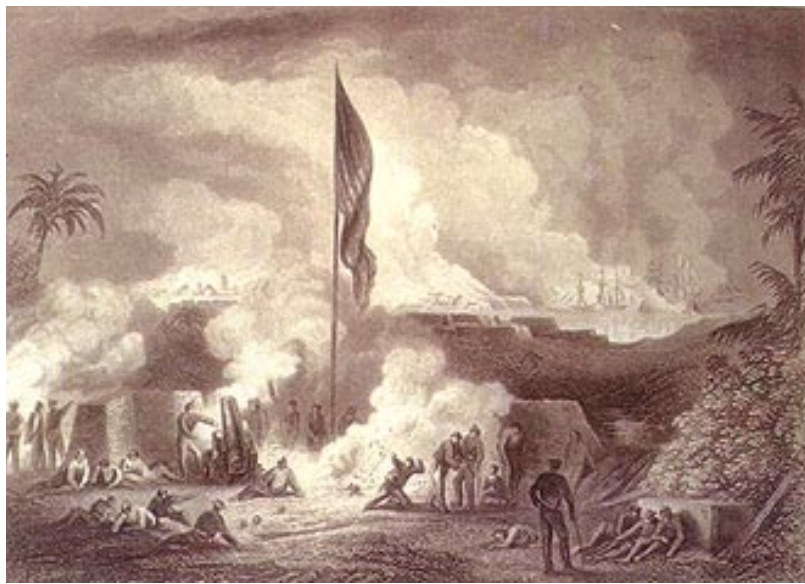
In his last message to Congress, delivered on December 5, 1848, President James K. Polk described the magnificent efforts that had led to victory in the war with Mexico. He praised those civilians who had directed the military in “a vast extent of territory, hundreds and even thousands of miles apart from each other.” He took special pride in the cooperative efforts of the Army and Navy: “Both branches of the service performed their whole duty to the country. . . . There was concert between the heads of the two arms of the service. . . . By this means their combined power was brought to bear successfully on the enemy.”¹

Mexican spy company
(S.J.N. Windisch
Graetze).



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Night battle at Veracruz.

Behind Polk's idealistic and laudatory statement was a much more complex and somewhat sordid reality. The development of national strategy during his administration was often marred by personal and political struggles, competition among officials with large egos, and a jealous chief executive insecure in his own strategic thinking and overly concerned with tactical details better left to his subordinates. A prolonged debate about the expansion of slavery blocked a major military appropriations bill in Autumn 1846, delaying critical supplies to the Army in the field. Suspicion and intrigue poisoned relations between the President and his two senior Army commanders, and at times between those officers. Despite such difficulties—and petty bickering—Polk was justified in feeling a sense of accomplishment for historic victories. In citing the close cooperation between the Army and Navy, he highlighted jointness as a significant dimension of the U.S. achievement. And one of the war's most successful joint operations was the landing at Veracruz.

To place this operation in context, it is important to note that there were numerous incidents of interservice cooperation during the Mexican War. It was evident in far-flung actions along the California coast, where sailors under Commodore Robert F. Stockton fought bravely on land to rescue a small, ill-equipped Army force

under General Stephen Kearny. General Zachary Taylor's campaign in northern Mexico was highly dependent upon a supply line across the Gulf of Mexico and up the Rio Grande, kept open by the Navy. In May 1846, the Navy landed 500 sailors and marines to reinforce Taylor at Fort Polk on the Brazos Santiago when "Old Rough and Ready" was fighting the first major battle of the war a few miles away at Palo Alto.²

Most significant, however, was the landing and siege of Veracruz, a joint operation which took place March 9–27, 1847. That landing, largely unknown to all but students of the Mexican War, was the first major amphibious operation in American history and the largest one conducted until the North African campaign in 1942.

The War's Background

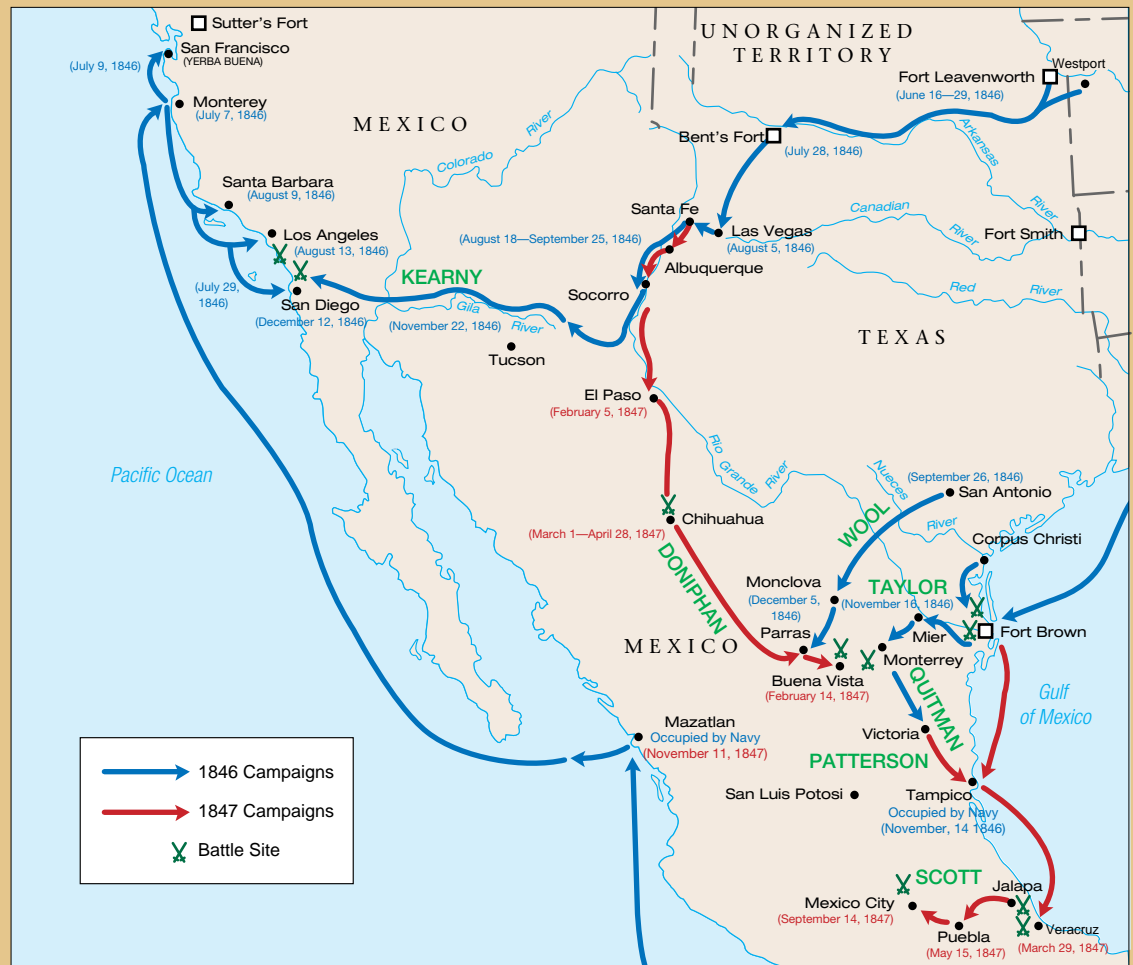
In a war message to Congress in April 1846, Polk charged Mexico with aggression against U.S. territory. He stressed the defensive nature of American military operations in the first weeks after Congress declared war. In keeping with that, naval forces established a blockade from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the Yucatan Peninsula and along the Pacific coast of Mexico. It soon became clear, however, that the President had much broader objectives. In answering the call of Manifest Destiny, he was committed to a strategy that would expand the Nation into New Mexico and California. To accomplish this, he decided on an aggressive campaign that took U.S. ground forces from the southwest borderlands deep into the Mexican interior.³

From May to September 1846, Zachary Taylor won a series of hard fought battles in Texas and Northern Mexico. Despite these Mexican defeats, it became apparent that the occupation of Mexico's northern provinces would not force that government to agree on a settlement acceptable in Washington. Polk held preliminary cabinet meetings in June 1846 about a new strategy calling for a second front along Mexico's east coast. In anticipation of this action, Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft directed the commander of the Home Squadron, Commodore David Conner, to furnish information on defenses at Mexican gulf ports, especially Tampico and Veracruz (including the latter's fortress, San Juan de Ulúa), and on routes from the coast inland to Mexico City.⁴

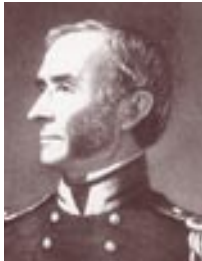
Conner considered the smaller port of Tampico useful as a staging base for an operation against Veracruz. The latter was the more important location because it gave access to the *Camino Nacional* (national road) to Mexico City. In his reports, Conner outlined a strategy for ground and naval forces to reduce Veracruz by investing it from the rear. Besides recommending Tampico as a staging base for U.S. forces en route to Veracruz,

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Mexican War: Theater of Operations, 1846–47



Sources: *The West Point Atlas of American Wars* (New York: Praeger, 1959); Adrian George Traas, *From the Golden Gate to Mexico City: The U.S. Army Topographical Engineers in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993).



Commodore David Conner.

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he recommended Antón Lizardo, an anchorage ten miles below Veracruz, as a safe roadstead for a rendezvous prior to an amphibious assault. Finally, Commodore Conner cautioned that a direct naval assault against San Juan de Ulúa would be an extremely high-risk operation.⁵

In August Polk first broached the idea of a major operation at Veracruz to the cabinet, and for the next three months, during numerous discussions with his staff, he discussed the notion of an amphibious landing. Though reports from the theater were usually a month old, the President demonstrated a zeal and tenacity regarding both strategic and operational issues and demanded that he be informed of practically every detail. Strangely, Polk did not include the Nation's top military officers in these sessions. It became clear that he had every intent of being his own chief of staff and would use cabinet members, especially

Secretary of War William Marcy and Secretary of the Navy Bancroft (who was replaced by John Mason in September 1846) as a kind of "operational plans" division. The War Department, which was larger than the Navy Department, had virtually no staff to support planning, and consisted of only nine clerks, two messengers, and a handyman. The President's decision to take matters of strategy into his own hands, despite a lack of military experience, was partially motivated by distrust of the senior Army commander, the general in chief Winfield Scott. Polk claimed that Scott's actions and attitude were "recklessly vindictive" toward his administration, and doubted him because he was an outspoken Whig. In fact, Polk's relations with senior officers reflected his

insecurity about military strategy, an uncertainty made worse by jealousy. He was equally suspicious and contemptuous of the other top officer, General Zachary Taylor, another Whig sympathizer.⁶

Polk continued his strategy sessions into Autumn 1846. When he decided on October 20 to have Taylor go on the defensive in northern Mexico, it appeared that he was moving cautiously toward some type of an operation along the gulf coast. His private statements and diary entries, however, indicated that he was uncertain about the course of the war and feared the political costs of enlarging it.

Veracruz and Its Castle

Although Scott was still out of favor with Polk and had not been invited to participate in the deliberations, Marcy kept the general in chief

Scott's strategy was based on Jominian principles of war

informed. Scott, sensing that a final decision on the expedition was near, maneuvered for command of the Veracruz operation.⁷ He prepared plans that outlined his views on seizing the port and on a subsequent march on Mexico City. In late October, he forwarded a written proposal to Marcy entitled "Veracruz and Its Castle." Two weeks later he revised this study to reflect an expanded campaign into the heartland of Mexico.⁸

Scott's strategy for the seizure of Veracruz and follow-on thrust into the interior was surely influenced by Conner's reports. It was also based on Jominian principles of war. Realizing that the war was controversial and that public opinion was dangerously divided, he understood that war policy would not be an unqualified extension of political will. Resources would be limited; the Nation would only partially mobilize to support a campaign. His strategy included blockades and

sieges, employed deception and diplomacy when possible, and substituted maneuver for superior numbers and combat. Following Jomini, Scott recognized the inherent dangers of an amphibious invasion of

a foreign land and the imperative to seize a fortified harbor through which to invade—or to retreat if necessary—and to secure a beachhead where a large force could be disembarked. His plan recognized the need to

introduce artillery early to support the landing. Scott called for an invasion early in 1847 since a delay beyond then would risk mounting the operation in an unhealthy season of the year along the coast where the dreaded *vómito negro* (yellow fever) could strike his troops.⁹

A Second Front

The President agonized over approval for the expedition. The conflict was at a stalemate. Taylor had won great victories on the northern battlefields, but strategically they had little meaning. Polk feared a public backlash if the war were greatly expanded. He began to speak of going on the defensive, even writing into a draft of his annual message to Congress a passage which called for a policy of "inactive occupation" of territory already conquered. A great frustration was beginning to set in among members of his administration and Congress. Daniel Webster remarked that "Mexico is an ugly enemy, she will not fight—and will not treat." Yet Polk knew that Veracruz meant a full-scale campaign into the heart of a foreign land, that it would transform the conflict into a war of conquest and subjugation, and that many Americans were opposed to their Army occupying the capital of another nation.¹⁰

At this point of indecision, the President came under the persuasion of his friend and fellow Democrat (and favorite military advisor), the influential Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Benton met with Polk almost daily in this period and they frequently discussed the war. Although initially against involvement, the senator was now a war hawk. Benton opposed Polk's inclination to revert to the defensive, contending that it would only "prolong the war and ruin the Democratic Party." He argued for an aggressive strategy that called for a bold strike against Veracruz followed by a "rapid crushing movement" against Mexico City. The President, at last convinced, announced his approval of the Veracruz expedition to the cabinet.¹¹

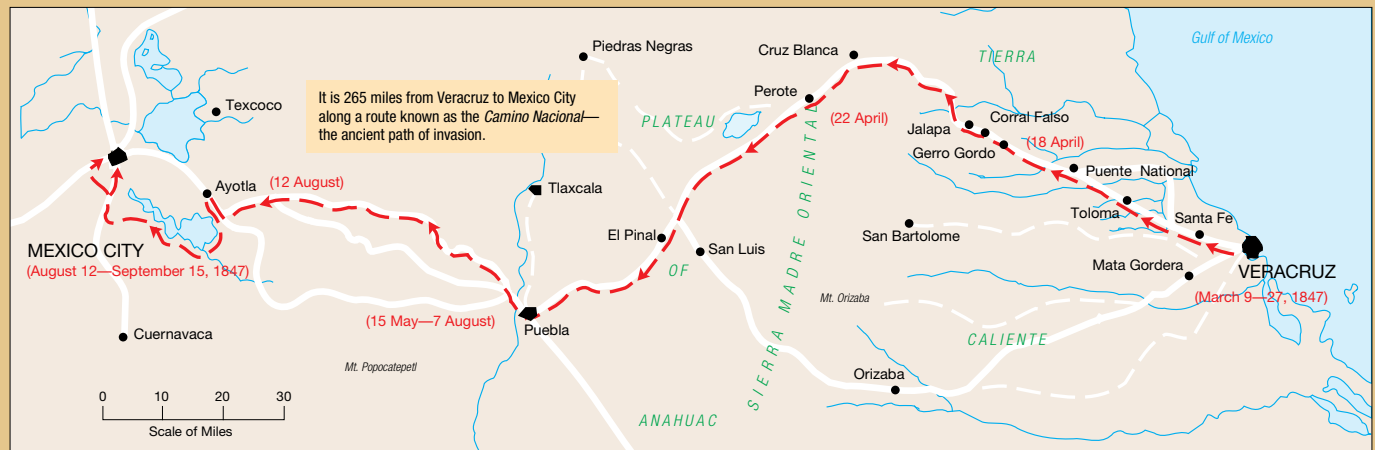
Polk now had to pick a commander for the new theater. Realizing the commanding general could become a national hero and thus a political challenge, Polk wanted a Democratic ally, while the two senior men in uniform, Taylor and Scott, were Whigs. He discussed the command issue with Benton who readily concurred with the partisan opinion that Taylor was "a brave officer but not a man of capacity enough for such a command."¹² When Polk raised Scott's name, the senator replied that he had no confidence in him, a view that must have pleased the President. Benton then suggested that the President ask Congress to create the grade of general of the Army, a rank above that of both Taylor and Scott, the



Naval bombardment of Veracruz (lithograph by N. Currier).

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After Veracruz: Scott's Six-Month March on Mexico City



Source: *The West Point Atlas of American Wars* (New York: Praeger, 1959).



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Secretary of the Navy
George Bancroft.

Army's general in chief. The officer holding this rank could then be given command of the new Army. The great Missouri senator, never accused of modesty, then suggested that he was willing to accept the command himself. Polk, revealing a tendency to place politics first—and showing his innocence of military affairs—enthusiastically backed the idea and immediately lobbied Congress for support. After briefly attempting a political coup (the House of Representatives favored the idea), Polk was convinced of its futility by his friends in the Senate. He then turned again to Scott, the logical choice and Marcy's recommendation. Secretary of State Buchanan, Secretary Mason, and the remainder of the cabinet—even Senator Benton—eventually fell in line to support the general in chief who was the author of the plan to open a second front that the administration had already agreed upon. Winfield Scott could now pursue his grand design.¹³

Scott and Joint Warfare

The mission was only generally defined by Scott's command authorities. Marcy indicated that Polk had ordered him to "repair to Mexico, to take command of the forces there assembled, and particularly to organize and to set afoot an expedition to operate on the gulf coast." He assured Scott of the full support of the administration and promised no interference from either himself or the President on operational questions. Some have argued that the mission was purposely broad to ensure that if "grief came to the expedition the blame would rest on Scott's Whig shoulders."¹⁴

Scott took full advantage of the broad mission statement. Before arriving in the gulf, he communicated with Conner, requesting details on staging areas, anchorages, defenses at Veracruz, Mexican troop strengths, potential landing beaches, and roads to the interior. Conner, echoing his earlier report to Bancroft, recommended that Scott use Tampico, 200 miles north of Veracruz, as an intermediate staging area for ground and naval units, and that Antón Lizardo serve as a final safe anchorage and rendezvous point prior to the assault. Much of Conner's information in this period was the basis of Scott's operational plan for the landing. Scott also wrote to Taylor at Monterrey, informing him that he would have to stay on the defensive and furnish most of his regulars for this expedition. Some troops in forward positions around Monterrey would go overland to Tampico; units still in Taylor's rear area on the border would rendezvous at the Brazos Santiago (referred to as "the Brazos"), north of the mouth of the Rio Grande on off-shore islands along the gulf coast. Drawing off Taylor's best troops embittered the old soldier, causing a permanent rift with Scott.¹⁵

Scott's demand for sea transport and naval support was both large and unique for that era. For the largest amphibious assault in American history, he requested 50 ships of 500 to 750 tons each to lift approximately 15,000 men and a large siege train to the area of operations.¹⁶ These transports would be sail as well as steam-powered and under Army command. Since amphibious operations of this type and scale were unprecedented, the landing craft did not exist. Scott wanted small assault boats to put his troops ashore and gave

the requirement to his resourceful logistician, Army quartermaster general Thomas S. Jesup. These surfboats were the first specially constructed for an American amphibious assault. Scott's specifications called for flat-bottomed, double-ended, broad-beamed rowboats; and 141 were ordered at \$795 each. They would carry a platoon of forty men plus a crew of eight sailors, with a naval officer in command. The contract was negotiated with a Philadelphia builder by Jesup's agent, Captain Robert F. Loper of the Army, but the boats were designed by a naval officer, Lieutenant George M. Totten.¹⁷

Scott's demand for naval support was unique for that era

When Scott departed Washington for the Brazos on November 26, 1846, he planned to have his entire force afloat in gulf waters by February 1 at the latest. In New York, he engaged the diplomat Francis Dimond to go to Cuba to recruit two intelligence agents to operate inside Mexico. Continuing from New York on the 30th, head winds and rough seas in the gulf delayed his arrival in New Orleans until December 19, where he dined with Henry Clay. The venerable old statesman and orator, who opposed an aggressive policy toward Mexico as a presidential candidate two years before, would lose a son, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay, Jr., at Buena Vista within two months. While in the Crescent City, Scott was also advised by shipmasters that Lobos Island, a sandy coral formation between Tampico and Veracruz, offered safe anchorage and a good rendezvous location. Due to limited space in the Tampico anchorage, Scott chose Lobos and sent a message from New Orleans advising all forces to rendezvous there before continuing to Antón Lizardo.

Scott then moved on to the Rio Grande, hoping to discuss the exact breakout of forces for the new campaign with Taylor. But Taylor was in no mood to converse with the general in chief and failed to appear, so Scott decided which units to take along. The troops were ordered to gather at the Brazos for movement to Lobos Island. Concerned about undercutting Taylor's command authority, Scott was careful to send him copies of all movement orders. He discovered that many of Taylor's units had not arrived at the Rio Grande, and that Jesup, whose headquarters had been moved to the Brazos, was having trouble getting the transports and accompanying trains (including surfboats) from the east coast. Scott became increasingly concerned that he would not meet the February 1 launch date for the invasion. In an

attempt to "summon an army," he remained at the Brazos during January 1847. While there, he communicated again with Conner, who confirmed that Lobos Island would be an appropriate rendezvous point. Restless with inactivity and agitated by the laborious process of gathering troops and supplies, Scott—now resigned that his target date would slip—left Brigadier William Worth to complete the embarkation at the Brazos and departed for Tampico in the middle of February.

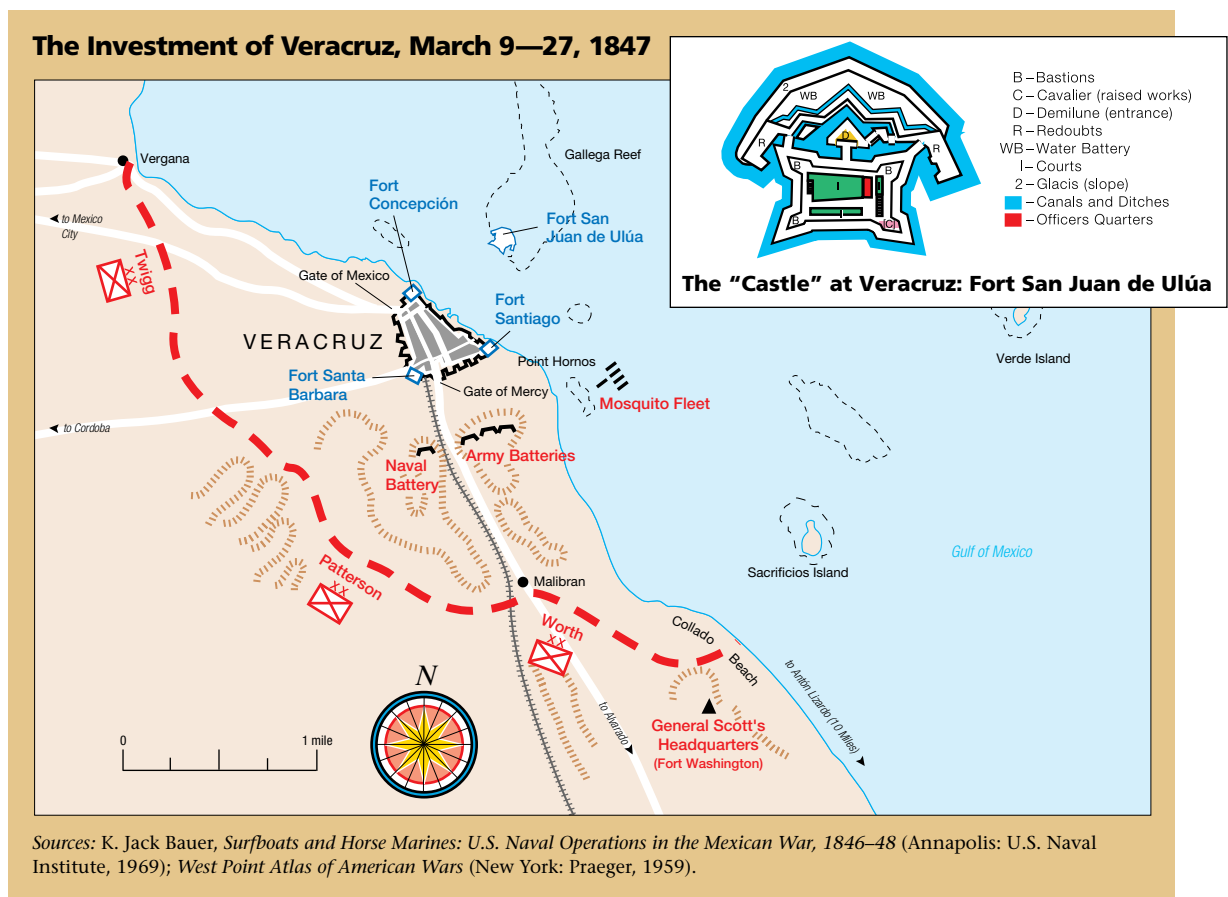
Scott found some 6,000 soldiers at Tampico on February 19 waiting for transportation to Veracruz. Reaching the port city was a triumph for Scott. He was greeted in grand style ashore by the strains of the Army band from Governor's Island. Many senior officers who had been fighting with Taylor were there to greet him. After conferring overnight, Scott steamed south and arrived at Lobos Island, now the main rendezvous for the Army, on February 21.

Scott spent a week at Lobos drilling available troops and waiting impatiently for the rest of his force. Good winds finally came, bringing most of the regiments under General Worth, along with a few units from Tampico and troops directly from home "coming down before the gale like race horses." The roadstead at Lobos Island became, in the words of one soldier, "a wilderness of spars and rigging." Although all his troops had not arrived, the restless Scott, fearing the approach of the yellow fever season, decided to go with the forces on hand. On March 3 the commanding general departed, his blue flag flying from the maintrunk of *USS Massachusetts*. Always a man of spectacle and drama, the imposing six-foot-five Scott stood bareheaded on the deck of his flagship. As it moved among the transports, he acknowledged the shouts from his men. Morale was high; troops cheered their general, and sailors sang:

*We are now bound for the shores of Mexico
And there Uncle Sam's soldiers we will land, hi, oh!*

The fleet stood away. Winfield Scott and his army were off to Veracruz.¹⁸

Driven by fair winds, the armada arrived March 5. Commodore Conner sent a ship under Captain John Aulick to an offshore island, Isla Verde, to meet the fleet and guide it through the shoals to Antón Lizardo. The next day—Sunday, March 6—Conner arranged for a reconnaissance of the landing site by Scott and his principal commanders and staff, who left at 0900 on the small steamer *Petrita*. Aboard were Scott's three division commanders and all the officers he called his "little cabinet." This group essentially acted as a general staff and was made up of Army officers. Among them were Lieutenant Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, the inspector general; Scott's son-in-law, Captain Henry Lee Scott (who



acted as staff coordinator); the chief engineer, Colonel Joseph Totten; and five engineers: Major John L. Smith, Captains Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston, First Lieutenant P.G.T. Beauregard, and Second Lieutenant Zebulon B. Tower. Conner showed Scott a potential landing site. Known as Collado Beach, it lay behind Sacrificios Island, two and a half miles below Veracruz. It was a slightly curving stretch of beach with a gentle slope. The site, just beyond the range of the guns of the city and fort, was an excellent choice.¹⁹ As

landing as an all-Army effort—with troops simply moving from Army transports to surfboats and assaulting the beach. But Conner argued that the roadstead between Collado Beach and Sacrificios Island was too limited to hold all the Army transports and that it would be more effective to move most of the assault force from Antón Lizardo in large Navy ships. Scott agreed. Army transports were put temporarily under the command of Conner who was given authority to organize loading on Salmedina Island—adjacent to Antón

the plan was simple compared to modern amphibious operations

Petrita turned in front of the fortress San Juan—at a distance of less than a mile—Mexican batteries opened fire and bracketed the ship. Ten rounds exploded beyond, short of, and over the command group, but none struck the little steamer, and it returned safely to Antón Lizardo.²⁰

Scott and Conner used Monday, March 7, to organize the forces in loading units. The plan was simple compared to modern amphibious operations. Scott had apparently first thought of the

Lizardo—and carry out ship-to-shore movement. Scott planned to hit the beach in three waves: Worth's division of regulars would go in first, with Major General Robert Patterson's volunteers following, and Brigadier General David Twigg's regulars landing last. On the evening of the 7th, Scott announced the landing would take place the next day.

On the 8th, the weather broke stormy. Scott, fearing a "norther," the dreaded gulf storm of the winter season, postponed the landing a day. On

the 9th, Scott later recalled, “the precise day when I had been thirty years a general officer—the sun dawned propitiously on the expedition.” Another officer present observed, “If we had the choice of weather, we could not have selected a more propitious day. The sun shot forth his brilliant rays in a cloudless sky. . . .” The first real D-Day in American history had arrived. At Salmedina, boat crews under Captain French Forrest launched surfboats from designated positions on the beach and used them to move the troops from Army transports to naval vessels. The largest ships, the frigates *USS Raritan* and *USS Potomac*, each loaded 2,500 men; the smaller ships, such as the sloops *Albany* and *St. Mary’s*, each loaded about 1,000 men; and other still smaller vessels loaded fewer men. Ten Navy sailing ships, four Navy steamers, and five Army steamers were used for the move from Salmedina to Sacrificios.²¹

Discarding signals which had been prepared for an all-Army operation, Scott and Conner worked out a set for supporting fires, loading surfboats, and assaulting the beach. The movement took most of the day. At 1530 hours, Scott hoisted red, yellow, and red-and-white flags from the mainmast of *USS Massachusetts*, a preparatory signal for Worth’s division to reload the surfboats. After some initial confusion, Worth pulled them abreast behind *Princeton*, anchored about 400 yards off shore. As *Potomac* moved behind Sacrificios its band struck up “Yankee Doodle,” “Hail Columbia,” and “The Star Spangled Banner.” At this time Mexican cavalry were spotted on hills behind the beach. Although the enemy disappeared when the schooner *Tampico* fired one volley in its direction, anxiety rose as the assault troops expected opposition on landing. At 1730 the troops cheered as Scott fired a gun and raised a fourth flag to his mast. It signalled the first wave: assault the shore! It was a moment of great tension and excitement since no one knew what lay beyond the beach. In minutes a gig sped out from the left side of the line of boats and an officer jumped waist-high into the surf, general’s gold braid reflecting the bright sun. The gallant William Worth was leading the 6th Infantry Regiment ashore.²²

To Worth’s surprise, his division landed essentially unopposed—there was only sporadic fire from San Juan de Ulúa—and the remaining two assault waves came ashore by 2200 hours. By midnight Conner had landed 10,000 men without one life lost. Over the next few days, under intermittent harassing fire from Mexican batteries and occasional fire from cavalry patrols behind the sandhills, Scott established his headquarters

ashore (naming the encampment Fort Washington) and began subduing the city and fort. This required a large supply build-up on Collado Beach and troop deployments over difficult terrain to invest Veracruz, efforts delayed by “northers” over the next two weeks. Unloading supplies, however, continued at Collado. To distract the Mexicans during the troop movement, Conner sent Commander Josiah Tattnall with *Spitfire* close in to the shore to fire on San Juan de Ulúa on March 10. The bombardment did little damage but allowed Patterson to pass through Worth’s troops and position his division to the west. Within two days, Scott had most of his 12,000-man army—including a Marine company in the assault phase, soon augmented by a 400-man battalion—on Mexican soil.

The formation consisted of Worth’s division deployed from Collado Beach southeast of the city, west and northwest to a position at about seven o’clock. Patterson’s volunteers occupied roughly the center of the half moon encirclement on the west. Twigg’s regulars, passing through Patterson’s division, completed the investment on March 13 when they closed on the village of Vergana at the entrance to the national road on the coast north of Veracruz. The line of investment ran about seven miles from shore to shore.

From reconnaissance on horse the first day, Scott realized that his plan to reduce the city through siege would take patience. Conner’s earlier reports had convinced him that Veracruz and San Juan were formidable and strongly defended. He understood there were 3,000 well-supplied troops (including 1,000 militia) in the city of 15,000. The city was encircled by a 15-foot curtain wall with redans and nine forts. The defenders set thick clusters of prickly pear in front of the wall and dug a line of *trous de loup*, conical holes with sharpened stakes to impale anyone who stepped on them. On the seaward side loomed the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, solidly constructed on the submerged Gallega Reef. It was, and remains today, an awesome structure. Mounted along and within its walls were over 100 cannons and 1,000 men. Scott noted that in March 1847 the fort “had the capacity to sink the entire American Navy.”²³

During the first week on shore some of Scott’s officers questioned his siege strategy and wanted to take Veracruz by infantry assault. The general called a meeting in his tent and argued that an assault would be “an immense slaughter to both sides, including noncombatants—Mexican men, women, and children.” Besides, he claimed, such an assault could mean the loss of 2,000 to 3,000 of “our best men . . . and I have received but half the numbers promised me.” How, Scott contended, “could we hope to penetrate the



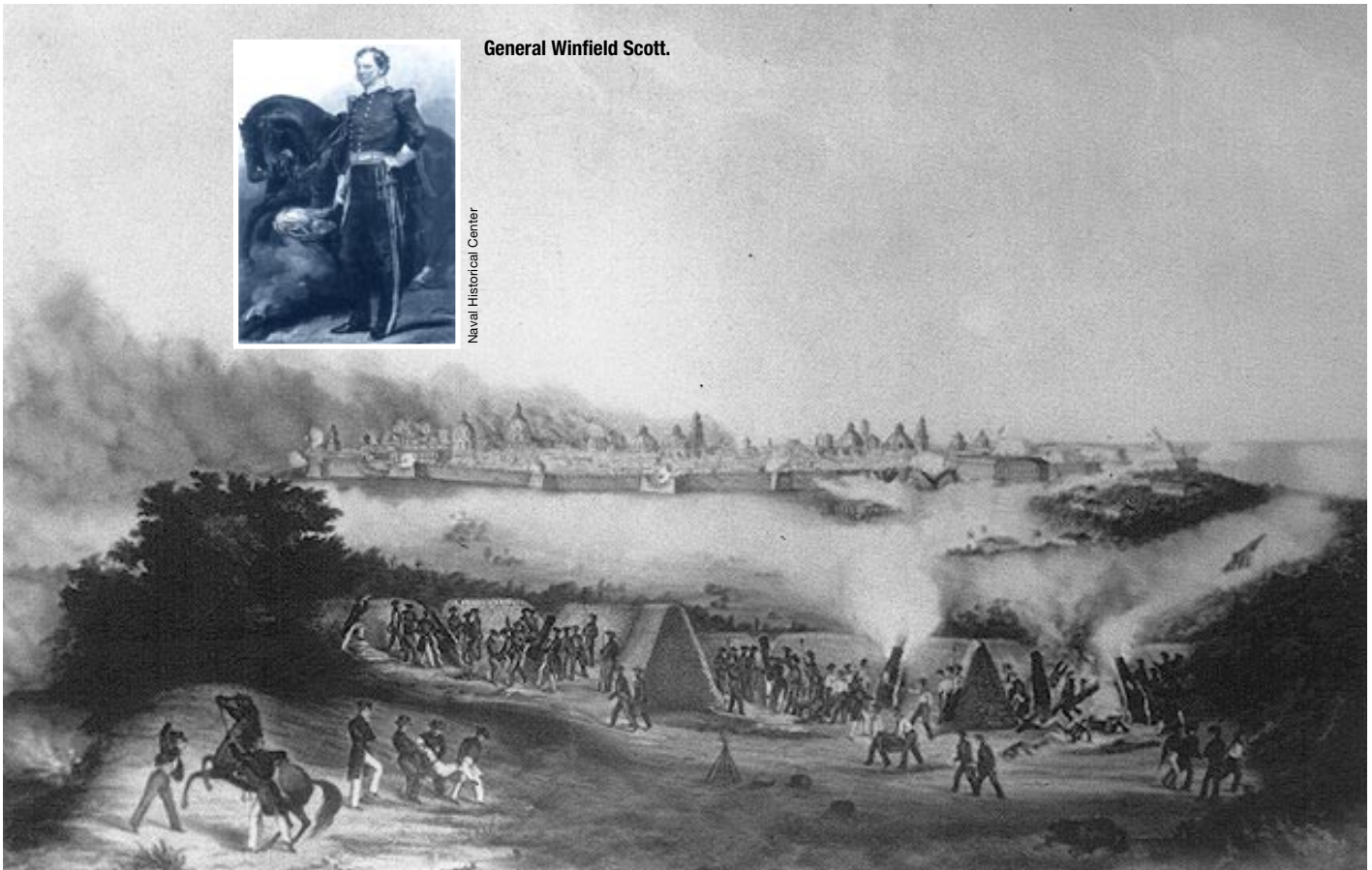
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Commodore Matthew C. Perry (portrait by John Beaufain Irving, Jr.).



General Winfield Scott.

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Perry's heavy guns,
March 24 and 25
(painting by Lieutenant
Henry A. Walke, USN,
from drawing on stone
by Pfau).

interior?" He admitted to his officers that the Nation would hardly acknowledge a victory "unaccompanied by a long butcher's bill" (referring to praise Taylor's bloody victories had earned in the States), but he would forego "loud applause and aves vehement," and "take the city with the least possible loss of life." Scott's arguments carried the

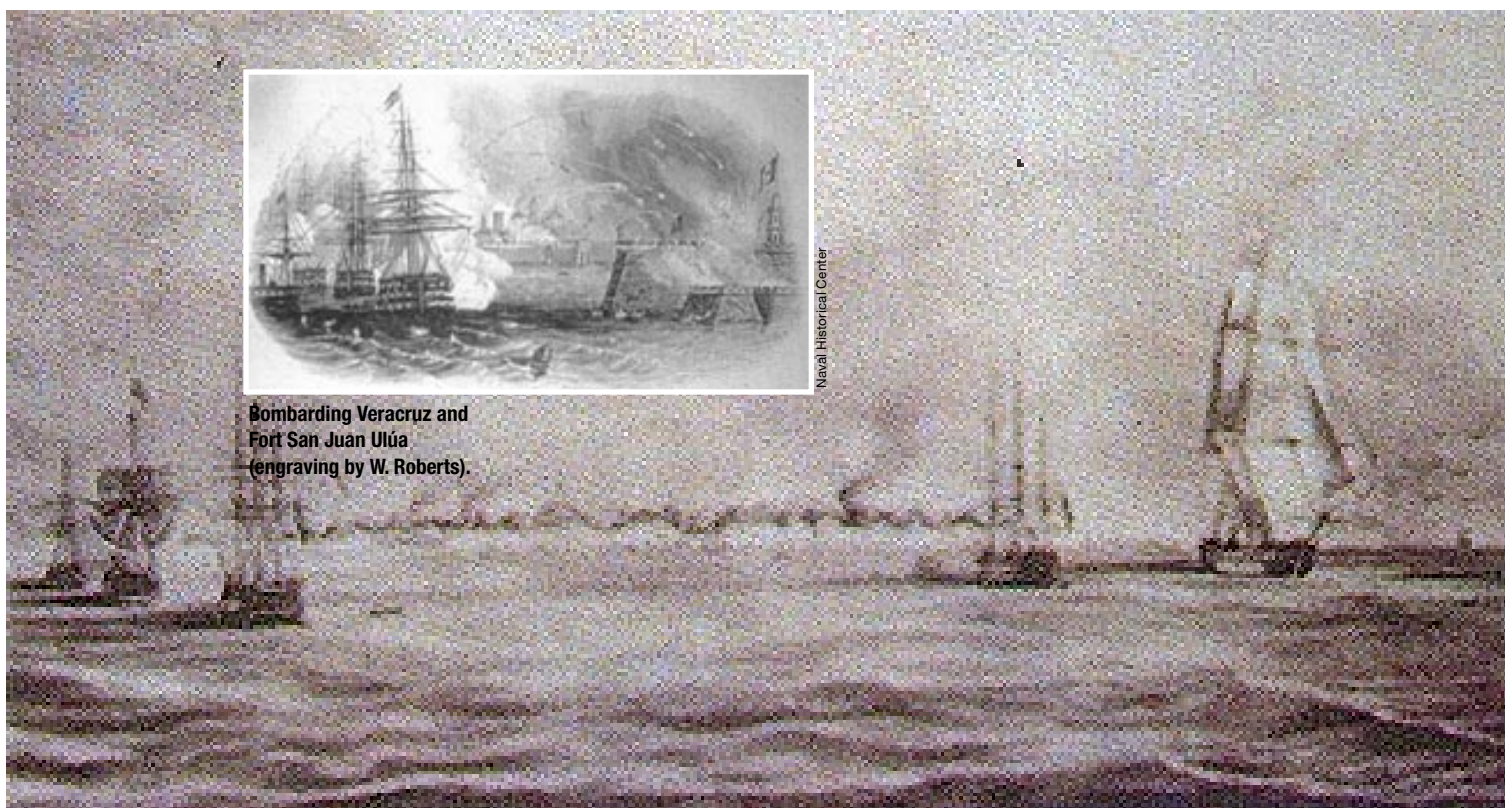
one critical aspect was constructing positions for siege guns

day—the siege continued with renewed support from his commanders and staff.²⁴

One critical aspect of the operation was constructing battery positions for siege guns, a task Scott gave to Totten. "Northers" that blew after landing delayed construction as well as unloading the mortars and heavy guns into position. Totten used both regular and topographical engineers as supervisors and infantrymen for the spade work.²⁵ Though discouraged at receiving only a small portion of the requested artillery, Scott nonetheless wrote to Marcy and expressed appreciation for the help of the Navy: "Commodore Conner's squadron is indefatigable in assisting us."²⁶

Despite storms and problems with the logistical build-up on the beach, the operation to choke off Veracruz continued apace. The Army tightened its line of investment, all the roads were secured, and the water supply for the city and fort was cut. American troops were under constant fire, and while work on battery positions was accomplished mostly at night, there were casualties around construction sites. Casualties also resulted from skirmishes with Mexican irregulars who were patrolling the perimeter. Scott sent a letter to the Spanish consul in Veracruz on the 13th with an offer of safe passage out of the city for foreign consuls, adding ominously that "a bombardment or cannonade, or assault, or all" of these possibilities could occur soon. He later recalled that the diplomats "sullenly neglected" his proposition.

Lacking sufficient heavy guns on shore, Scott feared his coming bombardment would not be effective on Veracruz's fortifications. Conner offered to bring naval guns ashore from the fleet and emplace them in land batteries under construction. The commanding general delayed accepting the offer but did inform Conner on the



Bombarding Veracruz and Fort San Juan Ulúa
(engraving by W. Roberts).

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Rendezvous at Island of Lobos on February 9, 1847 (drawing by Lieutenant Charles Crillon Burton, USN).

19th that Army batteries—prepared in Worth’s sector less than a mile south of the city—were almost ready and would open fire the next day. He requested that Conner join in bombarding Veracruz with his ships offshore. Scott delayed the bombardment order, however, and on the 21st decided to accept the earlier offer of naval guns. When Conner came ashore Scott was surprised to see him accompanied by Commodore Matthew C. Perry, who had arrived the previous day to take command of the Home Squadron. Even though the change of command was clearly inopportune, Scott apparently took it in stride and reiterated that he wanted the naval guns.²⁷

Scott asked Perry to send six guns ashore and said Army artillerymen would operate them. Perry balked, then calmly replied, “Certainly, General, but I must fight them.” While Scott wanted the Army to get credit for manning the guns that he thought would reduce the city, he recognized the Navy’s prerogative and agreed. Perry arranged for double naval crews to man the guns, and several hundred Army troops helped drag them across the dunes. Robert E. Lee, almost killed the previous night by an American attempting to desert, was in charge of preparing the

emplacement. Lee immediately had a problem with some sailors. Although eager for combat ashore, they could not see the need for laboriously reinforcing the naval position when they were a mile from the fort. Later, when the firing began, they were grateful for the sturdy fortifications. On the 22nd, before the naval battery was ready, Scott decided to begin the bombardment with the three Army batteries. He issued a demand for surrender; when the Mexicans refused, firing began at 1600 hours.

The batteries that opened fire on March 22 did little damage to the fortification but wrecked havoc on civilian structures in the city. More effective fire came from the naval guns offshore. At 1800 hours, Perry ordered the fleet to join in the bombardment. Once again he sent Tattnall of the small steamer *Spitfire* in close to fire on the fort. This time Tattnall took another steamer with him, *Vixen*, and five schooners, *Falcon*, *Reefer*, *Petrel*, *Bonita*, and *Tampico*). Tattnall moved in and dropped anchor in the lee of Point Hornos, a promontory south of the city less than a mile from San Juan de Ulúa. He opened up with every gun in his flotilla of light ships, remaining in position for eighty minutes under heavy counterfire. The guns from *Spitfire* were especially accurate, some rounds reaching Veracruz’s central plaza. Although Tattnall had to withdraw after

expending his ammunition, the brave exploit of his gunboats boosted morale among soldiers and sailors alike.

On the 23rd, Scott opened fire with a fourth Army battery after three 24-pounders arrived at Collado Beach, and Perry brought in the huge ship-of-the-line *USS Ohio*, to train its heavy guns to bear on San Juan de Ulúa. And that morning Perry again ordered Tattnall to take his guns back in under Mexican fire to engage the fort. The two

together Army and Navy batteries had a devastating impact

men had a strained relationship—Tattnall had never cared for Perry and did not mind expressing his opinion. The gallant commander now had another chance to excel, however, and immediately asked the commodore exactly where he should position his gunboats. Perry replied, “Where you can do the most execution, sir!” Tattnall went in closer, opened up his guns, and withstood a withering response from San Juan. Finally Perry called him back. Tattnall did not see the signal (or ignored it) and stayed on station for another hour. At last Perry sent out Captain Isaac Mayo to order the reckless Tattnall to retire, and he reluctantly did so to cheers from soldiers on the beach, sailors of the Home Squadron, and neutral British, French, and Spanish ships observing the action. Though Tattnall’s conduct bordered on insubordination, Perry felt compelled to ask his commanders to “express to the crews his sense of their gallantry.”²⁸

Lee had the naval battery—which some maps denote as “battery no. 5”—ready by the 24th. The six guns Perry furnished, according to one historian, were the heaviest “ever before mounted in siege.” Three were long thirty-two pounders which fired 32-pound solid shot. The others were *Paixhans*, a French 8-inch gun which delivered accurate horizontal fire with a 68-pound exploding shell. Lee transferred the battery to Captain John Aulick of the Navy and it went into action on the morning of the 24th. The joint artillery bombarded Veracruz until the naval battery expended its ammunition at 1500 hours. Army fire continued. Since the naval battery had attracted much of the counterfire from the Mexican guns, it had to be repaired and supplied over night. Before first light on the 25th, Perry sent Mayo to relieve Aulick with a new crew and resume firing.²⁹

Together, the Army and Navy batteries had a devastating impact on the city and fort. Large gashes appeared in the city’s walls (although not the fort’s), and at midafternoon of the 25th Mayo observed many Mexican gunners leaving their positions. He rode back to tell Scott he thought the

Mexicans had quit the fight. This was not quite true, because in a few minutes they briefly opened fire again. But the battle was over. Mexican fire ceased, and foreign consuls sent out word that they now desired safe passage and also requested that the women and children be allowed to leave. Scott quickly refused, reminding them that they had had their chance and stating that he would now treat only with General Morales. His terms were complete surrender. Morales feigned sickness (apparently to save face) and appointed General Juan Landero to negotiate a surrender with Scott’s representatives. The negotiations took most of a day, and terms were reached late on March 26. On the morning of the 28th, the Mexican garrisons of Veracruz city and San Juan de Ulúa marched out to military honors and stacked their arms in front of the assembled Americans.

The capitulation marked the end of a remarkable event in the annals of American military history. While Veracruz represented the largest U.S. amphibious operation prior to World War II, it was completed with relatively few casualties on either side. This was due partly to the baffling Mexican decision not to resist the assault on the beach, where even modest opposition could have brought high casualties, and partly due to Scott’s strategy of siege warfare vice infantry assault. He would later comment that it was an “economy of life, by means of headwork.” Mexican casualties vary by accounts from 200 to 1,000 killed, but most claims are in the lower range. Scott lost 13 killed in action and 55 wounded. The landing of over 10,000 troops ashore in wooden boats in the span of five hours without any losses was remarkable in itself. The operation surely suffered in the planning phase, adversely affected by Polk’s indecision and partisan politics. Even the selection of a commander was done in an unprofessional, roundabout manner. But in the event the best man got the job. He came up with a solid plan, much of it joint in nature. Scott consulted Conner’s reports—both the intelligence and recommendations on the landing, siege, and campaign to the interior—throughout his strategic and operational planning for Veracruz. The landing and siege operations were clearly joint, from the positioning of the Army and Navy ships, to the reconnaissance, to the landing, and finally to the Army-Navy bombardment itself.

Scott was not reluctant to give credit to the Navy. On March 30, he issued General Order Number 80: “Thanks higher than those of the



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Army leaving the Gulf Squadron with Veracruz in background (drawing by J. M. Ladd; lithograph by N. Currier).

general in chief have also been earned by the entire Home Squadron, under the successive orders of Commodores Conner and Perry, for prompt, cheerful, and able assistance from the arrival of the Army off this coast.”

Years after the war, Scott praised the Navy and interservice cooperation. His views were reinforced by President Polk and Secretary Mason, who remarked in his report to Congress that the “entire operation, from the landing of the troops to the surrender brought the Army and Navy into the closest contact.” The “courage and skill displayed,” the Navy Secretary stated, “were not more honorable to both than the perfect harmony which prevailed.”³⁰

Veracruz was the Normandy of the 19th century. The landing opened the way for great victories from Cerro Gordo to Mexico City, battles that “conquered a peace” and brought vast new territory to the Nation, forever changing the relationship between the United States of America and the Republic of Mexico. It was also a watershed campaign in the development of jointness. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Message of the President to Congress, December 5, 1848, *Senate Executive Documents*, House (vol. 537), 30th Cong., 2^d sess., 1847–48, pp. 5–6.

² Two studies of Navy and Marine Corps efforts in the Mexican War are K. Jack Bauer’s excellent *Surfboats and Horse Marines: U.S. Naval Operations in the Mexican War, 1846–48* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1969), and Gabrielle M. Neufeld Santelli, *Marines in the Mexican War* (Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1991).

³ Message of the President, May 11, 1846, in *Senate Document 337*, 29th Cong., 1st sess., 1845–46. Early debates over war policy are found in James Knox Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency*, edited by Milo Milton Quaipe, 4 vols. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1910), vol. 1, April to June 1846.

⁴ Polk, *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 16; Marcy to Polk, June 13, 1846, *Senate Document 392*: 29th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 18.

⁵ Conner’s reports are in Bauer, *Surfboats and Horse Marines*, pp. 9, 15–43.

⁶ For Polk’s attitude toward Scott, see *Diary*, vol. 1: pp. 407–18, and Ivor Debenham Spencer, *The Victor and the Spoils: A Life of William L. Marcy* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1959), p. 141. His opinion of Taylor grew increasingly hostile as the general’s national popularity grew after the Battle of Monterrey in September 1846. By November, Polk was beside himself with distrust of the new national hero. On the 14th, he recorded that Taylor was “unfit for command” of the expedition and was a “bitter political partisan.” On the 22nd, he noted that Taylor “is a narrow-minded, bigoted partisan, without resources and wholly unqualified for the command he holds . . . anyone would do better than Taylor.” By January 1847 Polk was lambasting Taylor as “wholly incompetent.” See Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), pp. 92, 255, 257; Polk, *Diary*, vol. 2: pp. 236, 250, 307. For an excellent account of relations among the major political and military figures of the Mexican War, see John S.D. Eisenhower’s “Polk and His Generals,” in *Essays on the Mexican War*, edited by Douglas W. Richmond (Arlington: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 34–35.

⁷ Polk had earlier offered Scott command of all theater forces but had withdrawn the offer when Scott wrote a letter critical of the administration and Polk’s leadership. After May 1846 their relationship disintegrated into mutual distrust. See Polk, *Diary*, vol. 1, pp. 396–421, especially the entry for October 22, 1846.

⁸ The first paper is in found U.S. Congress, House, *Executive Document 60*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., pp. 1268–70; the second paper is at pp. 1270–74.

⁹ On Scott as a disciple of Jomini, see James W. Pohl’s “The Influence of Antoine Henri de Jomini on Winfield Scott’s Campaign in the Mexican War,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 4 (Winter, 1973–74), pp. 85–110. A recent discussion of Scott as a strategist is found in James R. Arnold, *Presidents Under Fire: Commanders in Chief in Victory and Defeat* (New York: Orion Books, 1994), pp. 113, 121. Scott’s principal biographer, Charles Winslow Elliot, discusses his strategic thinking and the Veracruz plan in *Winfield Scott: The Soldier and the Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), pp. 90, 436–37, as does T. Harry Williams in *The History of American Wars from 1745 to 1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

¹⁰ Fletcher Webster, *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols. (Boston: National Edition, 1903), vol. 16, p. 465.

¹¹ Bauer, *Surfboats and Horse Marines*, p. 64; Charles L. Dufour, *The Mexican War* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1968), p. 159; Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, p. 437; Polk, *Diary*, vol. 2, pp. 233–38; Otis A. Singletary, *The Mexican War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 111.

¹² Polk, *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 227.

¹³ Arnold, *Presidents Under Fire*, pp. 99, 100; Polk, *Diary*, vol. 2, pp. 244–46; Singletary, *The Mexican War*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Mission statement is in Merrill L. Bartlett, *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 75; quote from *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 237.

¹⁵ Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, p. 444; James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 166; Singletary, *The Mexican War*, pp. 72–73. Polk had earlier ordered Taylor through Marcy to halt his advance at Monterrey and go on the defensive; Scott's order reinforced this directive. But Taylor ignored it, even after his forces were drawn off by Scott, and he advanced south of Saltillo where he engaged the much larger army of Santa Anna at Buena Vista. That famous victory in February 1847 greatly enhanced his stature as a war hero and carried him to the White House in the following year.

¹⁶ Scott's force estimates are in studies prepared for Marcy. See *House Executive Document 60*, pp. 1268–74.

¹⁷ Surfboat specifications are found in William G. Temple, "Memoir of the Landing of the United States Troops at Veracruz in 1847," addendum to Philip Syng Physick Conner, *The Home Squadron Under Commodore Conner in the War with Mexico, Being a Synopsis of Its Services, 1846–1847* (n.p., 1896), pp. 60–62.

¹⁸ Emma Jerome Blackwood, editor, *To Mexico with Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to His Wife* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), pp. 108–09; Du-four, *The Mexican War*, p. 201; Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, p. 451; Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), vol. 1, pp. 220–23.

¹⁹ Retracing Scott's campaign in 1993, the authors visited Veracruz and San Juan de Ulúa and inspected the beach from Antón Lizardo to the city. Part of the wall still can be found and the massive fort (now connected to the mainland) is quite intact and a tourist attraction. The beach is largely unchanged and the visitor will come to agree with most commentators on the Mexican War that the site chosen by Scott and Conner for the amphibious landing was superb.

²⁰ Scott does not mention arriving at Antón Lizardo or the *Petrita* incident in his memoirs. Events on March 5 and 6 are in the following participant accounts: Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Fifty Years in Camp and Field* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), p. 237; George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Major-General United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), vol. 1, p. 187; and William Starr Myers, editor, *The Mexican War Diary of George B. McClellan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917), p. 52. Also see Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, p. 455; Freeman, *R.E. Lee*, vol. 1, pp. 223, 226.

²¹ Samuel Elliot Morison, "Old Bruin": *Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1794–1858* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 210, and Winfield Scott, *Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1864), vol. 2, p. 419.

²² Participant accounts of the landing are in Blackwood, *To Mexico with Scott*, pp. 113–14; Myers, *Diary of George B. McClellan*, pp. 53–54, and Richard F. Pourade, *The Sign of the Eagle* (San Diego: Union-Tribune Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 71–74 (the latter being letters of Lieutenant John James Peck).

²³ A detailed description is contained in a pamphlet by P.S.P. Conner, *The Castle of San Juan de Ullóa and the Topsy Turvists* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1897). Also see Freeman, *R.E. Lee*, vol. 1, p. 227; McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, p. 168; Scott, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 422.

²⁴ Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, pp. 458–59; Scott, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, pp. 425–26.

²⁵ Major John Smith, Captain R.E. Lee, and Lieutenants P.G.T. Beauregard and George McClellan were with Totten as regular engineers (Corps of Engineers). Among those at Veracruz in the Corps of Topographical Engineers were Major William Turnbull; Scott's chief "topog," Captain Joseph E. Johnston; and Lieutenant George G. Meade. See Adrian George Traas, *From the Golden Gate to Mexico City: The U.S. Army Topographical Engineers in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), pp. 5, 6, 182–84. Also see Gustavus W. Smith, "Company A Engineers in Mexico, 1846–1847," *The Military Engineer*, vol. 56, no. 373 (September–October 1964), pp. 336–40.

²⁶ Bauer, *Surfboats and Horse Marines*, pp. 86–87; Morison, "Old Bruin," p. 211; John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846–1848* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 261–62.

²⁷ Scott, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 427; Smith, *The War With Mexico*, vol. 2, p. 27.

²⁸ Morison, "Old Bruin," p. 218.

²⁹ Eisenhower, *So Far From God*, p. 263; Don E. Houston, "The Superiority of American Artillery," in Odie B. Faulk and Joseph A. Stout, Jr., editors, *The Mexican War: Changing Interpretations* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1973), p. 106; Elliot, *Winfield Scott*, pp. 458–59.

³⁰ Scott, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 429; U.S. Congress, "Report of the Secretary of the Navy," December 6, 1847. *Senate Document 1*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 1847–48, pp. 945–58.