

THE MEXICAN ARMY AT PALO ALTO AND RESACA DE LA PALMA:
A LEVELS OF WAR ANALYSIS

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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ABSTRACT

THE MEXICAN ARMY ACROSS THE LEVELS OF WARFARE DURING THE OPENING BATTLES OF THE MEXICAN WAR, by Major Manuel Ledezma Vera, 93 pages.

The Mexican War drastically altered the borders of the United States (U.S) and México. American historians have largely attributed the stunning defeat of the Mexican Army to the tactical and technological superiority of U.S. forces, but this opinion discounts the significant contribution that Mexican leadership made to México's territorial losses with their mistakes and faulty decision making. Despite the advantages in manpower and familiar terrain, Mexican forces failed to win any major engagements. This study analyzes Mexican efforts across the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare and whether Mexican Army leaders were able to successfully execute complementary efforts across those levels during the opening battles of the Mexican War. This assessment utilizes English and Spanish language sources with the aim of providing a balanced analysis of Mexican actions and operational outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Few events have impacted two warring nations like the dynamic and sudden conflict of the Mexican War. The loss of half of the national territory for México and the addition of more than half a million square miles of territory for the United States following the conclusion of war from 1846 to 1848 significantly altered the face of the still-developing continent. For México, the war was a dramatic setback for a country that, only two decades before, won its independence. This significant loss of territory is something that continues to shape Mexican identity to this day. So, the question to ask is, how did this happen?

Most Mexican historiography on this subject examines the social aspect, political causes and impacts that ultimately led to the outcome of the war. What these sources do not provide is any meaningful military review of the campaigns of the war from the perspective of the Mexican Army. While there is analysis of the causes, there is no specific analysis of the individual actions on the battlefield that led to the outcome. Military analysis from the Mexican perspective is not well represented in existing historiography. México barely had time to process the losses of the war with the United States when it suddenly found itself fighting a bloody civil war between liberals and conservatives and then repelling another invasion from an aggressive French empire. Douglas Murphy, in his study *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, details that there were few Mexican authors who included reviews of military engagements. But for those that did, “the discussion of actual battles was usually perfunctory, consisting of little more than

excerpts of previous testimonies and histories.”¹ This study will bridge that gap and provide meaningful analysis of the actions that the Mexican Army took on the battlefield.

Decisions taken by Mexican leadership at all levels will be analyzed to show that the Mexican Army failed in conducting complementary efforts at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war in the opening battles from May 8 to May 9, 1846. This study will focus on the Mexican Army’s attempts to dislodge the U.S. Army from the banks of the Rio Grande during the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. Military decisions should serve the mission and objectives that are outlined at all levels. War is not just a single action, but also a sequence of actions that need to be coordinated in concert with each other to achieve objectives. Efforts at the strategic level inform and set the conditions at the operational level, which in turn sets the conditions for tactical success. Likewise, actions at the tactical level should support objectives at the operational level, which support the objectives outlined at the strategic level. Understanding this process is important. The opening battles of the Mexican War provide unique opportunities to analyze this process in both success and failure.

The impact of the opening battles of the Mexican War is undeniable. It can be argued that by the time the Mexican Army retreated from Matamoros that the fate of the northern territories was sealed. México no longer had access to or controlled the territory north of the Rio Grande. With such a devastating impact to the territorial integrity of the Mexican Republic, it is important to analyze the decisions leading up to each engagement and actions of commanders in the battles because they had such a significant impact on

¹ Douglas A. Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande: The First Campaigns of the US-Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 4.

the political, social, and economic environment of both México and the United States.

The result has had a tremendous impact on the Mexican identity and the introduction of new territories introduced new friction into the American political arena.

Analysis of the military engagements will be conducted with a focus on the levels of warfare. Conducting an analysis of the application of each level will provide a standardized approach to analyzing the opening battles of the war and the success of Mexican commanders in executing them. According to U.S. military joint doctrine, the application of the levels of warfare “helps commanders visualize a logical arrangement of operations, allocate resources, and assign tasks to appropriate commands.”² Although the concept of these levels of warfare may not have existed during the war, it is expected that commanders on both sides still applied similar concepts when planning and executing operations. This analysis will provide the opportunity to examine the actions that the Mexican Army took in defense of its territory.

Each battle will be analyzed using the levels of warfare. The strategic level of warfare develops ideas of the ways to employ instruments of national power, in this case the military instrument, in a synchronized and integrated fashion to accomplish national objectives.³ Leaders develop strategy and guidance to allocate resources to meet objectives. In identifying strategy, leaders facilitate planning for how objectives can be accomplished. The operational level of warfare is the link between the tactical

² Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2017), I-12.

³ Ibid.

employment of forces and achieving strategic objectives.⁴ Commanders use the operational level of warfare to determine how, when, where, and for what purpose military forces will be employed, to influence the enemy and to achieve operational and strategic objectives. The final part of the analysis will determine the success or failure of Mexican actions in the tactical level of warfare. According to U.S. Army doctrine, the tactical level is where “battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units.”⁵ Analysis in this level will determine how the Mexican Army arranged, moved, and maneuvered its combat elements in relation to those of Zachary Taylor’s army.

It is easy to draw a preliminary conclusion into whether México failed or succeeded in executing complementary efforts across the levels of warfare. México decisively lost the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de Palma. In each of the battles, the Mexican Army had the advantage of a numerically superior force. The Mexican Army fought from highly defensible positions in fields that were chosen by Mexican leadership. México also enjoyed the advantage of fighting on its own terrain, with the invading army utilizing extended supply lines and lines of communication. Despite all of this, the Mexican Army still experienced defeat.

The conclusion is that México was not able to execute complimentary efforts across the three levels of warfare. This was evident in two ways. First, although strategic

⁴ JCS, JP 3-0, I-13.

⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2019), 1-1.

goals were identified, decisions at the strategic and operational level did not set the optimal conditions for success at the tactical level. For example, Mariano Paredes' march to México City with his army of 8,000 to take over the Mexican presidency at the beginning of the war deprived the garrison at Matamoros the needed reinforcements to overwhelm American forces in the opening battles of the war on the Rio Grande.⁶ Second, the failure of Mexican leadership to produce tactical successes prevented the accomplishment of operational and strategic goals. One example of this failure was General Arista's forces inability to use cavalry during the Battle of Palo Alto to flank and maneuver against the American lines. Thick, marshy terrain prevented the cavalry from effectively maneuvering against American forces.⁷ Even though Arista chose the field, it was clear that a reconnaissance of the adjacent terrain was not conducted by him or his subordinate commanders. This failure resulted in tactical failure and the inability to accomplish operational objectives.

Leading works on the subject like K. Jack Bauer's *The Mexican War 1846-1848*, and Peter Guardino's *The Dead March* provide extensive narratives of the campaign to help build an understanding of the events. William Depalo's *The Mexican National Army 1822-1852* provides a detailed study of the Mexican Army during its first three decades that includes the structure of the army and the social factors that guided actions during the war. These works provide foundational narratives that inform this study and provide

⁶ Miguel Angel Gonzalez-Quiroga and Cesar Morado Macias, *Nuevo León Ocupado: Aspectos de la Guerra México-Estados Unidos* (Monterrey, Nuevo León: Fondo Editorial Nuevo León, 2006), 7.

⁷ Peter Guardino, *The Dead March: A History of the Mexican-American War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 80.

the information needed to analyze the actions at each level of warfare. A variety of Spanish language sources also provide an opposing and unique perspective of the war. Of note are Ramon Alcazar's *Apuntes Para la Historia de la Guerra Entre Mexico y los Estados Unidos* (Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States) and *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte* (Campaign against the Americans from the North). Alcazar's study provides a unique perspective from several statesmen and officers who attempt to make sense of the war and the second work provides the narrative of an unknown Mexican infantry officer during the two battles in question. These two works specifically inform this study into the battles and provide a more holistic view. To add to this, there are a variety of archival sources to include personal correspondence and battlefield dispatches from Mexican and American leadership. In addition to this there are several journals and letters from U.S. soldiers that provide important details of the conditions on the battlefield. These will assist in developing an understanding of actions at various levels of warfare throughout the campaign.

Although the subject in question occurred almost two centuries ago, it is the hope of this work that in highlighting the successes and failures of Mexican leadership that parallels can be drawn to the world today. With the benefit of hindsight, this study can provide examples and insight into how to conduct warfare. This work may follow a fairly beaten path, but it may offer a new perspective into one of its least visited areas.

CHAPTER 1

CAUSES OF THE WAR AND THE STRATEGIC SETTING

Central to analyzing México's conduct in the war and the success of its efforts in employing all three levels of warfare is an understanding of the causes of the war. The question of Texas is key to explaining why the war happened. The Republic of Texas came into existence in 1836 after a short war of independence with México. Texas remained independent for almost a decade, a decade in which México stubbornly refused to acknowledge the republic's independence. A strained relation with the United States became even worse when the prospect of Texas annexation became a possibility.⁸ Texas officially applied for admission into the Union in 1844, prompting an immediate rebuke from México and a declaration that annexation was not only a violation of Mexican rights, but a declaration of war.⁹ Public opinion in México on the topic of annexation was strong, Mexicans preferred war to conceding the loss of Texas.¹⁰

The resulting diplomatic crisis worsened with responses on both sides of the border. Threatened with war, U.S. President James Polk ordered the newly created Corps of Observation from Fort Jesup, LA into Texas. Polk ordered these troops "to promptly

⁸ Stephen A. Carney, CMH Pub 73-2, *Guns along the Rio Grande: Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War (Fort Lesley J. McNair, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), 2006), 4.

⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 13.

¹⁰ K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 16-17.

and efficiently act in defense of Texas in the event it shall become necessary or proper.”¹¹

This force, under the command of Brigadier General Zachary Taylor and now called the Army of Occupation, would be in position to respond to Mexican hostilities against Texas. Mexican President José Joaquín de Herrera understood the state that México was in at the time and that war was not in the best interest of his country. Nevertheless, he gave in to public and political pressure and on July 21, 1845 he announced a resolution promising to declare war the moment that annexation was formally completed or when U.S. troops “invaded” Texas.¹²

The initial aggravation of tensions gave way to what seemed like a diplomatic breakthrough. With his reelection in September of 1845, President Herrera expressed a willingness to receive a commissioner from the U.S. that was empowered “to settle the present dispute.”¹³ President Herrera was willing to negotiate and extend official recognition to Texas as long as it remained independent of the U.S. This was a dangerous position for the Mexican president, given the political environment and public opinion in México. President Polk named John Slidell, a Congressman from Louisiana, to the diplomatic mission to México. But this breakthrough would not go far since Slidell’s mission was doomed to fail from the start.

Slidell was given the title “Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary” and instructed to secure an agreement to the Rio Grande as the southern boundary of

¹¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 17.

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 22.

Texas and “to purchase for pecuniary consideration Upper California and New México.”¹⁴ Both Slidell’s title and instructions further deepened the crisis when he arrived in México. Slidell arrived in México in December of 1845. When Slidell presented his credentials, it was Mexican Foreign Minister Manuel de la Peña y Peña that received him. Peña y Peña immediately notified him of several problems. First, Slidell’s title implied that the U.S. was attempting to restore full diplomatic relations, which had been suspended due to the war in Texas.¹⁵ Slidell’s appointment was as a minister, a mistranslation since the Mexicans said they would receive a commissioner, not a resident minister. Herrera made this explicit when he expressed his willingness to negotiate.¹⁶

The second problem pertained to Slidell’s instructions. Peña y Peña pointed out that President Herrera only agreed to receive a commissioner empowered to settle the dispute over Texas. Accepting Slidell with his current title and diplomatic mission would imply restoration of normal relations, which under the circumstances would allow the government’s opponents to claim that Herrera accepted the loss of Texas.¹⁷ This was unacceptable to the public and would topple the Herrera government. Despite these issues, the Herrera government submitted the question of whether to receive Slidell to the Council of Government where his credentials were promptly denied on December 16, 1845.

¹⁴ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 22.

¹⁵ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 31.

¹⁶ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

When news of Slidell's rejection reached President Polk, the president responded by extending U.S. military protection in Texas all the way down to the Rio Grande. Texas was officially welcomed into the Union on December 29, 1845, making the decision to send Taylor into disputed territory more pressing. On January 13, 1846, Secretary of War William Marcy instructed Taylor to

advance and occupy, with the troops under your command, positions on or near the east bank of the Rio del Norte, as soon as it can be conveniently done with reference to the season and the routes by which your movements must be made....It is not designed, in our present relations with México, that you should treat her as an enemy; but should she assume that character by a declaration of war, or any open act of hostility towards us, you will not act merely on the defense, if your relative means enable you to do otherwise.¹⁸

Although tensions were clearly escalating, these instructions made it clear that México was not an enemy. President Polk did not intend to go to war. He intended to use Taylor's army as a show of force to bring the Mexicans back to the table. He was confident that México would neither invade Texas nor declare war, so he continued to make his demands for territorial concessions.¹⁹

The political situation in México quickly deteriorated after this. Leaked news of Slidell's instructions to not settle the Texas dispute but to offer the purchase of more Mexican territory sparked public outrage in México.²⁰ To make matters worse, General Mariano Paredes executed a plot to take over the Mexican Presidency. Paredes was at the head of an army of 8,000 men stationed in San Luis Potosi. President Herrera ordered

¹⁸ William A. DePalo, *The Mexican National Army, 1822-1852* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 95.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 93.

Paredes and his men to march north in July of 1845 to strengthen Mexican military presence along the disputed territory.²¹ Paredes gave way to political ambition rather than support Herrera's government. He claimed that the Herrera administration was allowing anarchy, arming the poor, assaulting private property ownership, and that he was also starving the army of the resources it needed to face the U.S.²² Instead of marching north, Paredes marched with his army to México City and took the presidency on January 2, 1846.

The discord in the Mexican government convinced Polk even more that México would avoid war and come to the table. He continued to pursue his policy of graduated pressure. With Taylor's army ordered to march on the Rio Grande, Slidell's commission was altered in an attempt to reopen diplomatic communications. With Slidell in place, Polk believed it was a matter of time before the Paredes government would agree to meet with him. Polk and his administration committed themselves to war as their only viable course of action if Slidell's credentials were rejected again.²³

With his new credentials, Slidell once again asked for reconsideration of his recognition. On March 6th, the Council of Government again refused to accept him. The Mexican foreign minister wrote that the annexation of Texas was a cause for war. John Slidell responded with a long rebuttal in which he concluded that with his rejection that

²¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 35.

²² Guardino, *The Dead March*, 49-50.

²³ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 27.

“words must now give place to acts.”²⁴ On March 21st, President Paredes issued a manifesto calling for a defensive war. He claimed the U.S. had “undertaken new conquests in the territory lying within the line of the Departments of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León.”²⁵ With both parties now primed for war, the spark that ignited the conflict was soon to follow.

Zachary Taylor’s army arrived on the northern banks of the Rio Grande on March 28, 1846. Prior to his arrival, he overtook the Mexican stronghold at Port Isabel and established his supply depot there. Upon arrival, the commander in Matamoros, General Francisco Mejía, sent General Rómulo Díaz de la Vega to parley with U.S. General William Worth. The parley proved unsuccessful.²⁶ Taylor ordered a fortification erected at the camp opposite the river of Matamoros.²⁷ Command of the Mexican Army soon passed to General Pedro de Ampudia. With his arrival to Matamoros, he dispatched correspondence to General Taylor demanding that the American force leave the territory. Taylor responded by asking the U.S. naval squadron to blockade the mouth of the river to prevent supplies from reaching the Mexican Army. This put pressure on México to act; with limited food and supplies, México was forced to fight or retreat.²⁸ Ampudia was eager to cross the river and attack the American camp before they dug in. Before this

²⁴ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁶ Ramon Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos* (México: Editoria Nacional, 1952), 33.

²⁷ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 40.

²⁸ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 76.

could happen, the Mexican Minister of War issued a directive on April 4 ordering General Mariano Arista to take command of the Northern Divisions and ordered an attack on the American forces.²⁹ Arista directed all operations out of Matamoros to halt until his arrival. México missed their opportunity to attack the enemy before they could complete their fortifications.³⁰

General Arista arrived in Matamoros on April 24th. He immediately dispatched a letter to General Taylor in which he reiterated México's grievances and declared that the time had come to respond in battle.³¹ At the same time Arista ordered General Anastasio Torrejón with a force of 1,600 cavalymen to cross the Rio Grande to patrol around the American camp and to cut the Point Isabel road.³² This would effectively isolate the American force from their supply point.

Shortly after, Taylor began receiving reports that a Mexican cavalry force of one thousand troops had crossed the river upstream of the American camp. Taylor sent two detachments of dragoons to investigate the reports. The first detachment, led by Captain Croghan Kerr, was sent east of the camp to determine if the Mexican cavalry force was directed toward Point Isabel and the camp's supply depot. Taylor sent the second detachment under Captain Seth Thornton to the west.³³ Captain Kerr's detachment

²⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 43.

³⁰ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos*, 33.

³¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 119.

³² Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 48.

³³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 119.

returned the following day with reports of no enemy activity. That same day, unbeknownst to Taylor and his forces, the Mexican force attacked Thornton's detachment. Thornton and his men rode into an ambush twenty miles from the American camp near Rancho Carricito. They tried to fight their way out but eleven of the men were killed, six wounded, and most of the rest of the eighty men along with Thornton were captured.³⁴ The Americans found out the next day when several members of Thornton's detachment stumbled back into the camp to report the attack. This marked the official start of armed hostilities between the two nations.

Taylor was satisfied that this event met all the conditions that were imposed on him by the President to treat the Mexicans as hostile: the attack occurred north of the Rio Grande, the attack was initiated by the Mexicans, and it was confirmed that the attack involved the Mexican Army and was not the result of banditry.³⁵ Taylor immediately sent word to Washington and New Orleans asking for more men and calmly stating that "hostilities may now be considered as commenced."³⁶ Taylor's message reached President Polk on May 9th. The following day he sent a message to Congress and addressed the legislature on the 11th stating that the "cup of forbearance had been exhausted."³⁷ The Congress unanimously fulfilled Polk's call for a declaration of war.

³⁴ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 48.

³⁵ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

With the actions now laid out, there still seems to be several questions to ask concerning the causes of the war. Why was the U.S. so readily inclined to admit Texas despite the threat of war with their southern neighbor and why was México so reckless in their eagerness to wage a war they were not ready for? The answer to the first question lies in the heart of the American expansionism. Reflections from Mexican elite supposed of the Americans that “from the days of their independence they adopted the project of extending their dominions, and since then, that line has not deviated in the slightest,” that “they desired from the beginning to extend their dominion in such a manner as to become absolute owners of almost all of this continent.”³⁸ What these men were describing was the American belief of Manifest Destiny, the notion that God intended for the U.S. to control the entire North American land mass. The U.S. wanted more land beyond Texas and were justifying their claims for the land with Manifest Destiny.³⁹ California was of particular interest to Polk and his government. It was ripe with resources and positioned for trade with markets in the east. México exerted little control over Alta California, and it was the opinion of some Americans that a more capable power should control it to obtain its riches.⁴⁰

President Polk complicated the situation with his eagerness to expand westward. He ran for office with a vow to expand the country’s borders.⁴¹ President Polk escalated

³⁸ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 2-3.

³⁹ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 4.

⁴⁰ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 12-13.

⁴¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 15.

tensions when he proposed the new boundary for the state of Texas. Texans believed their southern boundary was the Rio Grande despite there being no legal basis for it and even though any people living in the disputed area were Mexicans.⁴² This unfounded escalation by Polk was intended to raise the stakes and, with the threat of war from Taylor's army, was aimed at applying graduated pressure on México to bring them to the negotiating table to give territory for cash.⁴³ This did not happen as President Polk intended. Mexican popular opinion insisted that the government preserve all the territory that it took from Spain.⁴⁴ This forced the government to act irrationally in pursuing a war with the U.S. Both Presidents Herrera and Paredes understood that their country was in no position to wage a war, but they also understood that their government would only survive in the turbulent Mexican political arena if they gave in to the strong nationalist public sentiment. The war existed because México underestimated the depth of American expansionism and America misunderstood the extent of Mexican national identity and the political complexities that led the Mexican government to choose war.

With the causes of the war identified, it is also important to look at the state of both militaries at the onset of the war. The Mexican Army numbered 18,882 regular troops, 10,495 active militiamen, and 1,174 irregulars. The U.S. Army numbered 7,364 officers and enlisted men.⁴⁵ Mexican infantry were armed with outdated, inaccurate, and

⁴² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 16.

⁴³ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 92.

⁴⁴ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

often unserviceable muzzle-loading flintlock muskets. American infantry were armed with more modern smoothbore flintlock muskets. The U.S. Army fielded percussion cap muskets and rifled weapons, but they did not become standard issue until after the conflict.⁴⁶ México's cavalry was considered one of its greatest strengths. These troopers carried a variety of weapons including sabers, pistols, escopetas, and lances. U.S. dragoons carried a saber, a single-shot pistol, and an 1843 model breechloading carbine for use while dismounted.⁴⁷

Mexican artillery suffered from a number of difficulties. Brigades usually possessed few guns of mixed calibers: 2-, 4-, 6-, 8-, 12-, and 16-pound iron and bronze guns. The guns were outdated, mostly forged in the 1770s.⁴⁸ This caused several issues. The mixed caliber guns resulted in a lack of sufficient logistical support. The age and design of the guns meant they were heavy and difficult to maneuver, slow to reload, and extremely inaccurate.⁴⁹ Despite a manpower shortage, the U.S. employed artillery more effectively. Light batteries primarily fielded a 6-pound bronze gun weighing 880 pounds and accurate to 1,500 yards. Light batteries came with a large number of horses to transport the guns, ammunition, and its crew. This made the artillery highly mobile and able to maneuver to respond to threats over large distances.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

México struggled with the logistical support of its military. The Mexican treasury was regularly on the brink of bankruptcy and could rarely provide the funds to meet the army's logistical needs.⁵¹ The Mexican Army lacked dedicated supply bureaus and resorted to foraging methods common to European armies of the prior century. The war ministry provided funds to regimental commanders to purchase supplies and equipment for their men.⁵² With no accountability, much of what was allocated eventually found its way into the pockets of senior officers.⁵³ Reliance on foraging also slowed the cross-country movement of troops. In stark contrast, the U.S employed a robust logistical support system throughout the war. The Quartermaster Department arranged transportation and created and operated a series of forward supply depots close to the front lines to ensure a steady flow of provisions and equipment.⁵⁴ A steady stream of firearms and munitions as well as bulk items (flour, salt pork, cured beef, etc.) were also run along the rear lines by two separate departments.⁵⁵

Numerically, México held the advantage. Both armies shared similar structure based on European models, but neither was suited for the coming engagements involving the movement of large armies. The U.S. Army was scattered and organized for small unit

⁵¹ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 90.

⁵² Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*,” 10.

⁵³ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 90.

⁵⁴ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 10.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

action, company size or less, to safeguard against Native Americans on the frontier.⁵⁶ The Mexican Army faced similar circumstances. Social unrest and other challenges forced the army to organize into small detachments that were deployed across huge areas in support of five territorial divisions. These small detachments rarely served or trained with other units in their divisions.⁵⁷ The U.S. Army had the advantage of modern and mobile weapons, but México held the advantage of fighting on familiar terrain.

Strategically and operationally, México committed several missteps before the war started that significantly reduced their ability to repel the American invasion. When General Mariano Paredes defiantly marched his army from San Luis Potosi to México City to take over the presidency instead of reinforcing the Division del Norte, he denied soldiers on the frontier the needed manpower reserves to effectively mount a defense of the republic. Not only did this weaken México's position, it also had a significant impact on the population and local governments who were closest to the Rio Grande and would have to contend with the invading army. The people of the bordering state of Nuevo León felt that they were left defenseless, that it was clear that Paredes and his supporters did not have the same concerns that they did.⁵⁸ The state assembly of Nuevo León claimed that "this plan from a Mexican Army general when he should be marching to the border

⁵⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁷ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 8.

⁵⁸ González-Quiroga, *Nuevo León Ocupado*, 7.

to defend the integrity of the territory, jokingly left the hopes of the fatherland, he turned his back to the foreign enemy when he should be fighting.”⁵⁹

Because of this decision, the newly sworn in President Paredes made a grave operational mistake due to a lack of manpower. He decided to allow the American Army to advance to the Rio Grande uncontested. This came to a head at the Arroyo Colorado, a one-hundred-yard-wide river south of Corpus Christi. This was the site of the first encounter between Mexican troops and the American Army on March 20, 1846. Paredes ordered all Mexican forces to fall back to Matamoros because he was not confident that enough troops could get north in time to mount an effective defense.⁶⁰ There was concern that an early defeat would demoralize the military and lose Paredes political support. The Mexican soldiers that encountered Taylor’s force fell back instead of contesting the crossing at the Arroyo. This drew sharp criticism from Mexican leadership on the frontier and surprise from the American force. General Mejia, who was in command of forces north of the river, believed the Arroyo was the only place for the Mexican Army to counter the superior weapons of the U.S. Mejia believed that superior U.S. artillery made any engagements in open field catastrophic and a withdrawal to Matamoros pointless since the city was impossible to defend.⁶¹ The Arroyo would limit the effectiveness of the artillery and significantly level the playing field. The Mexican Army also abandoned the Fronzon de San Isabel, which Taylor quickly took over and reinforced as his supply

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 58-59.

⁶¹ Ibid.

depot.⁶² The site served as a critical lifeline to U.S. operations in the area. Falling back to Matamoros effectively surrendered the disputed territory to the U.S. and allowed the U.S. to gain key defensible positions.

The American Army was surprised that México would give up a defensible position north of the Rio Grande. William T. H. Brooks, then a lieutenant with the U.S. 3rd Infantry Regiment, pointed out that the Mexicans abandoned “the only defensible spot between the Nueces and the Rio Grande,” that they had “let their golden opportunity pass.”⁶³ General Taylor agreed, noting in his correspondence back to Washington that the Arroyo “would have formed a serious obstruction to our march had the enemy chosen to occupy its right bank, even with a small force.”⁶⁴ As a result, General Taylor and the Army of Occupation marched unmolested to the banks opposite the city of Matamoros.

⁶² Ibid., 60.

⁶³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 56.

⁶⁴ Zachary Taylor, the Adjutant General of the United States Army, March 21, 1846, in *Dispatch from General Taylor, Headquarters, the Army of Occupation, camp 3 miles south of the Arroyo Colorado* (Washington, DC: Wendall and van Benthuysen, 1848).

CHAPTER 2

ARISTA'S STRATEGY AND THE SIEGE OF FORT TEXAS

With the causes of the war now clear, it is important to address how Mexican leadership attempted to create the conditions that were necessary for success in the coming battles. Although General Mariano Arista seized the initiative early on to force General Zachary Taylor to take action, a series of operational missteps caused the Mexican army to lose the advantage. Arista failed to create the conditions necessary for the Mexican Army to defeat the U.S. The Mexican Army moved forward with a strong operational plan, but Arista failed in executing it. Once the advantage was lost, it was difficult for México to regain it, and it suffered decisive defeats at the hands of the Americans.

Arista and Taylor, although acting in a state of undeclared war following General Torrejón's skirmish with Captain Thornton's cavalry, began to contemplate their next steps to gain a position of advantage. Torrejón proceeded as instructed and positioned himself between Taylor's camp on the banks of the Rio Grande and the American supply point at Point Isabel. On April 28th, 200 lancers from Torrejón's force encountered a camp of Texas Rangers near Resaca de San Antonio, killing five and taking four prisoners.⁶⁵ Arista's actions at this point signaled a significant shift in control. Before these skirmishes, Mexican leadership had been simply reacting to U.S. movements. This now changed as Arista seized the initiative and began to fight the war on his own terms.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 100.

⁶⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 122.

Strategically, México's goal was the neutralization of the threat posed by the U.S. army. If Arista could destroy Taylor's army, México could reestablish the Nueces River as the border with Texas and eliminate pressure on the Mexican government to give up more territory. To achieve this strategic goal, Arista put a bold operational plan into action. His plan was to position his army along the road from the American camp to Point Isabel to cut off the American lines of communication and prevent them from receiving ammunition, provisions, and reinforcements.⁶⁷ Arista assumed this would pressure Taylor into surrender or force a decisive engagement.

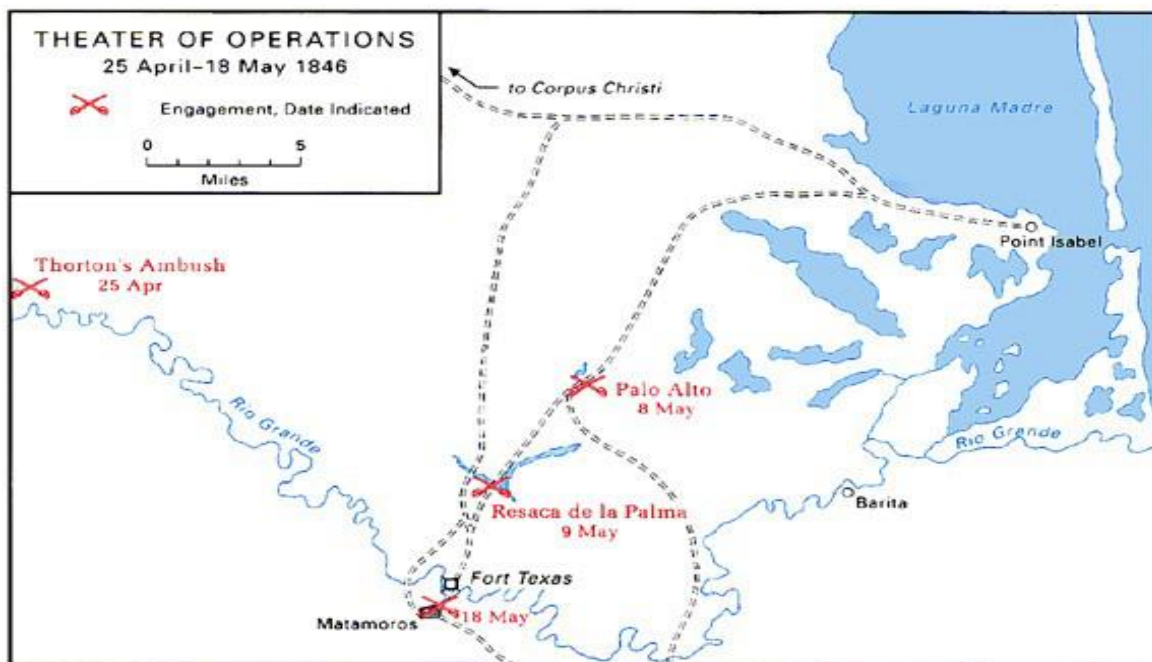


Figure 1. Rio Grande Theater of Operations

Source: Stephen A. Carney, CMH Pub 73-2, *Guns along the Rio Grande: Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War (Fort Lesley J. McNair, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), 2006),” 15.

⁶⁷ Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 162.

Arista and his generals believed the time was right to act against the Americans. Arista received intelligence that U.S. forces were dangerously low on supplies and munitions. He estimating that Taylor only had enough food to last eight to ten days.⁶⁸ He also knew that, with the start of hostilities, Taylor and his men could no longer depend on the local market for meats, milk, or eggs.⁶⁹ American soldiers described that a train of two to three hundred wagons with provisions usually made a weekly trip from the depot at Point Isabel to supply the American camp.⁷⁰ Arista was correct in his assumption that Taylor's forces were running low on supplies. As of April 27th, the American camp had fifteen days of provisions. Taylor's men recounted that as a result of the low supplies, they were prohibited to issue corn to the horses in case it could be parched to feed his men.⁷¹ Closing Taylor's lines of communications would have a drastic effect on the force.

Arista also ensured that his army was supplied for the coming engagements and that he was comfortable with the state of his own lines of communications. Arista's command was buried in debt from the continued borrowing of his predecessors. Former commanders made it a habit to get provisions from local ranchers and farmers on credit but rarely settled those debts. Arista knew that it would be impossible for him to get

⁶⁸ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 126.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁰ Dr. Grayson M. Prevost Journal, April 27, 1846-May 31, 1846 (Dr. Grayson M. Prevost Papers, 1846-1849, The University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections), 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

support from the locals to secure his provisions.⁷² He also had to contend with the U.S. blockade of the Rio Grande. Before being assigned to the command, Arista suggested that a less vulnerable overland supply route to Matamoros be established. An overland supply corridor would be out of the reach of invading forces and could ensure contact with food, weapons, and orders from the central government. Arista created a system of soldier detachments to escort provisions coming up to Matamoros from central México.⁷³ With this established, Arista felt comfortable initiating hostilities against the enemy.

Arista and his generals also believed that the Mexican Army was of better quality and more disciplined than the Americans. The Mexican commanders received information about American forces from spies and deserters. Since Taylor's army arrived in Corpus Christi, Arista and his predecessors employed spies disguised as travelers and merchants to infiltrate the camps.⁷⁴ Desertion was also common once Taylor arrived on the banks of the Rio Grande. Arista learned from deserters that there was a large number of immigrants in the enemy's ranks who only joined the army out of hunger. These recruits had little attachment to the U.S. and resented the nativist sentiments of most of the officers.⁷⁵ Mexican leadership issued appeals based on religious and foreign prejudice and offered generous rewards for any Americans that deserted.⁷⁶ The spies and deserters

⁷² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 19.

⁷³ Ibid., 123-124.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁵ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 77.

⁷⁶ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 160.

also relayed that a large part of Taylor's army were fresh recruits who had only just received their training at Corpus Christi.⁷⁷ Arista was confident that his force was superior to Taylor's. It is likely that this was another factor in his eagerness to seize the initiative and attack the Americans.

To complete the crossing of the Rio Grande with the rest of his forces, Arista planned to have Torrejón maneuver from his position on the road to Point Isabel down to the river to cover the crossing of the main body.⁷⁸ Two brigades needed to cross the river and Arista knew that they would be vulnerable during the movement. Once the rest of the army crossed, they would join with Torrejón's division and block Taylor's forces from accessing supplies and reinforcements from Point Isabel. Arista reasoned that this would force Taylor to risk battle to re-establish his only supply line.⁷⁹ The Mexicans needed Taylor to be out in the open where Arista could use his numerical advantage and the terrain to achieve a decisive victory. He knew Taylor was limited on supplies and that decisive action was needed to eliminate the American threat. This was the plan that Arista devised and set in motion on April 30th.

Once Arista received notice that Torrejón was in position and occupied the road to Point Isabel, he ordered the main body to prepare to cross the river. Ampudia's brigade was ordered to cross on April 30th at Longoreño, approximately ten miles below Matamoros. Unfortunately, several issues plagued the crossings and severely delayed the

⁷⁷ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 77.

⁷⁸ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 100.

⁷⁹ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos*, 36.

operation. Ampudia's brigade, along with four guns, was supposed to begin the crossings in the morning hours of the 30th but was delayed until the afternoon. The barges that they used for the crossing were taken overland via cart on a circuitous route, as opposed to transporting them down the river. Arista's forces did this to avoid arousing the suspicion of American scouts across the river.⁸⁰ The overland movement caused extensive damage to the boats, and they immediately filled with water on the first crossing attempts.⁸¹ Mexican soldiers had to spend hours caulking and tarring the boats before they were finally able to attempt the crossings. This, coupled with the fact that only three small barges were available to complete the crossing of two brigades, caused considerable delays to Arista's timeline. What was supposed to be completed on the morning of the 30th took more than twenty-four hours. It was not until the afternoon of May 1st that Arista finally had his main body on the other side of the river.⁸² This represents a significant logistics failure that had drastic effects on the maneuver of Mexican forces across the river.

The crossing delays also led to one of the Mexican Army's biggest operational failures. The initial plan called for Torrejón and his 1,600-man force, already in position on the road between the American camp and Point Isabel, to temporarily reposition to the river opposite Longoreño to guard the crossing of the rest of the Mexican army. Torrejón acted as instructed but was then ordered to remain in position for far longer than was

⁸⁰ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 162.

⁸¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 147-148.

⁸² Ibid.

initially planned. Torrejòn was only supposed to guard the passage of Ampudia's brigade and then allow Ampudia to take over and guard the passage of the remaining forces.⁸³ Once the crossings began, Arista received reports of increased activity in the American camp that caused him to keep Torrejòn at the crossing site. The general disarray and delays of the crossing plus the perceived threat of attack from the Americans required Torrejòn to offer protection for the duration of the entire crossing.⁸⁴ This was a significant operational blunder. Without Torrejòn's force in position on the Point Isabel road, Taylor now had access to his supply lines. In this case Arista presents a general inability to assume risk, which led to the decision to keep Torrejòn at the crossing site for an extended period. Arista was completely responsible for making the decision to keep Torrejòn there. He was unable to assume risk in his crossing operation to accomplish his decisive operation. Blocking the road and severing Taylor's supply lines was Arista's decisive operation, the operation that directly accomplished the mission. Arista failed to establish theater conditions, which gave Taylor the opportunity that he needed to secure his supply line.

By midday on May 1st, scouts notified Taylor that a significant Mexican force was crossing the river below him.⁸⁵ At this point, he was well aware that Mexican forces were operating north of the river, but he was also not sure whether this was the only point in which the Mexican Army was currently crossing the river. Rather than contest the

⁸³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 163.

crossings, he opted to continue reinforcing his camp, which was newly dubbed Fort Texas, and he prepared to make an attempt to secure his supply line and the supply depot.⁸⁶ Taylor acknowledged that his forces were short on food and ammunition and that Point Isabel was vulnerable to attack.⁸⁷ Major Jacob Brown assumed command of the fort with 500 men and the bulk of the artillery while Taylor initiated movement to Point Isabel with 2,000 men in midafternoon.⁸⁸ The column moved quickly, unsure of whether they would encounter Mexican forces or not.

As detailed by an unknown Mexican infantry officer, General Francisco Mejía, who had been left in command of the garrison at Matamoros, immediately alerted Arista that the enemy was initiating some sort of movement.⁸⁹ With the river crossing finally complete, Arista quickly readied his forces for movement. He knew he had a small window of opportunity to get ahead of Taylor and cut the road to prevent him from reaching his supply depot.⁹⁰ Taylor and his troops bivouacked close to Palo Alto at midnight and quickly departed again in the early morning hours of the 2nd to arrive at

⁸⁶ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 49.

⁸⁷ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 163.

⁸⁸ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 49.

⁸⁹ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte: Primera Parte, Relación Histórica de los Cuarenta Dias Que Mandò en Gefe el Ejèrcito del Norte el E. Sr. General de Division Don Mariano Arista* (Campaign against the Americans from the North: First Part, History of the Forty Days That Division General Mariano Arista Served as Commander in Chief of the Army of the North) (Linares, Mèxico: Imprenta de Ignacio Cumplido, 1846), 5.

⁹⁰ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 49.

Point Isabel by noon.⁹¹ Arista chased the American column but never caught it. He abandoned his pursuit and camped his army near Palo Alto.⁹² Taylor immediately began fortifying the depot and gathering supplies and reinforcements for his return to Fort Texas.

The absence of Torrejòn from the Point Isabel road was one of the most consequential events leading up to the opening battles. Arista's entire plan centered on his army's ability to cut the American lines of supply and communication. Taylor was able to capitalize on this failure without realizing it. Taylor took his only opportunity to avoid an engagement with the Mexican Army by securing his supply line and disrupting Arista's original plan.⁹³ Taylor realized the danger to which his forces would be subjected if Arista was able to control the road to Point Isabel and decided to take action. Torrejòn was not in position to block the Point Isabel road and sever Taylor's supply line. The Mexican Army failed in its operational goal of containing the Americans at Fort Texas and failed to capitalize on the opportunity to gain the upper hand in the early stages of hostilities.⁹⁴

Arista now had to revise his entire plan of attack. He needed to regain the initiative. He decided to attack Fort Texas. This would serve two purposes. First, it would

⁹¹ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 163.

⁹² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 149

⁹³ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 37.

⁹⁴ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 149.

allow him to destroy the outnumbered force before Taylor could return.⁹⁵ Arista still assumed the forces remaining in Fort Texas were running short on food and supplies and they thus would be vulnerable. Second, he sought to hasten Taylor's return from Point Isabel.⁹⁶ Arista was still seeking a decisive engagement and he knew that Taylor would not risk losing such a large part of his army. To accomplish this Arista split his forces. He maintained his position on the Point Isabel road with the majority of his forces to wait for Taylor. Arista ordered Ampudia's brigade, along with Mejia's forces in Matamoros, to attack Fort Texas.⁹⁷

The attack on Fort Texas began at daybreak on May 3rd with artillery fire from Matamoros. This quickly escalated into an artillery exchange, with the U.S. firing on the town and Mexican gun positions. American fire ceased later that morning due to a shortage in ammunition. Mexican fire was largely ineffective against the walls of the American fort. Although the highly accurate American fire managed to take out several troops and some of the guns directly across the river, the Mexicans maintained fires from positions upriver.⁹⁸ On the 4th, Mejia's men emplaced new batteries north of the river and behind the fort to continue the bombardment.

Taylor could hear the distant cannon fire from Point Isabel. He received reports from Captain Samuel Walker's cavalry that the Mexican Army was camped near Palo

⁹⁵ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 14.

⁹⁶ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 164.

⁹⁷ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 50.

⁹⁸ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 176-177.

Alto.⁹⁹ Taylor decided to send Walker with an escort of dragoons through Arista's lines to communicate with Major Brown at Fort Texas.¹⁰⁰ Walker was able to slip past the Mexicans and make contact with Brown. He returned to Point Isabel on the morning of May 5th to report that Brown and his forces were doing well and could wait out the bombardment.¹⁰¹ With this information, Taylor was confident that he could wait at Point Isabel until additional reinforcements arrived before marching back to Fort Texas and battling Arista.

Despite being in position on the road between Fort Texas and Point Isabel, Mexican forces proved incapable of limiting communication between Taylor and his men at Fort Texas. Once the bombardment of the fort started on May 3rd, the American general had no way of knowing how his forces were doing. Arista knew that there were several routes that linked Point Isabel with Fort Texas, but those routes were not adequately screened for enemy movements. When the guns started firing on the 3rd, Taylor was anxious to get back to his forces, so much so that he issued an order to begin the march back later that afternoon.¹⁰² He later rescinded that order to avoid rushing into battle and to gather more information on the state of the besieged fort. This was when he decided to send Walker to ascertain the condition of Brown and the remaining defenders. Walker and his party did encounter Mexican cavalry on their return to Point Isabel, but it

⁹⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 180.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰² Ibid., 180.

was not enough to stop their movements.¹⁰³ When Walker returned with good news, Taylor was convinced that he could take his time to gather supplies and reinforcements before meeting Arista on the field.¹⁰⁴ The purpose of limiting communication between the two American positions was to hasten the Americans into battle as unprepared as possible. This operational failure ensured that Taylor would take the conservative course of action and meet Arista in a much better state than if he had rushed into battle.

Taylor's refusal to commit frustrated Arista.¹⁰⁵ In response, Arista determined that he should complete the investment of the American fortification across Matamoros. On the 5th he ordered Ampudia to march on Fort Texas to lay siege to it. Ampudia's force consisted of the 4th Infantry Regiment, the Battalion of Puebla, two companies of sappers, two hundred men of the Regiment of Auxiliary of the North, and four pieces of artillery.¹⁰⁶ While Ampudia's forces moved into position, Arista moved his main body from Palo Alto to Los Tanques del Ramireño so that he could cover all the roads between Fort Texas and Point Isabel. Ampudia's forces joined in the bombardment of Fort Texas but as detailed by an unknown Mexican infantry officer, Arista expressly Ampudia ordered not to assault the fort.¹⁰⁷ Ampudia was confident that he could take the fortification with an assault and wrote to Arista on the 6th asking for permission to attack.

¹⁰³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 182.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 37.

¹⁰⁷ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 7.

The Mexican commander declined, he was expecting Taylor to begin his march back at any moment and he needed Ampudia's troops for the engagement.¹⁰⁸

Operationally, Arista did not benefit from splitting his forces and assaulting Fort Texas. There were two options to committing a sizeable force to the fort: the fort could be bombarded and sieged until the American troops surrendered, or the Mexican force could assault the fortification and kill or subdue the Americans. The latter option, although likely feasible, could not have been accomplished without Ampudia's force taking significant losses. This option would have also tied up Ampudia's force which needed to be able to rapidly move to Arista's position once Taylor began his march back to Fort Texas. Arista opted for the first option, which was to lay siege to the American force. The only direct action that was taken against the fort was the artillery bombardment which continued for seven days. Although this option bore little overall risk to Ampudia's force, it still degraded the overall combat power of the Mexican Army because it expended valuable resources in ammunition. The only way either option would have benefitted the decisive operation would have been if they could eliminate the American fort and allowed Ampudia's force to join Arista before Taylor advanced. Neither option could do that given the time required and without incurring significant losses.¹⁰⁹

As Ampudia settled into a regular siege, the bombardment continued. Dr. Grayson M. Prevost, a surgeon in Taylor's army that survived the siege, recounts in his diary that

¹⁰⁸ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 185.

¹⁰⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 50.

the firing occurred at intervals of no more than two or three hours and would usually cease at night to allow Mexican light infantry to surround the parapets and pepper the fortification with musket balls, to little effect.¹¹⁰ On the morning of the 6th, the American commander in the fort, Major Brown, was mortally wounded and command passed to Captain Edgar S. Hawkins. Later that afternoon, Arista sent a message to the fort demanding the surrender of American forces. Hawkins' official correspondence with Arista showed the following replied; "Your humane communication has just been received, and after the consideration due to its importance; I must respectfully decline to surrender my force to you."¹¹¹ By this point the Americans understood that as long as their supplies held, they were in no immediate danger since the Mexicans showed no inclination toward an assault on the fort.¹¹²

On May 7th, both Arista and Ampudia remained in their positions and continued to harass the American fort with fires. In the afternoon, Taylor, along with 270 wagons and an additional two hundred recruits, begin the march back to Fort Texas. Taylor's force numbered 2,228 men. Seven miles into the movement the force bivouacked for the night and resumed march early the next day. Later that morning, Arista received word from his scouts that the Americans had left Point Isabel on the road to Palo Alto. Arista immediately put his forces to march and ordered Ampudia and his forces to join them at

¹¹⁰ Dr. Grayson M. Prevost Journal, 18.

¹¹¹ Edgar S. Hawkins to General Mariano Arista, May 6, 1846, in Registers of Letters Received, Office of the Adjutant General, 1812-1889, Entry Number PI17 14, Record Group 94, (National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives, Washington, DC).

¹¹² Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 52.

Palo Alto. Arista was finally going to get the decisive engagement that he sought against Taylor.

With the stage set for the opening battle of the Mexican War, it becomes clear that Arista was not successful in setting the conditions for his army's success. Although Arista undoubtedly took bold action and attempted to control the situation, a series of shortcomings at the operational level prevented him from gaining the upper hand. The failure to maintain Torrejón on the Point Isabel road was his biggest operational failure. Splitting his forces and committing Ampudia's brigade to the siege of Fort Texas as well as Arista's inability to limit communications between the two American positions are also operational failures. The failure to conduct the river crossing expeditiously was a significant failure that led to the rest of the operational failures. The cumulative effect of this prevented Arista from initiating the opening battle from a position of advantage.

Although General Arista developed a strong operational plan to defeat the American forces, the difficulties in executing that plan prevented the Mexican Army from gaining the upper hand before the opening battles. A series of operational blunders allowed General Taylor the freedom of maneuver necessary to secure his supply lines. Arista did not create favorable conditions for his army's success. He had Taylor's army in a difficult position but lost the initiative and allowed the Americans the room to gather forces and supplies to fight. These failures precipitated the loss that México's war effort would never recover from. Although Arista was going to get the decisive battle that he sought from the beginning, it was going to be against a more prepared American force, one that was eager to get back and relieve their besieged comrades.

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLE OF PALO ALTO

The various moves and countermoves between the Mexican Northern Divisions and the Army of Occupation culminated between May 8 and 9, 1846. The operational mistakes committed by General Mariano Arista and his forces in executing their operational plan dramatically changed the situation. The Mexican Army's inability to contain the U.S. Army to Fort Texas resulted in the first meeting between the two armies on the plains of Palo Alto. Strategically, there was no change to the original goals identified for the Mexican Army. México still had to neutralize the threat posed by the U.S. Army so that it could reestablish the Nueces River as the boundary with Texas. The Mexican Army needed to block the advancing enemy army as they returned from Point Isabel to Fort Texas. Rather than contain the forces, Arista was now forced to meet them in the field of battle to accomplish his goals. Operationally, México was not able to create favorable conditions, but it was a series of tactical mistakes that led to Mexican failure at Palo Alto.

Arista was not facing what he once hoped would be a tired and desperate army. He was facing General Zachary Taylor and his 2,228 men with eight field pieces and two 18-pound siege guns.¹¹³ Taylor's forces were able to refit and gather the supplies necessary to continue their mission and, in the process, picked up two hundred new recruits. Arista planned on making use of the critical plain of Palo Alto to contain the Americans in the *chaparral* (thick brush/vegetation) in the hopes of retaining control of

¹¹³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 189.

the position and the important watering hole.¹¹⁴ Arista needed to retain the initiative and stay ahead of the enemy to ensure his success. In his own report of the day's actions, Arista detailed his decision to put his troops to march towards Palo Alto as soon as his spies reported the departure of the American force from Point Isabel.¹¹⁵ He also sent word to General Pedro de Ampudia to meet him at Palo Alto with the 4th Infantry Regiment, two hundred cavalrymen, the sapper company, and two artillery pieces.¹¹⁶

The Mexican forces began to have issues with their tactical plan from the start. By the time Arista received word of Taylor's departure on the 8th, the American's were well on their way to Palo Alto and ahead of the Mexican force. The day prior, spies reported no unusual activity from Point Isabel. That day, Arista sent out additional scouts at 10 pm to confirm the earlier reports and upon their return the following morning at 7 am, they reported no unusual activity. An hour later, a presidial soldier came rushing in to notify Arista that the Americans were marching along the primary road and were nearly at Palo Alto.¹¹⁷ Unbeknownst to Arista, the scouts he sent out the night before had been too frightened to make a close enough approach to the supply depot to spot Taylor's forces leaving.¹¹⁸ This failure does not rest with Arista, for his subordinate commanders were responsible for the employment of proper reconnaissance efforts. This was an extremely

¹¹⁴ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 191.

¹¹⁵ *Taylor and His Generals* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co, 1847), 68.

¹¹⁶ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 9.

¹¹⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 190.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

detrimental lapse since Arista's plan rested on the ability of the Mexican force to conduct reconnaissance and respond to Taylor's movements.

Arista immediately put his forces to march but the reports from his scouts indicating that the U.S. force was only a few miles north of Palo Alto made it clear that he would not arrive in advance of them.¹¹⁹ When the Mexican Army arrived on the southern edge of the prairie a mile and a half south of Palo Alto, his scouts reported that a squadron of U.S dragoons was already patrolling the northern end of the field and at least half of the U.S. force had emerged from the chaparral onto the open plane.¹²⁰ This was a significant blow to Arista's plan—he had indeed arrived too late to contain the American force in the chaparral and was in no position to take control of the tactically important watering hole. The Mexican Army's task was now more difficult, Arista once again failed in securing a position of advantage.

Arista was forced to change his plan and make use of the terrain as best as he could. Although Taylor's force had made it to Palo Alto first, the Mexican Army was still on the road to Matamoros and, thus, still put pressure on Americans seeking to push their way through to rejoin their comrades at Fort Texas. Palo Alto was also a reasonably defensible position. The nearly flat plain was broken by small shallow depressions that were still filled with water from recent rains, and shoulder-high sharp grass impeded movement by unmounted troops. Dense chaparral and a *resaca* (dry riverbed) bordered the plain to the west, which limited that option as an escape route to Americans slowed

¹¹⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 191.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

by their wagons. Taylor's army could also not escape to the east, for its open grassland ensured any movement in that direction would leave the troops vulnerable to Mexican fire.¹²¹ Taylor's only option was to go south on the road towards Arista's force.¹²²

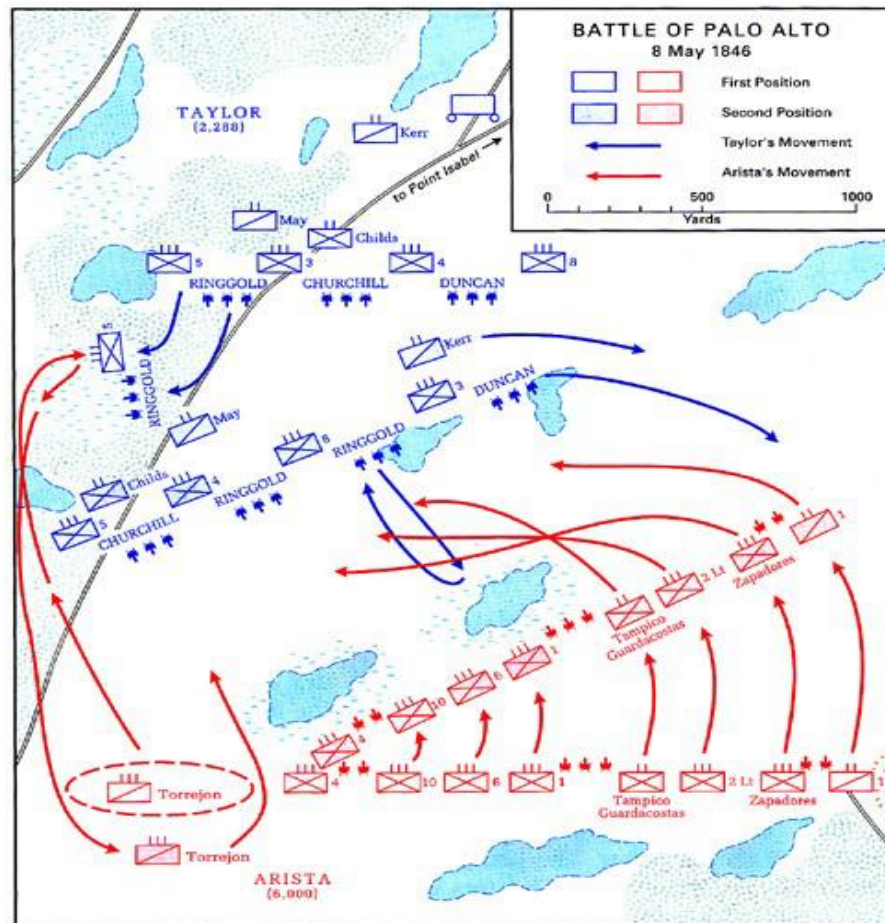


Figure 2. The Battle of Palo Alto

Source: Stephen A. Carney, CMH Pub 73-2, *Guns along the Rio Grande: Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War (Fort Lesley J. McNair, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), 2006), 16.

¹²¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 192.

¹²² Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 52-53.

The pressure was now on Arista to assemble his 3,702 men on the open plain. General Anastasio Torrejón led his cavalry column across the field until it was less than a mile south of the American scouts. Torrejón established his position as the far left of the Mexican line along the north/south running road and the chaparral to the west while the remaining Mexican troops stretched out to the east forming a line more than a mile long.¹²³ The Mexican lines are described by one Mexican infantry officer as long and weak, with no second lines or reserves.¹²⁴ The lines likely lacked depth because of the need to block the entire width of the plain. The few guns that the Mexicans did have were positioned within the brigades and cavalry formed in two separate sections, a small section under Colonel Luis Noriega on the right flank and Torrejón's section on the left flank.¹²⁵

Taylor concentrated his troops across a half mile expanse on the north side of the plain and divided them into two wings.¹²⁶ He arrayed his forces with infantry in succession and artillery batteries between regiments. The right wing consisted of dragoons, and the left wing consisted of an artillery battalion. The wagons remained to the rear near a pond with a squadron of dragoons assigned to guard them.¹²⁷ Although Arista formed first, he allowed the American forces to deploy into formation unimpeded.

¹²³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 192.

¹²⁴ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 9.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 17.

¹²⁷ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 164.

By about 2:30 pm, Ampudia and his forces closed in from the south and he positioned himself to the rear and left of the main lines. With this arrival, Arista had all his troops formed and felt confident commencing the battle.¹²⁸

Arista planned to lure the Americans into a bayonet charge, which he would meet with his infantry and artillery. He hoped to cut down the charging forces with concentrated volleys from his lines. He then intended to use his cavalry to sweep around the flanks and overwhelm the Americans in a double envelopment.¹²⁹ Arista believed that the American force, assumed to be demoralized and anxious to get to their besieged comrades in Fort Texas, would have to attack.¹³⁰ Arista knew the enemy's strength lay in artillery and if the battle progressed as he envisioned it, the enemy would have to hold their fires to avoid hitting their own soldiers.¹³¹ Opposite the Mexicans, Taylor's plan was to force a passage by a bayonet charge in order to reach his men at Fort Texas.¹³²

The battle began as Taylor's forces advanced in silence. Taylor reiterated to his men that the bayonet would be the focus of the battle.¹³³ Like Arista, Taylor was weighing the effects that the terrain had on the available options for attack. This limited Taylor to a frontal assault on the Mexican forces blocking the road. He saw the bayonet

¹²⁸ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 195.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 196.

¹³⁰ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 78.

¹³¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 196.

¹³² Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 166.

¹³³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 197.

charge as the best option for breaking through the enemy to get to his men at Fort Texas. Stopping half a mile short of the Mexican lines, many believed the order to charge would come at any moment. As the enemy advanced, Arista rode across the line on horseback trying to motivate his troops with lively yells of “*Viva la República*” (Long live the Republic) and “*Viva la Patria*” (Long live the Fatherland).¹³⁴ He then made the inexplicable decision to open fire on the advancing forces with his cannons. The shot bounced across the field and over the heads of the American lines.¹³⁵ As other pieces on the Mexican lines opened fire, Taylor gave the order to roll his guns to the front and return fire from two light batteries and the two 18-pounders. The order to charge was never issued. From the start of the artillery exchange, the superiority of the American guns was plain to see. One U.S. artillery officer recalled that the American fires had a dreadful effect, and he could see the enemy ranks thrown into confusion as gaps formed which required some time to close.¹³⁶

Taylor quickly realized that as long as his guns continued to out-range the Mexican's, he held a position of advantage. He immediately decided not to attack with his infantry.¹³⁷ Taylor halted his force and aligned it under cover of the fire of his batteries by ordering Major Samuel Ringgold's battery and a squad of dragoons forward

¹³⁴ Heriberto Frías, *Episodios Militares Mexicanos* (Mexico City, Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1987), 171.

¹³⁵ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 197.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Guardino, *Dead March*, 80.

about two hundred yards ahead of the line.¹³⁸ Arista had made a serious tactical error by firing first and revealing the limited range of his artillery. It is likely that Arista overestimated the range of his guns when he opened fire and thought that he could begin to attrit Taylor's forces as they advanced. It is also possible that the suspense and buildup of the events that finally led to this decisive engagement against Taylor caused Arista to initiate fires too early. In either case, the decision had drastically negative effects on his plan and also altered Taylor's plan of attack. Arista acknowledged in his report that his actions caused Taylor to maintain a defensive rather than offensive posture by employing his best arm, which was his artillery.¹³⁹ This was not what Arista wanted. From this point onward, Arista could not coerce Taylor into the bayonet charge that he needed to implement his tactical plan.

The Mexican tactical plan now changed. Arista decided to wait out the bombardment, as he hoped that the Americans would run out of ammunition and commit to a bayonet charge.¹⁴⁰ The artillery exchange continued with drastic effects to the Mexican lines since they could not reach the enemy with their fire. Mexican rounds tended to fall short and ricochet into the American lines slowly enough for the enemy troops to dodge them.¹⁴¹ Mexican forces also lacked the selection of exploding projectiles and, being unable to shower Taylor's forces with shrapnel, instead pointed their guns at

¹³⁸ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 54.

¹³⁹ *Taylor and His Generals*, 68.

¹⁴⁰ Guardino, *Dead March*, 80.

¹⁴¹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 54.

the opposing batteries in hopes of silencing them counterfire.¹⁴² An unknown Mexican infantry officer described that in the first couple of hours, the American fires targeted the left side of the lines, whose explosions caused Mexican soldiers to fly through the air without having fired their weapons. Despite the carnage, the Mexican soldiers held their line, unmoved, like a wall, and answered the fire with cries of “*Viva México*” (Long Live Mexico) and “*Viva la Independencia*” (Long Live our Independence).¹⁴³ Despite their enthusiasm, the spirit soon faded as the casualties mounted and men rushed forward to fill the gaps created by the enemy fires.¹⁴⁴

The deteriorating situation forced Arista to amend his tactical plan once again. Now realizing that American ammunition was plentiful, he improvised a plan to attack the American right flank with his cavalry. In his report of the battle, Arista claims that he was “anxious for the charge,” because of the devastating fire from the enemy. He instructed Torrejón “to execute it with the greater part of the cavalry” by the Mexican left flank, while another charge “should be executed at the same time by the right flank.”¹⁴⁵ Arista wanted to commit his forces to the double envelopment he had originally planned even though American forces would not charge. He intended to use the maneuverability of Torrejón’s cavalry to engage the American right and then send Colonel José María Carrasco’s light infantry and Colonel Luis Noriega’s light cavalry on the American left to

¹⁴² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 199.

¹⁴³ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 199.

¹⁴⁵ *Taylor and His Generals*, 68.

complete his double envelopment.¹⁴⁶ If Arista could not silence the American guns, he looked to skirt around them to engage the infantry at the rear of Taylor's lines.

Torrejòn's cavalry, supported by two guns, began their charge through the chaparral on the west side of the plain. The charted course through the chaparral posed considerable challenges to the mobility and maneuverability of Torrejòn's force. It immediately lost speed in the dense brush and became bogged down in the marshy bed of a long resaca. A third of the force and one of the 4-pound guns became stuck in the mud while the rest of the force moved forward slowly to avoid getting stuck.¹⁴⁷ The Mexicans conducted no reconnaissance on this part of the field. The delay in receiving the news of Taylor's departure from Point Isabel and the haste in Arista to establish his lines on Palo Alto meant that there had also been little time for a proper reconnaissance of the terrain.¹⁴⁸ Compounding the issue was the fact that Torrejòn's force was slowed by indecision and hesitation from the troops leading the charge. Torrejòn had chosen presidial troops to lead the charge through the chaparral—these troops were historically employed in remote outposts to counter Native American raids. Although these troops had considerable experience in repulsing Comanche raiders, they were not proficient in the cavalry maneuvers that were required in open battle.¹⁴⁹ As a result, their charge failed

¹⁴⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 199.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

to gather real momentum. The failure to reconnoiter the field and properly consider the organization of his forces during the charge rest at Torrejòn's feet.

The slow movement of Torrejòn's attack gave the Americans time to react. Colonel David Twiggs, who commanded one of Taylor's brigades, observed the coming charge and moved troops from the 5th Infantry Regiment and a two-gun section about a quarter mile to the right and rear of the main line, where it formed a square to meet the assault.¹⁵⁰ The square was a common troop formation used by infantry to repel cavalry attacks. As the slow moving Mexican column emerged from the chaparral it directed ineffective fire towards the square and was answered with a concentrated volley that caused them to retreat back three hundred yards.¹⁵¹ Torrejòn pulled back, regrouped his forces, and tried to attack farther west around the square to target the American supply wagons.¹⁵² Troops from the U.S. 3rd Infantry Regiment observed this second charge and formed another square with two artillery guns in support. The guns fired on the advancing Mexicans and drove them, inflicting heavy casualties.¹⁵³ Torrejòn then attempted to recover to his original position. Although the superior artillery gave the Americans an advantage in accuracy, range, and mobility, the tactical disarray by Torrejòn's advance provided Twiggs' forces ample time in countering Mexican attacks.

¹⁵⁰ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 54.

¹⁵¹ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 167.

¹⁵² Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 19.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

The failure of Torrejón's charge significantly affected Arista's tactical plan. Arista describes in his report of the battle that he "was waiting for the moment when the general should execute the charge, and the effect of it should begin to be seen, in order to give the impulse on the right."¹⁵⁴ He was unwilling to commit to the charge from his right because Torrejón's charge failed on the left. Arista was inexplicably married to his plan for the double envelopment. Although he was adjusting parts of his plan because of the consequences from his decisions, the decisive operation that he hoped to execute was still the double envelopment. This likely stems from the heavy influence of Napoleonic tactics that many military leaders relied on at the time. Arista's military career took form in a time when armies used maneuver and massed fires to produce a decisive moment in battle. In the case of Palo Alto, Arista's decisive moment was the double envelopment.

Ringgold's battery continued to push forward and effectively target the Mexican lines. The devastating fires, as described by one Mexican officer, "reached the park which was eight hundred yards to the rear, even to the hospital which was in a forest 1,500 yards from our left, and took the right arm of a wounded man who was having his left arm amputated."¹⁵⁵ Ringgold's advance, in fact, took him almost to the original position of Torrejón's cavalry. The American battery opened fire on the retreating Mexican cavalry as it attempted to return to its post, forcing them farther back to the rear of the Mexican lines to regroup.¹⁵⁶ The Mexican right flank also experienced difficulties.

¹⁵⁴ *Taylor and His Generals*, 69.

¹⁵⁵ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 11.

¹⁵⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 201.

Carrasco's light infantry and light cavalry were heavily targeted by CPT James Duncan's battery on the American far left.¹⁵⁷ Carrasco was prepared to make the second charge to complete Arista's double envelopment, but he never received any signal that Torrejón was successful and that he should begin his advance.¹⁵⁸ He waited and watched as his lines took fire from the American guns.

At approximately 4 pm, the grass on the plains was set ablaze, creating a smoke screen that blew across the entire plain. There are two different accounts explaining how this happened, one from the Mexican perspective and one from the American perspective. According to most Mexican accounts, Taylor's forces set fire to the pasture, forming thick smoke to cover their movements.¹⁵⁹ U.S. reports indicate that with Ringgold's guns firing ferociously, a burning wad of paper from one of the guns set fire to the grass.¹⁶⁰ The smoke obscured the battlefield, causing the fighting to cease for almost an hour. In the ensuing confusion, Taylor believed that the Mexican left had given way, so he pushed his 18-pound guns to the road where Torrejón's cavalry had been positioned on the western end of the field.¹⁶¹ The Mexican left fell back about one thousand yards. Arista noticed that U.S. units on the eastern end were also preparing themselves for a push towards the weakened part of the Mexican right flank and he responded by pushing his

¹⁵⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 201.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Leopoldo Martínez Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848* (México City, México: Panorama Editorial, 1981), 71.

¹⁶⁰ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 55.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 168.

units on that side forward about four hundred yards.¹⁶² This, in effect, shifted the lines on both sides to have them face more northwest and southeast. This sound tactical decision by Arista prevented the Mexicans from being routed and kept his forces well situated to continue to block the way to Fort Texas.

Sensing that he had seized the initiative, Taylor ordered Captain Charles May to lead a squadron of dragoons on a charge against the weakened Mexican cavalry.¹⁶³ He also sent the U.S. 4th Infantry Regiment forward to offer support. May's assault only advanced about four hundred yards before it drew fire from several Mexican artillery pieces, which also fired on the advancing 4th Infantry, inflicting a number of casualties. The dragoons and infantry quickly fell back and out of range of the Mexican guns. This failed U.S. assault paints a clear picture of what the battle might have looked like, had Arista lured Taylor into a frontal assault as he had originally envisioned.¹⁶⁴ As the battle once again settled into an artillery exchange, the Mexican lines continued to sustain casualties. Mexican troops started to plead with their leadership to either be allowed to charge or to fall back out of reach of the American guns.¹⁶⁵ Arista was unable to give in to the pleas of his soldiers; he knew that retreating would result in the surrender of the land north of the Rio Grande and that a charge would result in countless casualties. This indecision and inability to assume risk was costing Arista on the battlefield. He continued

¹⁶² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 202.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

to maintain his troops in formation, only moving his line forward about twenty yards so his men would no longer have to stand among the dead who lay at their previous position.¹⁶⁶

Arista ordered his guns to fire on Ringgold's battery, which had advanced into the range of the Mexican guns. It sustained heavy casualties, Ringgold among them, and was forced to retreat.¹⁶⁷ The Mexican right, being closest to the enemy, nonetheless suffered under its fires. Sappers and men of the 2nd Light Regiment sustained heavy casualties and begged their leaders to be allowed to charge.¹⁶⁸ To alleviate pressure on his lines, Arista made another attempt at attacking, this time on the eastern end of the field on the American left with cavalry from the 2nd Light Regiment.¹⁶⁹ There, Duncan's battery advanced with support from the 8th Infantry Regiment and a squadron of dragoons. Arista committing another tactical mistake by incorrectly assuming that the shift in the lines left these enemy forces isolated and considered them weak.¹⁷⁰ The U.S. forces succeeded in stopping the Mexican cavalry and drove them from the field.¹⁷¹ Arista and his officers, noticing the effect this had on the Mexican lines, attempted to keep their

¹⁶⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 204.

¹⁶⁷ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 21.

¹⁶⁸ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 13.

¹⁶⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 55.

¹⁷⁰ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 204.

¹⁷¹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 55.

shattered units from falling back after this unexpected turn.¹⁷² In his report of the battle, Arista detailed that with the losses continuing, his battalions were becoming impatient and began to fall into disorder.¹⁷³ In an attempt to forestall a rout, Arista ordered the 2nd Light Regiment, the battalion of sappers, the 7th Cavalry Regiment, and one squadron of the light regiment to attack. Arista's stalling and indecision caused him to order the attack with haste and no preparation. The hasty attack lacked coordination, causing units to become intermixed and those on horseback to trample over the infantry.¹⁷⁴ The advance also proved why Arista was hesitant to commit his troops to a charge against the enemy; his infantry became entangled in the tall grass of the plain.¹⁷⁵ With the units moving forward in disorganization, the U.S. 8th Infantry fired several volleys of musket fire in conjunction with fire from Duncan's battery. This broke the charge, causing the Mexicans to fall back westward across their entire front, all the while taking casualties by enemy musket and canister shot.¹⁷⁶

Nightfall brought the battle to a close as the final Mexican charge failed, and the soldiers fell back to their lines. Reports from both Arista and Taylor differ over who won the battle. Arista reported that "the battle was concluded, the field remaining for our

¹⁷² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 55.

¹⁷³ Taylor and His Generals, 69.

¹⁷⁴ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848*, 71-72.

¹⁷⁵ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 204.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 205.

arms.”¹⁷⁷ At the same time Taylor reported that “after an action of five hours” his forces had dislodged the Mexicans “from their position and encamped upon the field.”¹⁷⁸ Arista pulled his forces back to the southern edge of the plain into the chaparral and Taylor pulled his back to a defensive formation around his wagon trains on the north end of the field.¹⁷⁹ In all actuality, the battle is considered a tactical draw since neither army was able to accomplish their objective. But the disparity in number of casualties paints this as an American victory. Taylor reported that his army suffered seven killed in action with 37 wounded.¹⁸⁰ Arista tried to portray a more favorable picture to his superiors and reported 252 killed, dispersed, and wounded.¹⁸¹ The true number of Mexican casualties has been estimated to be much higher. Arista also did not report the demoralized status of his force and how close the army was to collapsing at the end of the battle.¹⁸² The demoralized state spread into what was referred to by one Mexican officer as extreme accusations that Arista had sold his army out to the Americans.¹⁸³ Distrust began to spread throughout the Mexican ranks.

¹⁷⁷ *Taylor and His Generals*, 70.

¹⁷⁸ Zachary Taylor to Office of the Adjutant General, May 1846, in Register of Letters Received, Office of the Adjutant General, 1812-1889, Entry Number PI17 14, Record Group 94, (National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives, Washington, DC).

¹⁷⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 206.

¹⁸⁰ Taylor to Adjutant General.

¹⁸¹ *Taylor and His Generals*, 70.

¹⁸² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 206

¹⁸³ *Campana Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 15.

Arista outright failed to execute his original plan. A series of tactical mistakes on his part complicated the Mexican Army's situation and nullified any advantage that it hoped to gain. The failure to report Taylor's departure from Point Isabel in a timely manner forced Arista to take the field with no preparation. Because of this, terrain played a significant role in the outcome. The tall, sharp grass inhibited dismounted movement, which limited Arista's options. The failure to conduct reconnaissance of the surrounding terrain affected the cavalry's maneuverability, which was crucial in accomplishing Arista's planned double envelopment. Torrejón's failure in effectively employing his unit and allowing the presidial troops to lead the charge against the American right also affected the accomplishment of the envelopment. In the end, Arista's indecision, and his inability to alter the decisive operation of his plan by committing to the double envelopment cost his army a chance for victory.

Ultimately, American artillery played a significant role in the outcome of the battle. In the decade preceding the battle, the U.S. had implemented an ambitious modernization program to revitalize its fires.¹⁸⁴ This modernization effort produced a light, mobile field artillery arm that could move quickly and engage at longer ranges. The real advantage was not merely in the extended range of the new bronze cannons, but in the pairing of the guns with horse-centric battery organizations.¹⁸⁵ To complement this, U.S. artillerists developed doctrine and tactics that emphasized mobility and rapid fire.

¹⁸⁴ Nathan Jennings, "Modernizing for Victory: U.S. Army Fires at the Battle of Palo Alto, 1846," *Infantry Magazine* 110, no. 2 (2021): 58.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The new guns and tactics were present on Palo Alto as American guns were quickly transitioned across the battlefield to counter Mexican cavalry and infantry attacks.

There were no such modernization efforts conducted in the Mexican Army. The older, heavier guns meant that Mexican batteries could not shoot far, with much accuracy, or move across the battlefield. Arista committed a significant tactical error at the beginning of the battle by firing his cannons first and disclosing the weakness in his arms. Taylor was committed to charge the Mexican lines but quickly changed tactics when he realized that his guns were more powerful. He reported in his dispatches that his artillery, “and the excellent manner in which it was maneuvered and served, is our success mainly due.”¹⁸⁶ Arista realized the effect of the artillery as he reported that his guns fired 650 rounds throughout the course of the battle while Taylor’s forces fired 3,000.¹⁸⁷ Mexican soldiers displayed tremendous forbearance in the face of superior fires but were unable to withstand the destruction of American artillery.

Even though the battle is assessed as a tactical draw, Arista and his subordinate leaders’ actions failed to translate into operational success. While Arista altered his plan several times to account for his poor decision making, tactically, it was insufficient to neutralize the American threat. The only course of action that Arista did not pursue during the battle was a frontal attack to close with the enemy and nullify the effect of Taylor’s guns. Superior numbers and the eagerness of his men to fight would have given the Mexican Army an advantage. In the end, Arista decided this course of action was

¹⁸⁶ Taylor to Adjutant General.

¹⁸⁷ *Taylor and His Generals*, 70.

impractical since his troops would have moved too slowly through the sharp, tall grass.¹⁸⁸

In disclosing the range of his guns, Arista narrowed his options and attacked even though he only needed to stand his ground and defend the road. The pressure was on Taylor to act since time was critical for him to get back to his men at Fort Texas. In being compelled to act, Arista lost the initiative and was at a tactical disadvantage throughout the five-hour battle.

The demoralized Mexican Army woke up the next morning and found that the shallow pools on the battlefield that they used as a source of drinking water the day prior were now red with the blood of their fallen.¹⁸⁹ Arista decided to abandon Palo Alto, knowing full well that his soldiers could not withstand another day of artillery fire on the open plain.

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 166.

¹⁸⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 210.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE OF RESACA DE LA PALMA

The decisive engagement that General Mariano Arista sought against the American Army of Occupation was over. The tactical draw on the plains of Palo Alto brought Arista no closer to achieving his operational and strategic goals. As he awoke on the morning of the 9th, Arista reassessed his situation and knew that his present position did not afford him any advantage against the American fire's superiority. He was also concerned about the condition of his army. The Mexican Army was in terrible shape. The previous day's devastation utterly demoralized the army. Some of Arista's senior officers observed that many soldiers were preparing to desert the field but the only thing that kept them there was the darkness of night.¹⁹⁰ The Mexican commander desperately needed to regain the initiative and win if he hoped to keep his army from falling apart. Despite the sense of urgency in the Mexican senior leadership, a series of operational and tactical miscalculations, as well as outright failures from senior leaders to maintain command and control will prevent the Mexican Army from accomplishing its objectives in Resaca de la Palma. The next engagement between the two armies will effectively end the debate over the disputed territory and leave México vulnerable to invasion.

Shortly before dawn on the 9th, Arista decided to abandon his position on the southern edge of Palo Alto to search for more favorable ground.¹⁹¹ An unknown infantry officer remarked that the troops could sense their inevitable retreat as they began their

¹⁹⁰ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 206.

¹⁹¹ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 22.

movement south along the road to Matamoros.¹⁹² Rumors alleging betrayal on Arista's part began to circulate the night before and only added to the "fatal presentiment of a rout."¹⁹³ There was a general feeling among the Mexican troops that the battle could not be won by their skill or valor. Arista was aware of the low morale, but also based his decision to abandon Palo Alto on several other factors. He wrote to the minister of war that "following the battle of Palo Alto the troops were generally frightened and had lost morale. This obliges me to seek another way to challenge the enemy and I propose to place the troops undercover from the fire of cannon, where they might make use of muskets and bayonets."¹⁹⁴ Not only did he intend to find a way to negate the enemy's artillery advantage, but he also needed to mitigate his own weakness in that regard due to the low amount of ammunition on hand after the artillery exchange on Palo Alto.¹⁹⁵ Arista spent the night prior sending dispatches to his officers near the river indicating that he expected to reengage General Taylor's forces in the morning and to instruct General Francisco Mejía in Matamoros to send five hundred 4-pounder and one hundred 8-pounder rounds across the river. Arista was also worried that Taylor's troops had discovered another route to the river and could use it to bypass his position to relieve the

¹⁹² *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 15.

¹⁹³ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos*, 42.

¹⁹⁴ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 210.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

battered Fort Texas.¹⁹⁶ Although he did not know what exact position he would take, Arista knew wanted to use the chaparral farther south as a new line of defense.

The Mexican Army departed Palo Alto around daybreak and headed south along the road to Matamoros. The U.S. troops heard the commotion from the south end of the field and assumed that Arista was preparing to reengage them. Taylor's forces were surprised to see the rear guard of the Mexican Army as they moved south from Palo Alto.¹⁹⁷ Unsure of Arista's intentions, Taylor sent a party of dragoons to determine whether it was a genuine retreat or if the Mexican troops were intending to use the chaparral as cover.¹⁹⁸ After confirming the retreat, Taylor gathered his council of war and, despite the fact that the majority of his officers opposed a pursuit for fears that a much larger enemy force awaited them, he decided to pursue the Mexican Army.¹⁹⁹ Before his departure, Taylor ordered his forces to build breastworks and left four cannons along with five hundred men, a detachment of artillery, infantry, and cavalry, to protect his supply trains.²⁰⁰ He also sent Captain George McCall with a light battalion from the 4th Infantry to move ahead of the main body and make contact with Arista's forces.

¹⁹⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 210.

¹⁹⁷ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 22.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 170.

¹⁹⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 211.

²⁰⁰ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 22.

As the Mexican Army began its movement south, Arista initially selected a position that was three miles from Palo Alto to establish his defensive line.²⁰¹ Arista intended to use the brush on the edge of an open plain to conceal his forces but was convinced by one of his officers that the most defensible position north of the river was another three miles farther south along the road in a place called Resaca de la Palma.²⁰² Arista agreed and continued his march south. The Mexican Army arrived in the new position by ten in the morning. Although Arista followed the advice of his officers, he seemed to be moving forward without a definitive plan or an understanding of the terrain north of the river. The new position, Resaca de la Palma, was an area of particularly dense chaparral in which a resaca intersected the north-south running road to Matamoros. The dry riverbed was about two hundred feet wide, ten to twelve feet deep, and both sides of the ravine were covered in thick forest.²⁰³ The high banks of the resaca also provided natural breastworks for any force that commanded them. Narrow pools of water dotted the dried riverbed throughout. Arista believed this position provided the greatest probability of success for his army.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 215.

²⁰² Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 42.

²⁰³ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 59.

²⁰⁴ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 42.

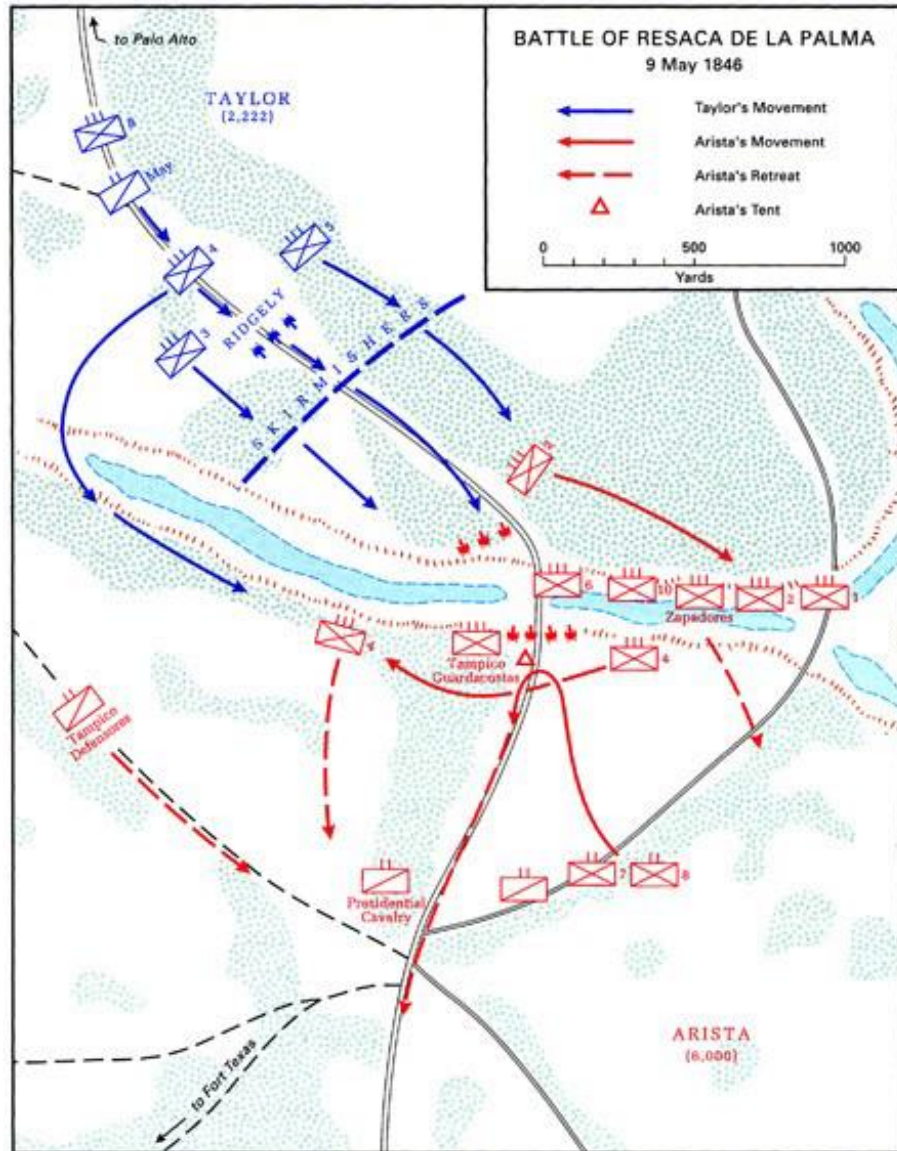


Figure 3. The Battle of Resaca de la Palma

Source: Stephen A. Carney, CMH Pub 73-2, *Guns along the Rio Grande: Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Mexican War (Fort Lesley J. McNair, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), 2006), 23.

Arista recalled the remaining forces he left at Fort Texas to harass the Americans and set about to place his forces on the resaca to wait for the Americans. To the east of the road, he placed the 6th Infantry, 10th infantry, the battalion of sappers, the 2nd Light

Infantry, and finally the 1st Infantry Regiment.²⁰⁵ To the west of the road Arista positioned the 2nd Infantry, the Tampico Battalion, and the 4th Infantry Regiment. In the rear Arista positioned the presidial troops, his light cavalry, and the 7th and 8th Regiments of heavy cavalry. Arista positioned three guns on the southern embankment to cover the whole crossing, a single gun on the western flank, and the remaining four Mexican guns on the road to concentrate on any forces trying to break through. He also positioned skirmishers to the north of the entire Mexican front to harass the incoming Americans and provide advance notice of their arrival.²⁰⁶ Arista's headquarters tent was positioned in a small clearing to the rear of the right flank. Arista's forces numbered close to 3,600 men.

The Mexican operational plan remained the same. It was vital for the Mexican Army to continue isolating the troops in Fort Texas and to prevent Taylor from reaching them.²⁰⁷ Even though the plan remained the same, the situation was now more pressing following the previous day's events. If Arista failed and Taylor was able to reach Fort Texas, there was a real danger that the Americans could hold out in their earthworks indefinitely. The longer that Taylor and his forces could hold out the greater the possibility that he could get reinforced with troops and supplies from Point Isabel.²⁰⁸ The pressure was on Arista and his undermanned and under supplied force to defeat Taylor

²⁰⁵ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 59.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 216.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

and reclaim the land north of the Rio Grande. The thick vegetation and wide embankments of the resaca effectively limited the role of American artillery while also easing the demands on Arista's short supply of artillery ammunition.²⁰⁹ While his men would be sheltered from enemy fire, Arista hoped that Taylor would be forced to rely on an infantry charge. Arista positioned his artillery to frustrate infantry advances and push the attackers back into the brush where his infantry could engage them in close quarters.²¹⁰ Superior numbers gave Arista the advantage in the close fight. The coming engagement would be Arista's best chance at defeating Taylor's forces and carrying out his objectives.

With his forces set, Arista took to his tent to address administrative duties. He delegated command of the army to General Rómulo Díaz de la Vega. Arista was convinced that Taylor would not attack such an imposing position and that it was too late in the day for the Americans to commit themselves to battle.²¹¹ As a result, he authorized that the ammunition be unloaded, the mules to be unhooked from the artillery pieces, and the cavalry to unsaddle.²¹² Arista authorized this while at the same time ordering Colonel José María Carrasco of the 2nd Light Cavalry to carry out reconnaissance on what appeared to be an advance party of American horsemen and infantrymen. Captain McCall's advance party, which departed the main American force earlier to establish

²⁰⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 60.

²¹⁰ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 217.

²¹¹ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 101.

²¹² Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848*, 76.

contact with Arista, was closing up on Resaca de la Palma by three in the afternoon. As he prepared to enter the resaca, Captain McCall split his forces into two columns and advanced into the brush to the left and right of the road.²¹³ Both columns immediately came under heavy fire from Carrasco's forces hidden in the brush. The Americans pressed on but by the time they were within one hundred fifty yards of the resaca, the Mexicans directed a barrage of cannon fire at them that killed one man and wounded two more. Convinced that he found the Mexican main lines, McCall ordered his forces to fall back out of range of the Mexican guns and sent word back to Taylor to inform him of the situation. Arista received report of this small American force and continued about his administrative duties, still convinced that Taylor would not attack his position.²¹⁴

Taylor received McCall's report of the Mexican position and arrived at McCall's location at four o'clock. Having left forces to guard the supply train at Palo Alto, Taylor's forces numbered just under 2,000 men. After conferring with McCall, he immediately pushed his advanced party forward to eliminate the Mexican skirmish line on either side of the road and pushed a battery under the command of Lieutenant Randolph Ridgely to move down the Matamoros road.²¹⁵ The rest of the U.S. battalions were pushed into the brush piecemeal behind the advanced party along with dragoons. Carrasco's reconnaissance forces suddenly found themselves confronted with two regiments of Taylor's infantry along with the American advanced party. Carrasco did

²¹³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 214.

²¹⁴ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 43.

²¹⁵ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 22.

everything he could to maintain the Mexican skirmish line but was forced to retire into the resaca with substantial losses.²¹⁶

As the Americans entered the chaparral, Ridgely's battery pushed his guns down the road to within four hundred yards of the Mexican battery in the brush on the west side of the road. This devolved into an artillery exchange with no clear indication of who had the upper hand.²¹⁷ Ridgely continued to edge farther south, using the reload time of the Mexican guns to advance forward. As the American infantry regiments moved into the brush on either side of the road, they began to experience difficulty in maneuver and command and control. All unit organization quickly broke down in the dense thickets.²¹⁸ As the Americans advanced, this quickly developed into a series of small unit contests.²¹⁹ Small groups of Americans, led by an officer or a noncommissioned officer, worked their way forward as best as they could. They slowly pushed the Mexican skirmishers back to the resaca but Mexican artillery and the main line halted them.²²⁰ But the same difficulties of operating in the chaparral quickly started to plague the Mexican line. Although the chaparral and the embankment provided the Mexican troops with cover and concealment, it also hid the American attack.²²¹ On some portions of the Mexican line, Mexican

²¹⁶ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848*, 76.

²¹⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 218.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ DePalo, *The Mexican National Army*, 102.

²²⁰ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 60.

²²¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 220.

soldiers did not realize that a battle was underway until American troops suddenly appeared on their position. One Mexican officer wrote that “the brushy forest that forms this battlefield is so dense that the soldiers had to use shovel simply to clear a big enough area to stand.”²²² Mexican officers couldn't see the ranks of men in their units and soldiers could only see those who stood shoulder to shoulder with them.

The problems in the Mexican lines extended beyond the effects of the terrain. De la Vega, who had been delegated command by Arista, positioned himself with the 4th Infantry Regiment to the west of the road when the fighting started.²²³ Not being centrally located within the Mexican lines and suffering from the effects of the terrain, made it difficult for the Mexican Army to effectively respond to the American attack. General Pedro de Ampudia, one of the first Mexican senior leaders to realize this as a formal American attack and not a simple skirmish, tried to send word to the senior commander in the field to initiate movement of the reserve from the rear to bolster the Mexican main lines.²²⁴ With Arista still in his tent refusing to believe that the Americans were attacking and De la Vega decisively engaged on the left side of the main lines, there was effectively no one present who was carrying out duties as the senior commander. This would get worse as the Americans continued to advance into the resaca.

Taylor continued his advance and focused on the west side of the road on the Mexican left. This side was weaker since it committed troops from the 2nd Light

²²² Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 220.

²²³ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 43.

²²⁴ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en Mèxico 1846-1848*, 77.

Regiment to the skirmish line that retreated earlier with significant losses.²²⁵ Mexican cannons fired ineffectively in the direction they believed the enemy to be but fired high over the heads of the Americans.²²⁶ Taylor's forces also struggled with directing their fires against the Mexicans. Although their artillery did not experience the same level of success from the day prior, the deafening sound of the shot exploding added to the disorientation and anxiety of the Mexican troops.²²⁷ This caused some of the troops to give up without a fight. Troops from the Tampico battalion put up fierce resistance but suffered heavy casualties and retreated along with the presidial troops.²²⁸ Companies from the 4th and 6th Infantry Regiments bore the brunt of the American assault on the left. But in most cases, Mexican leadership were lucky to get a single wildly inaccurate shot from their soldiers before they dropped their muskets and fell back.²²⁹ Most of their commanders either fell mortally wounded or were taken prisoner by the advancing enemy.²³⁰ The remaining officers tried in vain to restrain their men and hold their lines together. Colonel José Uruga of the 4th Infantry started the battle with 450 men but once the Americans advanced on his lines, he could only count on sixteen men to defend his

²²⁵ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 43.

²²⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 220.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en Mèxico 1846-1848*, 78.

²²⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 220.

²³⁰ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 43.

regimental flag.²³¹ One senior Mexican officer recounts of his soldiers that “most retreated almost without seeing the enemy and very few cartridges were fired that afternoon.”²³²

Ridgely and his guns continued to support the American advance from the main road. To silence these guns, a small detachment of Mexican lancers charged up the main road but the American gun peppered them with canister shot and forced them to retreat.²³³ Ridgely’s battery soon came under fire from the Mexican guns on the left. Ridgely requested aid from Taylor to silence these guns. Taylor ordered Captain Charles May and two companies of dragoons to take out the Mexican artillery. As May’s dragoons approached the Mexican lines, Ridgely drew fire from the guns to reveal their position, and then pressed them forward to charge.²³⁴ The swift charge scattered the crews manning the Mexican guns but also carried the dragoons past the gun position and farther into the Mexican lines. The dragoons became disoriented in the brush and suffered several casualties. They were able to regroup and were forced to retreat back across the resaca.²³⁵ The Mexican cannoneers were able to regain their pieces and resumed firing. Although May was unable to silence the guns, he was able to take several prisoners, among them

²³¹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 220.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 25.

²³⁴ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 222.

²³⁵ Ibid., 223.

De la Vega.²³⁶ The Mexican battlefield commander was now completely out of commission and in the hands of the enemy, further complicating the issues with command and control.

At this point, Taylor realized that he needed to commit a full-scale infantry assault to take the field. He ordered the 8th Infantry from his reserve as well as the 5th Infantry to charge into the chaparral to take the enemy guns.²³⁷ The remaining Mexican defense was focused on the point where the resaca intersected the road and the troops there held their position as the lines crumbled around them.²³⁸ If the U.S. was able to clear the Mexican cannon from their positions and take the road, there would be nothing left to stop Taylor from racing his cannon down the road and taking the whole resaca. Ampudia distinguished himself as he attempted to draw together remnants of the retreating regiments to assist in the defense of this crucial point.²³⁹ Despite these efforts, a final coordinated assault between Ridgely's guns, May's dragoons, and the newly committed troops of the 5th and 8th Infantry Regiments converged on the Mexican guns to capture them.²⁴⁰ In the ensuing chaos, advancing light companies under the command of Captain Robert Buchanan of the U.S. 4th Infantry found a trail to the west that passed around the

²³⁶ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 44.

²³⁷ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 62.

²³⁸ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 223.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 224.

Mexican left flank.²⁴¹ Just as the fighting broke out, Ampudia was alerted that a small trail that went around the left of the lines was discovered and that the enemy could use it to flank their position.²⁴² Ampudia diverted a company of sappers with a company from the 4th Infantry to guard the trail. Despite these efforts, the U.S. troops were able to push past the resaca to put more pressure on the retreating defenders.

Arista finally came out of his tent in time to see the left side of his line break and Ampudia attempting to enter the brush with two additional companies of the 4th Infantry to reinforce the lines.²⁴³ There seemed to be no order to the Mexican lines, and it seemed as though every man was engaged. The disorder of the retreating forces from the left began to spread to the right side of the Mexican lines. The units on the right, despite not being under fire, began to break and retreat, some without having even fired a single cartridge.²⁴⁴ Arista finally realized the danger of the situation and attempted to motivate and reorganize his forces.²⁴⁵ Burning with rage at his soldiers for falling back, he called to the rear to get his unengaged cavalry to enter the fight with an all-out charge.²⁴⁶ General Anatasio Torrejòn, who was still leading the cavalry brigade, questioned the order to

²⁴¹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 62.

²⁴² *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 18.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴⁴ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 44.

²⁴⁵ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en Mèxico 1846-1848*, 79.

²⁴⁶ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 45.

charge. Torrejón said it was unheard of for a cavalry charge through a forest to produce any success.²⁴⁷ Frustrated, Arista took to the rear to gather the cavalry brigade and lead the charge himself. As the charge moved its way up the road the cavalry was able to lance a few lingering American dragoons. But Arista experienced the same troubles that the American dragoons suffered, and it was obvious that he could not stand up against the American infantry in their protected positions in the chaparral.²⁴⁸ The brush and narrow road forced the cavalry to establish a narrow front and prevented Arista from bringing the full force of his cavalry upon the U.S. forces. It was also difficult for the lancers to advance with their spears in such tight quarters.²⁴⁹ As they advanced across the resaca they were met with concentrated artillery and musket fire that forced Arista to join the rest of his forces in retreat. Any hopes of driving the enemy back and regrouping his forces fell with the charge.

The retreating Mexicans fled south, looking for any way to cross the river. The desperation in the soldiers to flee the advancing Americans caused panic and disorganization.²⁵⁰ Arista himself crossed the river upstream at Villa de Ampudia and made it to Matamoros later that night. Most of the fleeing troops passed by Fort Texas and attempted to cross the Rio Grande at the Anacuitas Ferry across from Matamoros. With only two boats to aid in the retreat, many panic-stricken soldiers threw themselves

²⁴⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 225.

²⁴⁸ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 175.

²⁴⁹ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 226.

²⁵⁰ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848*, 79.

into the water. A great number of them drowned in the swift current.²⁵¹ While some of the officers attempted to gather and organize as many forces as they crossed, the battalions of Puebla and Morelia stood out as some of the more disciplined in the Mexican ranks. These battalions were able to form a rear guard to protect the rest of the force and were the last ones to cross the river.²⁵² Taylor initially ordered his forces to pursue the retreating Mexicans but ordered a halt to consolidate them back at Resaca de la Palma.²⁵³ Taylor was cautious, and he knew that he lacked an adequate cavalry to continue the pursuit. He also knew that he needed to remain close to the supply train he left at Palo Alto. So, he ordered his forces to establish camp at the resaca and rest for the night.

Resaca de la Palma was an even bigger loss for Arista and his army than Palo Alto. The Mexican Army suffered 154 dead, 205 wounded, and 156 missing or taken prisoner. U.S. losses only numbered 36 dead and 70 wounded.²⁵⁴ Just as great were the material losses that the Mexican Army suffered. U.S. infantry Lieutenant John C. Robinson described in a letter to a friend that they “captured nine pieces of artillery, five of which were taken by the 5th Infantry—besides flags, small arms, ammunition etc. in abundance.”²⁵⁵ At the end of the battle as U.S. soldiers on the east side of the road

²⁵¹ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 176.

²⁵² Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 47.

²⁵³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 226.

²⁵⁴ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en Mèxico 1846-1848*, 79-80.

²⁵⁵ John C. Robinson to Elisha M. Pease, May 10, 1846, in Letter, John C. Robinson to Elisha M. Pease, Field of Battle 3 miles from Matamoras, May 10, 1846 (University of Texas at Arlington Library, Special Collections).

advanced, they came upon the clearing where Arista had established his headquarters.²⁵⁶ When Arista rushed off to lead the final cavalry charge, he left no one to defend the area. Taylor's forces took control of the camp which included food, 393 muskets, more than 155,000 rounds of ammunition, almost 500 mules with pack saddles, twenty horses, and the personal baggage of Arista and his staff.²⁵⁷ Arista was left south of the river with a further demoralized and disorganized army with no "clothes, weapons, or hope."²⁵⁸

This battle was a decisive victory for the U.S. and helped accomplish a strategic objective for the Americans in securing the southern border of the Rio Grande. Taylor was also able to relieve his men at Fort Texas, which he renamed Fort Brown in honor of Major Jacob Brown who succumbed to wounds caused by the Mexican bombardment. At the same time, this was a strategic failure for the Mexican Army. In being driven south across the river, Arista lost control of the disputed territory and for a second time proved incapable of defeating Taylor's Army of Occupation. This loss also left México vulnerable and open to invasion. Following the battle, it became obvious to Mexican leadership that the battered army that remained in Matamoros was in no shape to engage in the defense of the city should Taylor choose to attack it.²⁵⁹ Rather than risk the remaining forces in what was deemed an indefensible city, they made the decision to abandon Matamoros. The battered army marched out on May 12th. With no means to

²⁵⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 227.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 234.

²⁵⁹ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 48.

transport trains and materials of war, a large quantity of war material was destroyed or thrown into the river to prevent the Americans from seizing them.²⁶⁰ This further limited the war capacity of the retreating army. In his account of the battle, Taylor reported that he was sure the enemy would not molest them again on the northern banks of the river.²⁶¹ Taylor was right, his forces took the city on the 18th, opening the door to the invasion of Northern México. For his failure, Arista was court-martialed and relieved of command for failing to defend the northern border and replaced with Ampudia.²⁶²

The battle of Resaca de la Palma requires a deeper analysis to understand why México lost. By all estimates, México should have won the battle. It held every advantage on the field except for quality of arms. Arista's forces outnumbered Taylor's almost two to one and held a strong defensive position. But these advantages could not overcome two significant factors that precipitated the defeat of the Mexican Army: the decaying morale of the Mexican troops and the outright failure of Arista and his senior officers to lead effectively. The loss at Palo Alto took a devastating toll on the morale of the Mexican troops. Adding to this was the physical exhaustion of the troops who could not rest or eat before the battle at the resaca began since Arista shifted his position.²⁶³ Some of the troops had not eaten or slept in over 24 hours when the battle started.²⁶⁴ It

²⁶⁰ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 49.

²⁶¹ Zachary Taylor to Office of the Adjutant General.

²⁶² Carney, *Guns Along the Rio Grande*, 28.

²⁶³ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 215.

²⁶⁴ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 172.

was reported by one officer that Ampudia tried to warn Arista that the low morale of the troops would cause the army's defeat. But Arista waived off the warning, citing the motivation and high spirits of the day before.²⁶⁵ Unbeknownst to Arista, he also contributed to the low morale of the soldiers. Confidence in the ability of Arista to lead diminished after the loss at Palo Alto. The rumor that Arista betrayed them the day before ate away at morale and discipline.²⁶⁶ There were also many in the ranks who pointed to the shift in position as evidence that Arista "did not know the terrain or had not developed a fixed plan of operations."²⁶⁷ The restrictive terrain of the resaca also created conditions that effected the morale of the troops and degraded their solidarity. Mexican soldiers who were able to see thousands of their comrades along their front the day prior could now only see the handful of people closest to them.²⁶⁸ The feeling of isolation only added to the decay of morale and led many to simply drop their arms and run, some without firing a single shot.

Arista and his senior officers failed to execute their leadership duties during the battle in the resaca. Arista, as the senior battlefield commander, was clearly overconfident. He was certain that his position on the resaca was invulnerable and convinced that Taylor did not have enough sunlight to commit to an attack at four in the

²⁶⁵ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 18.

²⁶⁶ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos*, 46.

²⁶⁷ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 216.

²⁶⁸ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 82.

afternoon.²⁶⁹ This overconfidence was shared with some of his senior officers, including De la Vega, who later said to his captors, “If I had had with me yesterday \$100,000 in silver I would have bet the whole of it that no 10,000 men on earth could drive us from our position.”²⁷⁰ This overconfidence is what led Arista to delegate command to De la Vega and to remain in his tent throughout the majority of the battle. Arista was well aware of the U.S. attack once it commenced but each time he was notified of the action, he waived it off as a simple skirmish.²⁷¹ Arista took himself out of the fight and when he finally realized the gravity of the situation it was too late for him to effectively lead the defense of his position. Even in the final cavalry charge that he led, he was still ineffective as a battlefield commander. As one unknown Mexican officer put it, during the charge “he became a mere soldier, he exposed himself to the enemy’s fire...”²⁷² Arista could not coordinate the defense of his position if he was decisively engaged in a charge.

Arista was not the only one who failed to execute his duties on the field. De la Vega, whom Arista delegated command of the army, did not lead the army once the attack on the resaca began. As soon as he took command, De la Vega positioned himself with the 4th Infantry Regiment on the west side of the road, effectively limited his ability to lead the entire army.²⁷³ Once the battle started, he became decisively engaged in the

²⁶⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 62.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 175.

²⁷² *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 20.

²⁷³ Alcazar, *Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre Mèxico y los Estados Unidos*, 43.

action with the Mexican guns in his position. The U.S. cavalry charge by Captain May that captured De la Vega further diminished Mexican command and control during the battle. De la Vega should have centrally positioned himself during the battle and should not have allowed himself to get decisively engaged or put in a position that risked his capture. Other high-ranking officers failed to do their part in the Mexican defense. Colonel Antonio Canales Rosillo, who had a contingent of cavalry and infantry to guard the rear left flank of the Mexican lines, failed to even take action when the Mexican main left line began to break.²⁷⁴ His squadron simply retreated without having fired a single shot. Units in the right flank, which were also largely unengaged, also retreated without firing a single cartridge.²⁷⁵

However, not all leaders failed. Ampudia stands out as one of the more effective leaders in the Mexican Army. He was one of the first to realize the seriousness of the American attack and coordinated much of the defense of key points along the resaca. Unfortunately, his actions were not enough to make a difference on the field. The Mexican Army may have had the advantage in numbers, but it forfeited that advantage with the tactical failure of leaders to motivate and commit their soldiers to the defense of their position.

Operationally, Arista made a sound decision in the selection of the resaca to counter U.S. artillery. But he failed to take into account the effects this would have on his own troops, their decaying morale and his army's ability to coordinate a defense.

²⁷⁴ *Campaña Contra Los Americanos del Norte*, 20.

²⁷⁵ Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México 1846-1848*, 79.

Tactically, the lack of command and control and failure of leaders to effectively employ their troops created the conditions that Taylor's smaller force needed to force a complete rout. This defeat led to México's failure and was the last time the Mexican Army held the initiative in Northern México. Although the army remained intact, it was forced to retreat with Taylor having the freedom to press into México and further threaten their territory.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma concluded with the Mexican Army in full retreat. The performance of General Mariano Arista and his leaders resulted in numerous failures at each level of warfare. Arista was tasked with accomplishing the destruction of General Zachary Taylor's Army of Occupation and reestablishing the Nueces River as the boundary between México and Texas. Arista's failure to realize these goals in the opening battles, leads to the conclusion that the México was not able to execute complementary efforts across the levels of warfare. Tactical efforts did not support operational goals, which in turn did not support strategic goals. Likewise, strategic and operational efforts did not set the conditions for success at the tactical level.

The Mexican Army's performance in the tactical level of warfare failed to achieve the effects necessary to defeat the U.S. Army. Terrain, both at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, did not favor Mexican efforts. At Palo Alto, the open plain was ideal for Taylor's superior cannons to wreak havoc on the Mexican lines. The thick chaparral and grass precluded effective maneuver and denied México the opportunity to use its cavalry and superior numbers. Morale also played a huge part in México's tactical failure. On Palo Alto, the continued devastation by U.S. artillery, coupled with the failed charge at the end of the battle caused the lines to break. The low morale only festered and carried over to the resaca, where the lack of unit cohesion and fear of U.S. artillery caused some of the units to simply drop their arms and flee.

Operationally, the Mexican Army was not able to position its forces to gain the advantage over U.S. forces. This failure began well before Arista crossed the river and

marched to contain Taylor. Mexican forces were ordered to fall back to Matamoros as U.S. forces began to advance south from Corpus Christi.²⁷⁶ As a result of this, Taylor was able to dig in directly across the river from Matamoros and take and repurpose Point Isabel as his supply depot. Arista further gave up the initiative by not containing Taylor to Fort Texas. This allowed Taylor to secure his only supply line and gather much needed supplies. This failure forced Arista to meet Taylor on the field where indecision and inferior weapons caused tactical defeat. Finally, the operational failure of Arista initiating his movement to Palo Alto late and failing to get ahead of Taylor's force created unfavorable conditions for the Mexican Army. In the rush of establishing his lines on Palo Alto, Arista was unable to hold the Americans in the chaparral and properly reconnoiter the surrounding terrain. This caused him to amend his tactical plan several times, leading to indecision and tactical defeat.

Strategically, Mexican national leadership gave up control of the disputed area by making the operational decision to pull their forces back to Matamoros. President Paredes made this decision to avoid a premature defeat and to maintain his political support base and morale of the army.²⁷⁷ By ceding the disputed area, it made the task of eliminating the U.S. Army that much more difficult for Arista. The aggregate effect of tactical and operational failures prevented the accomplishment of strategic objectives. This caused the loss of control of territories north of the Rio Grande and, even worse, left Northern México vulnerable to invasion.

²⁷⁶ Murphy, *Two Armies on the Rio Grande*, 58-59

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

Having assessed the performance of México across the levels of warfare, it is important to note that the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma occurred in the operational and tactical realms but were affected by decisions made at the national level. With this in mind, there is one common thread that links the failures that occurred at the operational and tactical levels during the two battles – Arista. Although he moved forward with a strong operational and tactical plan, his indecision, overconfidence, and inability to assume risk ceded the initiative to the invading force. This created multiple dilemmas for his army and made it difficult for him to utilize his cavalry and numerical superiority. He was slow to react in Palo Alto and in Resaca de la Palma he mistakenly removed himself from the battle. Arista failed to make the decisions that would lead his army to success, breeding failure at the operational and tactical levels.

Ultimately, the Mexican Army lacked preparation. Both Presidents Herrera and Paredes knew from the beginning that México was not in any position to wage a war. Eduardo Paz, a Mexican officer who wrote extensively about the war in the late 19th century, offers the following scathing review of México's lack of preparation:

México should have limited their actions to a defense. But the Mexican Army was not in any condition to carry out its task because it lacked preparation. If the Mexican Army had been prepared, they would have formed their study on the theater of operations and valued the resources and projects of the adversary. The terrain was not unknown to them, both from a topographical and strategic point of view, yet from here we have the failures of Palo Alto, Resaca, and Cerro Gordo among other.²⁷⁸

This review illustrates the understanding that Arista and his predecessors failed to achieve of the terrain and of the enemy intent. While Arista's decision making drastically

²⁷⁸ Eduardo Paz, *Invasión Norte-Americana en 1846* (México: Imprenta Moderna de Carlos Paz, 1889), 37.

affected the Mexican Army's attempts at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, the lack of preparation bled into every function of México's efforts to repel the U.S. Army.

The impact of this assessment lies in the expansion of the historiography to include a detailed analysis of actions during the initial battles of the war from the Mexican perspective. This assessment includes the different attitudes and opinions of the leading figures of the Mexican Army, the rationale behind their intended courses of action, the effects of terrain and the enemy force, and finally the resulting impacts of the actions. As stated before, this type of assessment is largely absent from the Mexican historiography. Including this assessment helps give a more holistic understanding of the specific reasons for México's failure on the battlefield and provides another method for analyzing the Mexican War.

Ideally, this type of assessment should be continued and conducted with regards to subsequent battles in the Mexican War. Taylor's advance into Northern México following his success on the Rio Grande took him to victory against the Mexicans at Monterrey and Buena Vista. This would add even more value to this analysis because it would consider two different Mexican commanders, General Pedro de Ampudia at Monterrey, and General Antonio López de Santa Anna at Buena Vista – both of whom experienced failure. Even further analysis can bridge this understanding through the U.S. invasion of Central México from Veracruz to México City. This introduces a new U.S. commander, General Winfield Scott, with a much larger force and further challenges Mexican commanders in new and complex terrain. This would vastly expand the understanding of the war from the Mexican perspective.

Despite the bygone era of the subject in question, the analysis highlights the successes and failures of Mexican leadership and can draw parallels to warfare today. This study provides examples and insight into how actions at various levels of warfare can degrade efforts in other levels. As stated earlier, efforts need to be complimentary and nested within each other to successfully accomplish objectives. This remains true today. But this critical analysis of Mexican leadership does not discount the efforts put forth by courageous soldiers that fought for their country. In recognizing their struggle, a deeper understanding of the employment of the levels of warfare can be made to avoid making the same mistakes in future engagements.

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