

in a manner not to be mistaken. . . . We are too far from the frontier to impress the government of Mexico with our readiness to vindicate, by force of arms if necessary, our title to the country as far as the Rio Grande."

He also added in the same despatch, that, if a forward movement was to be made, Point Isabel and Laredo were the points he would recommend for occupation.<sup>1</sup> But in spite of this expression of Taylor's opinion in October, orders for the movement he suggested were not sent to him until the following month of January.

It must also be noted that the American government, while asserting that Texas was in possession of the disputed territory, actually supposed that there were Mexican troops east of the Rio Grande; for Taylor had been instructed not to disturb "any posts on the Eastern side thereof which are in the actual occupancy of Mexican forces, or Mexican settlements, over which the republic of Texas did not exercise jurisdiction at the period of annexation, or shortly before that event."<sup>2</sup>

With the question of right Taylor and his men evidently had nothing to do. Whatever blame there may be for pushing forward into a region over which Texas asserted but did not exercise actual jurisdiction, and to which she could therefore have given no clear title, must rest solely with the authorities at Washington.

Taylor's advance to the Rio Grande, as has been already said, was unopposed, but it was not unobserved. General Francisco Mejía, who commanded the troops in Matamoros, hearing that the American force were marching toward him, sent a small force of cavalry to watch the movement, and as an additional precaution, he issued a fiery proclamation addressed to the inhabitants of the department of Tamaulipas and the troops under his command, in which he charged the United States with dissimulation, fraud, and the basest

<sup>1</sup> Taylor to Adjutant-General, Oct. 4, 1845; *ibid.*, 107. The italics are not in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Marcy to Taylor, July 8 and 30, 1845; *ibid.*, 806, 807.

treachery; announced that "the degenerate sons of Washington," not satisfied with annexing Texas, were advancing to take possession of a large part of Tamaulipas, and called upon citizens and soldiers alike to oppose the invader. Alluding to the defeat of the Spanish expedition at Tampico, in 1829, he burst into a strain of characteristic eloquence:

"If the banks of the Panuco have been immortalized by the defeat of an enemy, respectable and worthy of the valor of Mexico; those of the Bravo shall witness the ignominy of the proud sons of the north, and its deep waters shall serve as the sepulchre of those who dare approach it. . . . Let the enemy then come, whom you are burning to meet on the field of battle. We shall fight, and the crown of triumph shall be the merited reward of your valor and discipline. *A las armas! Viva la nación Mejicana! Viva la independencia!*"<sup>1</sup>

The party of Mexican cavalry sent out to observe Taylor's march met him about thirty miles from Matamoros at a small tidal creek, the Arroyo Colorado, on March 20, 1846, and stated they had peremptory orders to open fire if the American troops attempted to cross it. Taylor neglected the warning and crossed the creek, whereupon the reconnoitring party retreated without firing a shot, and were pursued, but not molested.<sup>2</sup> On March 24 a party of citizens from Matamoros were met, who also presented a formal protest against the occupation of "the northern district of Tamaulipas," to which Taylor promised a written answer, and continued his march.<sup>3</sup>

Having arrived opposite Matamoros on the twenty-eighth of March, Taylor proceeded to intrench himself and to establish a battery of eighteen-pounder guns commanding the town; but for four weeks no actual hostilities took place, Taylor continuing to strengthen his position by laying out "a strong bastioned field fort" for a garrison of five hundred men. The Mexicans, on their side, also threw up some works designed to prevent the Americans from crossing the river,

<sup>1</sup> Text and translation in H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 125-129.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor to Adjutant-General, March 21, 1846; *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>3</sup> Same to same, March 25, 1846; *ibid.*, 129. The answer was sent on March 28.—(*Ibid.*, 137.)

although Taylor believed that these works were "scantily armed with guns of inferior calibre," which would "oppose very feeble obstacles" in the event of his attempting to cross.<sup>1</sup>

Matters were in this state on the eleventh of April, when General Pedro Ampudia—the same Ampudia who had made himself conspicuous at the time of the capture of Sentmanat—arrived in Matamoros at the head of a considerable body of troops, and on the following day addressed a communication to Taylor. The substance of his letter was that the United States had insulted and exasperated the Mexican nation by advancing to the Rio Grande, and that therefore—

"by explicit and definitive orders of my government, which neither can, will, nor should receive new outrages, I require you in all form, and at latest in the peremptory term of twenty-four hours, to break up your camp and retire to the other bank of the Nueces River, while our governments are regulating the pending question in relation to Texas. If you insist on remaining upon the soil of the department of Tamaulipas, it will clearly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question; and in that case I advise you that we accept the war to which, with so much injustice on your part, you provoke us."<sup>2</sup>

Taylor replied immediately, declining to enter into a discussion of international questions and referring to the fact that an envoy had already been sent by the United States to Mexico for the purpose of settling the boundary by negotiation. He himself, he said, had been ordered to occupy the country up to the left bank of the Rio Grande until the boundary should be definitively settled; he had carefully abstained from all acts of hostility; his instructions did not permit him to retrograde from the position he occupied; and the responsibility for war, if it ensued, must rest "with those who rashly commence hostilities."<sup>3</sup>

Ampudia did not follow up his threats, and Taylor's next move was to commit an act which war alone would justify—though he himself described it as "a measure not in itself

<sup>1</sup> Same to same, April 6, 1846; *ibid.*, 133.

<sup>2</sup> H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 140.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

hostile, but a simple defensive precaution"<sup>1</sup>—that is, he arranged with the naval force off the mouth of the Rio Grande to institute a blockade of the river; and as the troops in Matamoros received their supplies largely by water, the measure was a serious annoyance to Ampudia, who sent a vehement protest. Taylor replied that he would not raise the blockade without orders from Washington, "unless indeed you desire an armistice pending the final settlement of the question between the governments,"<sup>2</sup> and the blockade continued to be enforced.

In these acts of Taylor's the Mexican government thought it saw a sufficient justification for an attack on the United States forces under his command. Both governments had asserted that they would act only on the defensive; but President Paredes now directed that what he called a "defensive war" should be begun. In a proclamation *urbi et orbi*, published April 23, 1846, he explained his position thus:

"The ancient injuries and the attacks which ever since the year 1836 the Government of the United States has incessantly inflicted upon the people of Mexico, have been crowned by the insult of sending us a Minister who is accredited to our government as a resident Minister, as if the relations between the two Republics had suffered no alteration since the final act of the annexation of Texas was consummated. At the very moment that Mr. Slidell presented himself the troops of the United States were occupying our territory. Their squadrons threatened our ports, and they were preparing to occupy the peninsula of the Californias of which the question of Oregon with England is no more than a preliminary. I did not admit Mr. Slidell because the dignity of the nation would repel this new insult.

"In the meantime the army of the United States encamped at Corpus Christi and occupied the Island of Padre Vallin, and then marched to Santa Isabel and the flag of the stars waved on the right bank [*sic*] of the Rio Bravo del Norte opposite the city of Matamoros, they previously stopping the navigation of the river by means of their ships of war. The town of Laredo was surprised by a party of their troops and a piquet of our forces who had been sent there to reconnoitre was disarmed. Hostilities therefore have been begun by the United States of America, who have undertaken new conquests in

<sup>1</sup> Taylor to Arista, April 25, 1846; *ibid.*, 1206.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 138, 144, 145.

the territory lying within the line of the Departments of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon while the troops of the United States are threatening Monterey in Upper California. . . .

"So many and such bitter outrages can be tolerated no longer, and I have commanded the general-in-chief of the division of our northern frontier to attack the army which is attacking us; to answer with war the enemy who makes war upon us; and that—invoking the god of battles—the valor of our soldiers may preserve our unquestionable right to the territory, and the honor of our arms which are not to be employed but in defence of justice. Our general, abiding by established usages and in accordance with the positive directions of my government, has demanded from the commander-in-chief of the American troops that they retire to the other side of the Nueces River, the ancient boundary of Texas, and the demand has been refused. . . .

"I solemnly announce that I do not decree war against the government of the United States of America, because it belongs to the august Congress of the nation, and not to the Executive, to decide definitely what reparation must be exacted for such injuries. But the defence of Mexican territory which the troops of the United States are invading is an urgent necessity, and my responsibility before the nation would be immense if I did not order the repulse of forces which are acting as enemies; and I have so ordered. From this day defensive war begins, and every point of our territory which may be invaded or attacked shall be defended by force."<sup>1</sup>

The day after the date of this proclamation General Arista arrived and took command, notified Taylor that he considered hostilities begun and that he should prosecute them, and at once began crossing the river.<sup>2</sup> His plan was to send his cavalry to cross above Taylor's position, while the main body of infantry and artillery would cross below, and thus

<sup>1</sup> *México á través de los Siglos*, IV, 559. The capture of Laredo mentioned by Paredes was made, apparently, by a party of Texas rangers, under Major Hays.—(H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 107, 115.) The reference to American forces threatening Monterey in Upper California presumably relates to Frémont's visit to that neighborhood the first week in March, 1846, as to which see below.

<sup>2</sup> C. M. Bustamante asserts that Ampudia was superseded because the administration was afraid he would pronounce for Santa Anna. Bustamante goes on to denounce Arista for his dilatory and incompetent management, and accuses him at great length of corrupt and treasonable relations with the enemy.—(*Nuevo Bernal Diaz*, II, 4, 21-37.) Arista's notification to Taylor, and Taylor's reply of April 25, 1846, will be found in H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 1204, 1205.

cut Taylor off from his base of supplies at Point Isabel.<sup>1</sup> The plan involved some serious risks, for Arista had no pontoons, and in the event of a defeat his position, with a considerable river in his rear, might prove disastrous. However, on April 24 General Torrejon, with all of Arista's cavalry and some infantry, was across the Rio Grande, and on the following day they came upon a scouting party of sixty-three American dragoons, under Captain Thornton, who after a short skirmish were surrounded and captured. The American casualties were sixteen killed and wounded.<sup>2</sup> Torrejon sent his prisoners to Matamoros, and continued his march round Taylor's position to a point on the river opposite the rancho de Longoreño, some twelve miles below Matamoros, which had been selected for the crossing of the main body of the Mexican force.

Taylor immediately despatched a brief account of the skirmish to Washington. "Hostilities," he wrote, "may now be considered as commenced," and he reported that he had called (under authority previously given) upon the governors of Texas and Louisiana for eight regiments of volunteers, or five thousand men in all.<sup>3</sup>

For the next two or three days Taylor remained stationary, finishing his fort and learning what he could of the enemy's movements, until he finally received information that the whole Mexican army was preparing to cross the river below Matamoros, with a view to effecting a junction with the force from above. He concluded that the object of the movement was an attack upon the depot at Point Isabel, and he therefore determined to march there, leaving the necessary garrison in the fort opposite Matamoros. Whether this movement was wise, under the circumstances, may be doubted. He was already in a critical condition, with his base of sup-

<sup>1</sup> Ampudia subsequently asserted that the plan was his, and that he had made his preparations to cross on the fifteenth of April, but had been stopped by an order directing him to suspend operations until Arista's arrival.—(*Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra entre México y los E. U.*, 34.)

<sup>2</sup> See reports of Captains Hardee and Thornton in H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 291, 290.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor to Adjutant-General, April 26, 1846; *ibid.*, 140.

plies nearly twenty miles away, and he was opposed by an enemy numerically superior. The advantages to be gained from a victory were relatively slight; the injury that would result from a defeat was enormous, for it must have meant the annihilation of Taylor's force. Nevertheless, he took the chances, and was thoroughly justified by success.

One regiment of infantry and two companies of artillery, together with the sick, numbering in all not over five hundred men, having been left behind under command of Major Brown, of the infantry, Taylor, with the remainder of his little army, set out on the afternoon of the first of May for Point Isabel. On the next day he arrived at that place without having discovered any signs of the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Brown was attacked on the morning of the third of May, but only by a long-range cannonade, which did little damage. The fort, planned by Captain Mansfield, of the United States Engineers, was built upon a triangular point of land, with the river on two sides of it, and no very formidable attempt was made to approach it on the land side. The total American casualties were two killed and ten wounded. Among the latter was Brown himself, who was so seriously injured during the cannonade, which lasted a hundred and sixty hours, that he died shortly afterward of his wounds. His memory has been preserved in the name of Fort Brown, and of Brownsville, the town which has since grown up about it.<sup>2</sup>

For five days Taylor remained at Point Isabel, where the sounds of the cannonade at Matamoros reached him. He strengthened the position at the Point, and the Gulf squadron (which he seems to have sent for) having arrived on the sixth of May, five hundred marines and bluejackets, under Captain Gregory of the U. S. S. *Raritan*, were landed to

<sup>1</sup> Same to same, May 3, 1846; *ibid.*, 289. Arista had withdrawn his cavalry from Taylor's line of march in order to protect his own troops in crossing the river. This was subsequently severely criticised as unnecessary, and as the cause of serious delay which at least contributed to the disastrous result of his movement. For further details as to Taylor's movements, see Meade, I, 53-78.

<sup>2</sup> See detailed reports in Sen. Doc. 388, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 31-37. The fort was abandoned by the War Department in 1907. A sketch map of the position in 1846 will be found in Meade, I, 73.

assist in defending the post.<sup>1</sup> On the next day Taylor and his men, with a part of the Point Isabel garrison, who were replaced by a few recruits recently arrived from New Orleans, set out on their return to Fort Brown. They had with them a large train of wagons containing supplies of provisions and ammunition, and two eighteen-pounder guns drawn by oxen.

Arista, on his part, had shown no great activity in carrying out his plan. He wasted a week after he had despatched Torrejon and the cavalry to the east side of the Rio Grande; so that it was not until the first day of May that his army was united on the Texan side of the river.<sup>2</sup> The next day he learned that Taylor had passed him, and was well on the way to Point Isabel. Fearing that the American troops left at the fort might make some attempt on Matamoros, Arista sent back a battalion to the defence of the town, sent some cavalry to watch Taylor, and with the bulk of his forces encamped at Palo Alto, where Taylor's infantry had encamped six weeks earlier on their way to Matamoros. Palo Alto, however, was ill supplied with water, and on the fourth of May Arista fell back to the Tanques del Ramireño, a point about eight miles from the river, and half-way between Palo Alto and the point where the Mexican army had crossed. From there he sent Ampudia to besiege Fort Brown, with a force consisting of perhaps a thousand infantry and four guns. Ampudia, as has been seen, accomplished nothing.

On the morning of Friday, the eighth of May, Arista learned that Taylor was on his march back to Fort Brown, and at once set his troops in motion for the open prairie at Palo Alto, which he had selected as the scene of a battle. Shortly after noon his forces were in position, and at half past two he was joined by Ampudia, who had been ordered to raise the siege of the fort and to join the commander-in-chief.

The numbers of the Mexicans were never very clearly ascertained. In the previous December Arista, writing to

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*; H. R. Doc. 4, 29 Cong., 2 sess., 380. Parker's *Recollections of a Naval Officer*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> His first division, under Ampudia, crossed on April 30, and the second on the morning of May 1.

Paredes for reinforcements, said he had available only 800 men at Matamoros, 420 at the presidio of the Rio Grande, and barely 1,200 at his own ranch of Mamulique.<sup>1</sup> This made 2,420 in all. Paredes, of course, sent no reinforcements at that time, as he needed them himself for his march on the city of Mexico; but as soon as he felt strong enough to spare any troops he detached Ampudia, who reached Matamoros with about 2,200 men.<sup>2</sup> There were also some reinforcements from Tampico, and possibly other points, so that when Arista took command his force may be reckoned at about 5,200.<sup>3</sup>

These troops were considered as good as any in the Mexican army. There were four regiments of infantry of the line, the permanent battalions of Tampico, Mexico, Puebla, and Morelia, three regiments of cavalry, a battalion of engineers (*zapadores*), and some local national guards and *guardacostas*. They had altogether 26 field-pieces; but they were ill supplied with provisions or reserve ammunition, and they were totally without surgeons or field-hospitals. Deducting 190 men left by Ampudia in observation in front of Fort Brown, and the garrison left in Matamoros, numbering 1,350, Arista, according to Mexican reports, had in line at Palo Alto 3,270 men, with 12 guns—an estimate which is probably too low.<sup>4</sup>

The American force amounted to 2,111 sabres and bayonets, or about 2,300 men in all<sup>5</sup>—roughly speaking, 70 per cent of the acknowledged Mexican strength. But if Taylor's army was small, it was of high quality. The officers, with very few exceptions, were graduates of West Point. The men, though a large proportion were foreigners—English, Irish, and German immigrants—had been long and carefully drilled, especially during the months that they had been in camp at Corpus Christi, and no army that the United States had ever put in the field was thought to have been more efficient.

<sup>1</sup> *México á través de los Siglos*, IV, 545.

<sup>2</sup> He is said to have left the city of Mexico on January 11, 1846, with 4,000 men and 6 guns.—(*Nuevo Bernal Diaz*, I, 115.)

<sup>3</sup> Roa Bárcena, *Invasión Norte-Americana*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ripley's *War with Mexico*, I, 122.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 44.

Its commander, Zachary Taylor, a colonel in actual rank but a brigadier-general by brevet, was a man in his sixty-second year, who had spent nearly forty years of his life in Indian fighting and in the routine duties of small frontier posts. His chief exploit in the War of 1812 was the defence of Fort Harrison, on the Wabash River, against a strong force of Indians. He took a creditable part in the Black Hawk War in 1832, and he fought the Seminoles in Florida from 1837 to 1839. This, with such little reading as he might have done, was the whole of his military education.

He was a native of Virginia, but when he was only ten years old his father had removed—one of the first settlers—to Kentucky, where the future general got a little schooling and much hard work on the paternal farm. He had never had much experience of cities or the world. He had hardly ever visited Washington, and owed such advancement as he had thus far attained solely to seniority and a conscientious performance of routine duty.

Mentally and physically he was a plain and unpretending citizen. Short and sturdy in build, with a typically Western carelessness in respect to dress, he looked, what he had been, a Kentucky farmer. His dislike for uniforms was notorious, and almost amounted to a mania. The army was full of stories about his carelessness in dress and his dislike for ceremony. A Mexican officer, sublieutenant Don Manuel Balbontin, who was at one time a prisoner in Taylor's camp, was amazed at the general's appearance when he first saw him, sitting on a camp-stool, in his shirt-sleeves, in front of his tent. A little while after, the general was seen riding out of camp.

"He wore a blue checked gingham coat, blue trousers without any braid, a linen waistcoat and a broad-brimmed straw hat. Neither his horse nor his saddle had any military ornament."

The only explanation that presented itself to the Mexican mind was that the general was going to make a dangerous reconnaissance alone. But Don Manuel did not know Taylor.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Balbontin, *Invasión Americana*, 38.