

He was considerate to his men, thoroughly appreciative of his officers, and was thought to be scrupulously just. In a remarkable degree he enjoyed the affection and respect of his army. They believed in him thoroughly, and were always ready with a cheer for "Old Rough and Ready."

The Mexican force, in its composition and equipment, presented a striking contrast to its adversaries. Like all Mexican armies, the rank and file were of Indian blood, the men being almost invariably recruited from the criminal classes or by means of a crude system of press-gangs. There were few volunteers, either militia or regulars, although during the stress of revolutions it had been the custom, at times, to raise more or less irregular bodies under various names, who were composed, partly at least, of volunteers, and who were usually incorporated subsequently in the regular army. Under the corporal's stick, the men learned in the barracks the first elements of the manual of arms and the routine of army life, but there seems rarely to have been any drilling of large bodies. The system of tactics and the army regulations were nominally the same as those of the Spanish army prior to 1821, but, owing to the constant succession of revolutions, discipline had become much relaxed.

The pay of the troops was small and extremely irregular; and indeed some corps went unpaid for years, so that the men were kept from starvation only by being allowed to work out as laborers for hire. There was no such thing as a regular commissariat. When in garrison the troops seem to have generally purchased their own food, but on the march they were furnished with rations, consisting of meat and a few tortillas or a handful of corn. Even these scanty rations were supplied without system, for in general troops on the march lived off the country through which they passed. There was no organized transport, essential supplies being usually carried on mule-back, or more rarely in country carts, mules and carts being commandeered for the occasion. The troops stationed in the larger cities were usually handsomely dressed, to make a show at military and religious festivities, but the clothing of the greater part of the army

was often ragged, the men lacking the most essential articles. The white cotton suits and straw sombreros of the Mexican peasantry were not unfrequently worn.

The officers, who were generally of Spanish descent, formed a heterogeneous body. Some of them were graduates of the military college at Chapultepec, some had risen from the ranks, and some were purely political appointees from civil life.

The infantry in both armies was equipped with smooth-bore flintlock muskets, high military authorities not being yet persuaded of the advantages of rifles or percussion-locks.¹ The Mexican small-arms were old English Tower muskets, which had been acquired in large quantities, some fifteen or twenty years before, when the English loan was made by the government. The American weapons were the product of the Springfield Arsenal, and probably as good as could then be made. The mounted men on both sides were what was then described as "light" cavalry, or dragoons, armed with sabre and carbine; and, in addition, the larger part of the Mexican cavalry also carried the lance. The Mexican field artillery was of the then antiquated Gribeauval system, but of very various calibres, and mounted on rough and heavy carriages. It possessed no reserve ammunition wagons. Neither in range, nor mobility, nor accuracy of fire, could it compare for a moment with the American artillery.²

¹ "It may be interesting to state," the colonel of the Mississippi volunteers wrote many years afterward, "that General Scott endeavored to persuade me not to take more rifles than enough for four companies, and objected particularly to percussion arms as not having been sufficiently tested for the use of troops in the field. Knowing that the Mississippians would have no confidence in the old flint-lock muskets, I insisted on their being armed with the kind of rifle then recently made at New Haven, Conn.—the Whitney rifle."—(*Memoir of Jefferson Davis*, I, 247.) The manufacture of percussion muskets had been begun at Springfield in 1844, when 3,200 were turned out; and a model of a percussion rifle was manufactured at Harper's Ferry the same year.—(Sen. Doc. 1, 28 Cong., 2 sess., 296.) In the next year 14,332 percussion muskets were manufactured, the manufacture of flint-lock pieces was discontinued, and arrangements were made for altering arms in store to percussion muskets.—(Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 403, 404.) Percussion muskets were issued at that time to the West Point cadets, but not to troops in the field until a later period.

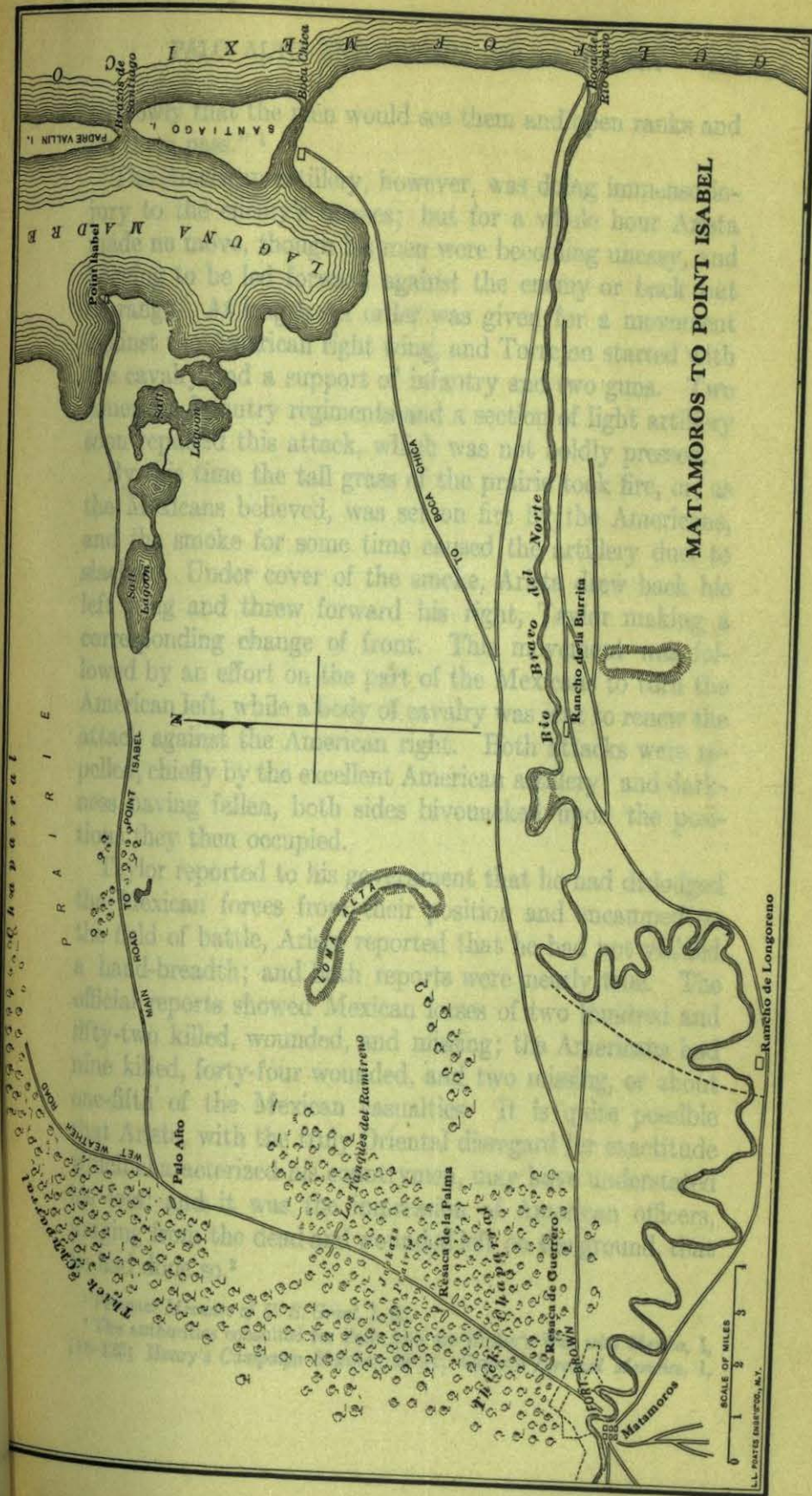
² The foregoing account is mainly derived from Balbontin, *Invasion Americana*, 76, 77.

Arista, the commanding general, was more of a politician than a soldier, though he had served as a youth in the royal Spanish army, and had filled various positions in the Mexican. He was reputed to be a man of wealth, and owned a good deal of land in northern Mexico. He had never, it seems, been on good terms with his second in command, General Ampudia, and the latter nursed a grievance at having been superseded by Arista a few days before; so that when the army crossed the Rio Grande there was a marked lack of cordial co-operation between the two generals.

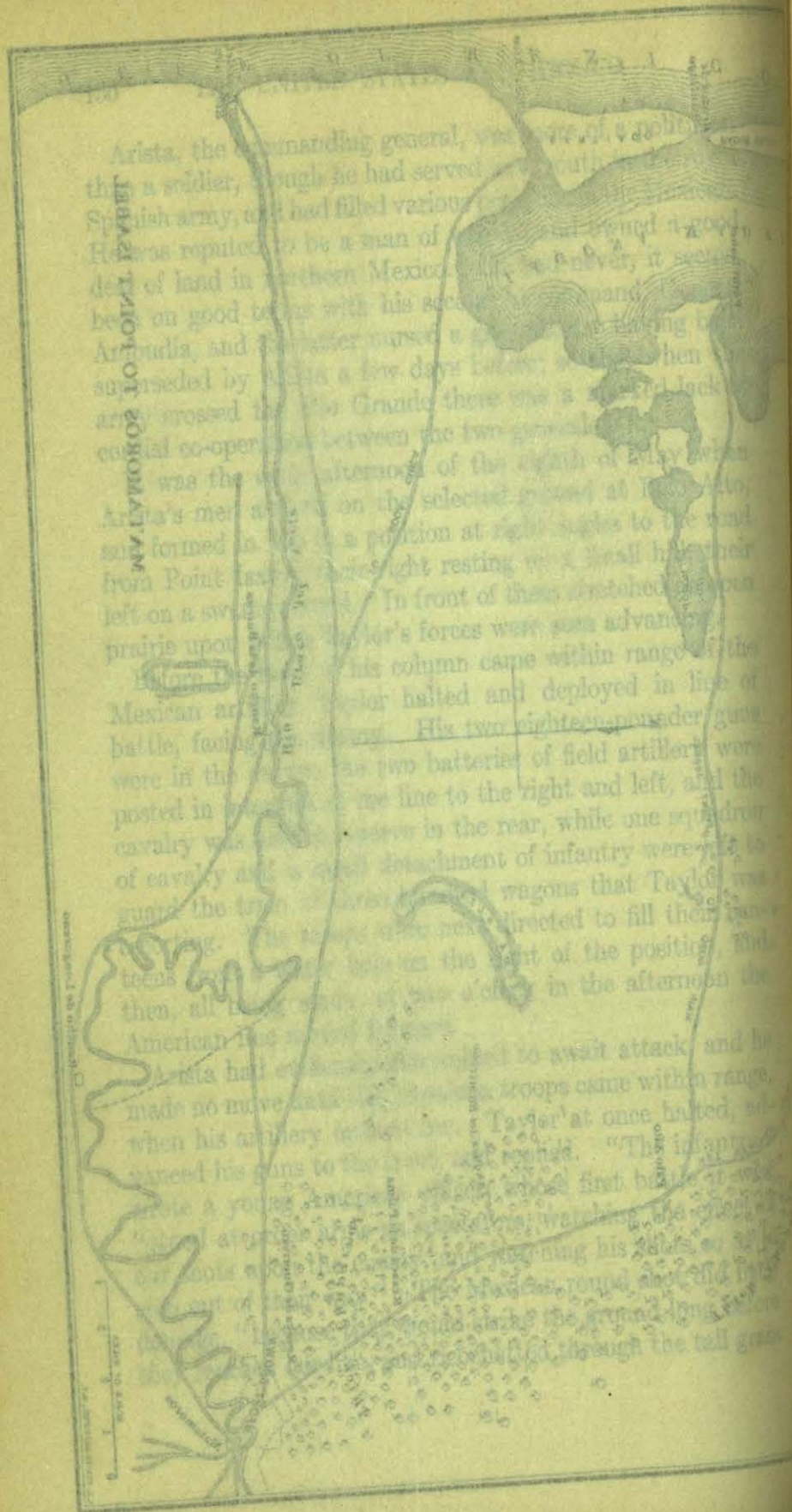
It was the early afternoon of the eighth of May when Arista's men arrived on the selected ground at Palo Alto, and formed in line in a position at right angles to the road from Point Isabel, their right resting on a small hill, their left on a swampy wood. In front of them stretched an open prairie upon which Taylor's forces were seen advancing.

Before the head of his column came within range of the Mexican artillery Taylor halted and deployed in line of battle, facing the enemy. His two eighteen-pounder guns were in the centre, the two batteries of field artillery were posted in intervals of the line to the right and left, and the cavalry was held in reserve in the rear, while one squadron of cavalry and a small detachment of infantry were left to guard the train of three hundred wagons that Taylor was escorting. The troops were next directed to fill their canteens from a water hole on the right of the position, and then, all being ready, at two o'clock in the afternoon the American line moved forward.

Arista had evidently determined to await attack, and he made no move until the American troops came within range, when his artillery opened fire. Taylor at once halted, advanced his guns to the front, and replied. "The infantry," wrote a young American officer, whose first battle it was, "stood at order arms as spectators, watching the effect of our shots upon the enemy, and watching his shots so as to step out of their way." The Mexican round shot did little damage, "because they would strike the ground long before they reached our line, and ricocheted through the tall grass



MATAMOROS TO POINT ISABEL



so slowly that the men would see them and open ranks and let them pass."¹

The American artillery, however, was doing immense injury to the enemy's masses; but for a whole hour Arista made no move, though his men were becoming uneasy, and begging to be led forward against the enemy or back out of range. At length an order was given for a movement against the American right wing, and Torrejon started with the cavalry and a support of infantry and two guns. Two American infantry regiments and a section of light artillery soon repulsed this attack, which was not boldly pressed.

By this time the tall grass of the prairie took fire, or, as the Mexicans believed, was set on fire by the Americans, and the smoke for some time caused the artillery duel to slacken. Under cover of the smoke, Arista drew back his left wing and threw forward his right, Taylor making a corresponding change of front. This movement was followed by an effort on the part of the Mexicans to turn the American left, while a body of cavalry was sent to renew the attack against the American right. Both attacks were repelled, chiefly by the excellent American artillery; and darkness having fallen, both sides bivouacked upon the positions they then occupied.

Taylor reported to his government that he had dislodged the Mexican forces from their position and encamped on the field of battle, Arista reported that he had not yielded a hand-breadth; and both reports were nearly true. The official reports showed Mexican losses of two hundred and fifty-two killed, wounded, and missing; the Americans had nine killed, forty-four wounded, and two missing, or about one-fifth of the Mexican casualties. It is quite possible that Arista, with the truly Oriental disregard for exactitude which characterized his countrymen, may have understated his loss; and it was the impression of American officers, judging from the dead and wounded left on the ground, that he had done so.²

¹ *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, I, 95.

² The authorities consulted for Palo Alto are Ripley's *War with Mexico*, I, 116-123; Henry's *Campaign Sketches*, 88-94; Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, I,

At dawn on the morning of Saturday, the ninth of May, Arista began an orderly retreat, and by ten o'clock in the morning he had fallen back about five miles and was in position on the banks of a ravine known to the Mexicans as the Resaca de Guerrero, distant between two and three miles from Matamoros. North of this ravine, and roughly parallel to it, was a similar ravine, known as the Resaca de la Palma. The road from Point Isabel, passing for the most part over an open prairie, enters, near Palo Alto, the growth of timber that fringes the course of the Rio Grande.

"This river," says Grant, "like the Mississippi, flows through a rich alluvial valley in the most meandering manner, running towards all points of the compass at times within a few miles. Formerly the river ran by Resaca de la Palma, some four or five miles east of the present channel. The old bed of the river at Resaca had become filled at places, leaving a succession of little lakes."¹

At the spot where Arista made his stand such a succession of lakes, dry in early May, formed a curve, concave to the road by which the Americans must advance. To the right and left of this road was the almost impenetrable chaparral, which rendered cavalry useless and prevented artillery fire, except along the line of the road itself.

The battalion of *zapadores* and four battalions of infantry were stationed to the Mexican right, upon the front slope of the ravine, being protected up to their breasts by the natural intrenchment. Another battalion was in their rear, in reserve. On the left were stationed only the Tampico troops, with the various local bodies under command of General Canales, and two pieces of artillery, in reserve. Of the other guns, three were placed on the front edge of the ravine, and the rest in the rear of the ravine and to the right of the road. About two hundred yards farther back,

92-96; Meade, I, 78-80; Roa Bárcena's *Invasion Norte-Americana*, 35-37, 44-46; *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra entre México y los E. U.*, 38-42. Taylor's detailed report of the battle, with subreports from his subordinates, will be found in Sen. Doc. 388, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 2-6, 13-23, and H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 1102-1104. Arista's report is in *México á través de los Siglos*, IV, 563.

¹ Grant, I, 93.

in an open space, were the head-quarters, the cavalry, and the pack-mules. The horses were unsaddled, packs taken off the mules, fires lighted, and all preparations made for passing the night.

Taylor's army had been put in motion as soon as the retreat of the Mexicans was observed, and it marched as far as the Resaca de la Palma, where a halt was made. At the request of some of the senior officers Taylor called a council of war to consider the propriety of advancing, and after hearing their opinions, a majority of which were in favor of remaining strictly on the defensive, he determined to push forward. He took time, however, to make his preparations. The wounded were cared for, a temporary breastwork, armed with the two eighteen-pounders and two twelve-pounder guns that had been carried unmounted in the wagons, was thrown up for the protection of the train, a strong rear-guard was left behind, and the army resumed its march.

It had not proceeded far when messages came in from the skirmishers in front that the enemy were in force in a strong position. This must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon. At once the infantry were deployed in the thickets to the right and left and a battery was put in position on the road three hundred yards from the Mexican artillery. At about half past four the infantry skirmishers advanced as best they could through the chaparral, unseen by their opponents until they were upon them, and broken up into little groups without a semblance of order. The Mexican left was quickly driven back, but on their right the struggle continued for some time upon more even terms. Meanwhile, the Mexican artillery fire had somewhat slackened, and Taylor directed Captain May's squadron of dragoons to charge the Mexican guns.

May rode up to the American battery that was in action and shouted to Lieutenant Ridgely in command: "Where are they? I'm going to charge." Ridgely replied: "Hold on, Charlie, till I draw their fire." What happened next is best told in Ridgely's own words:

"I gave them a volley, and he most gallantly dashed forward in column of fours at the head of his squadron. I followed as quickly as possible, at a gallop, only halting when I came upon the edge of the ravine, where I found three pieces of artillery *but no cannoniers*; however, their infantry poured into me a most galling fire at from twenty-five to fifty paces and here ensued a most desperate struggle, but our infantry coming up, they were completely routed."¹

The cavalry charge could only have occupied a very few moments. Sweeping down the narrow road and over the Mexican guns—"sab'ring the gunners there, charging an army"—the dragoons rode across the ravine to the rising ground in the rear; and then rallying what remained of them, May again charged the gunners who had regained their pieces, drove them off, and took prisoner General Vega, whom the dragoons brought back to the American lines as a token of their success.

By this time the Mexican line was falling into disorder. The eighth United States infantry regiment, left in the rear by Taylor to guard the train, had been sent for as soon as the action was fairly begun, and they came down the road at a charging pace. Joined by a portion of the fifth infantry, they swept down the road with Ridgely's battery, crossed the ravine, secured the abandoned Mexican guns, and completed the defeat of the enemy.

Arista, on his part, had been firmly convinced that Taylor would not venture to attack him that day. When reports reached him of the American advance, he insisted that it was a mere reconnoissance, and he remained writing in his tent until it had become evident that his army was defeated. At the head of his cavalry, which had not been engaged, he advanced as far as the ravine, where they came in contact with Ridgely's artillery before the latter could unlimber; but the American infantry, who by this time were lining the thickets on each side of the road, opened so terrible a fire that the Mexican cavalry were quickly driven back. The defeat became a rout. With the exception of a few corps, the Mexican army was broken into fragments,

¹ Sen. Doc. 388, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 21.

which fled as best they might. One squadron of the American dragoons which had not been engaged, both batteries of light artillery, and a small force of infantry were sent in pursuit and followed the scattered remnants of the Mexicans as far as the banks of the Rio Grande. As the pursuing forces came in sight of Matamoros the Mexican batteries opened fire. Fort Brown replied, and fired on such of the fugitives as crossed within range. In their headlong panic many of the Mexicans were drowned in crossing; but night fell and the remnants of the shattered and disorganized army were finally collected behind the fortifications of Matamoros.

Long before dark the main strength of the American army had been halted at the Mexican camp. They found the mules and their packs "arranged with great regularity on the ground," camp-fires lighted, and meals cooking. They captured Arista's personal baggage and public correspondence, five hundred mules and pack-saddles, hundreds of muskets, and all of the Mexican field artillery with its equipment and furniture. "The enemy," wrote Taylor, with an effective understatement, "has recrossed the river, and I am sure will not again molest us on this bank."¹

The American loss in the battle of Resaca was thirty-nine killed and eighty-two wounded. The Mexican loss was officially reported at two hundred and sixty-two killed, three hundred and fifty-five wounded, and one hundred and eighty-five missing—a total of eight hundred and two, between six and seven times the American loss.² Taylor thought the Mexican figures too small. He estimated the Mexican dead on the two fields of battle at over three hundred. The number of the wounded and drowned were still more conjectural. Arista reported that he had thirty-five hundred men left in Matamoros, but this was probably an underestimate. He probably had four thousand, making his total loss from all causes during his fortnight's cam-

¹ H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 296.

² Rivera, *Hist. de Jalapa*, III, 754.

paign twelve or thirteen hundred since he had crossed the Rio Grande.¹

Had Taylor been fully aware of the demoralization in the Mexican ranks, he might perhaps have continued his pursuit at once across the river and utterly destroyed Arista's army; but he waited to make his preparations before attempting to take Matamoros. Arrangements for naval co-operation were made, and a crossing was effected at the rancho de la Burrita, about fifteen miles below the town in a straight line, and probably twice as far by the river. On the morning of May 18, Taylor's preparations were completed, and he began crossing his men in boats, protected by a strong force of artillery on the left bank.

He soon ascertained that Arista had abandoned Matamoros and was in full retreat. Once before, on the twelfth of May, the Mexican troops had marched out upon a rumor that the Americans were crossing. Arista subsequently declared that his men were in a state of panic and ready to run at the first sound, and as a last resort he sent a message to the American commander proposing an armistice until the two governments should finally settle the questions in dispute. From the point of view of the security of Taylor's army, the request was obviously inadmissible, and Taylor replied that an armistice was out of the question; that he had offered one to General Ampudia a month before, which had been declined; and that "circumstances were now changed."² The abandonment of the town then began immediately. Four hundred wounded were

¹ Accounts of the battle called by the Americans Resaca de la Palma, and by the Mexicans Resaca de Guerrero, are to be found in Ripley, I, 123-129; Henry, 94-100; Grant, I, 96-98; Meade, I, 80-83; Roa Bárcena, 37-39, 46-48; *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra*, 42-47. Taylor's detailed report, with subreports, is in Sen. Doc. 388, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 6-29, and H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 1104-1106, and a further account by Gen. Taylor is contained in a personal letter to his son-in-law, Dr. R. C. Wood, in Taylor's *Letters from the Battlefields of the Mexican War*, 1-2. Reference may also be made to *Nuevo Bernal Diaz*, II, 16-20, for a letter from an inhabitant of Matamoros, who gives the version current in that town immediately after the battle.

² Taylor to Adjutant-General, May 18, 1846; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 298. Taylor to Wood, May 19, 1846; Taylor's *Letters from the Battlefields*, 3-5.

left behind, with the officers' personal baggage and a large part of the supplies and munitions of war. Some of the guns were spiked; some were thrown into the river. There had been many desertions, but with his remaining men and eleven guns Arista struggled on for ten days through a barren country, his men almost famished, until he reached Linares, more than a hundred and fifty miles from the scene of his late disasters. There, a week later, he received an order relieving him from command and directing him to appear before a court-martial.¹

By this time the news of Taylor's situation and his triumphant success had reached the United States. The first messenger despatched, on April 26, with the news of Arista's advance and the capture of Thornton's party of dragoons, got safely past the Mexican cavalry outposts, and on the ninth of May, only thirteen days from Matamoros, the information that "hostilities may now be considered as commenced" was in the hands of the War Department at Washington. It was the day of the battle of Resaca de la Palma. The cabinet on that same Saturday morning had been discussing the propriety of sending a message to Congress recommending a declaration of war in case, as the latest despatches seemed to indicate, the Mexicans should attack Taylor's forces. At about six in the evening General Jones, the adjutant-general of the army, handed Taylor's despatch to the President, and at a hastily summoned meeting of the cabinet it was at last definitely agreed that a warlike message should be sent to Congress on the Monday morning.²

With the valuable assistance of Bancroft, the Secretary of the Navy, the President during Sunday completed his message, which was duly delivered on Monday morning, the moment the two houses met. He began by referring to the claims of American citizens against Mexico as set forth in his annual message of the previous December, and

¹ See for accounts of the abandonment of Matamoros, Roa Bárcena, 48-50; *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra*, 47-51.

² Polk's *Diary*, I, 384-386.