

November 12 with the artillery battalion, two regiments of infantry, Blanchard's company of Louisiana volunteers, and one battery of field artillery.¹ Taylor at the time he reported this movement to Washington also stated that he had taken the first steps toward organizing an expedition in the opposite direction, namely, to Tampico. Recent information, he added, was to the effect that Tampico had been entirely evacuated, but he deemed this hardly credible. He had learned that the Mexican army was still at San Luis, some twelve thousand strong, and he also learned that the want of water on the road from Saltillo to San Luis would render his own advance beyond the former point impracticable. It might also be inferred from the letter, although Taylor did not so state, that he regarded an advance by Santa Anna from San Luis Potosí to Saltillo as being equally impossible.²

Three days after the date of this announcement of Taylor's intentions, Robert McLane arrived at head-quarters bearing the instructions from the War Department of October 22. These instructions, it will be remembered, pointed out the risk of an advance beyond Monterey, although such a movement was not positively forbidden, and informed Taylor that it was proposed to send a small expedition to Vera Cruz, which would necessitate withdrawing a part of the troops under his command. He at once replied, reaffirming his intention to advance, as he deemed the occupation of Saltillo important, chiefly "as a necessary outpost of the main force at Monterey, covering, as it does, the important defile which leads from the low country to the tableland, and also the route to Monclova." He also considered it important as controlling a fertile region from which supplies could be drawn, as being the capital of the state of Coahuila, and as necessary for carrying out the policy of a defensive line.

With regard to the expedition against Vera Cruz, he expressed his conviction that four thousand men would be

¹ See Order No. 139; *ibid.*, 362.

² Taylor to Adjutant-General, Nov. 9, 1846; *ibid.*, 361.

quite too few for the purpose contemplated. In his despatch of October 15 he had stated that twenty-five thousand men, of which ten thousand should be regulars, was the least force that should make a descent in that quarter, with a view to marching on the capital. Ten thousand men, he thought, might invest and take Vera Cruz; but considering the probable opposition from the Mexicans and "the uncertainty of weather during the winter season, rendering our communication with the fleet liable to interruption," he believed ten thousand men as small a force as should be ventured. He could not spare that number, but he could send four thousand men; and if six thousand were added from the United States, he believed that the proposed expedition might be undertaken with a promise of success.

"I conceive it all-important," he added, "having in view the Mexican character, that as little should be left to accident as possible, and that we should be careful, as far as human foresight can provide, to avoid the smallest liability to disaster. A descent upon a hostile coast, notoriously dangerous, and in an inclement season of the year, is an operation requiring the most careful preparations and exact management, and possessing, under the most favorable circumstances, more or less elements of failure. It seems the part of prudence, therefore, to take a sufficient force to meet any contingency that may arise."¹

A day or two afterward, therefore, in accordance with Taylor's announced intentions, and in the face of the orders from the War Department, Worth and his men marched from Monterey for Saltillo, and were accompanied by Taylor himself with an escort of cavalry. Saltillo was occupied on November 16 without opposition, the troops were quartered in the town, and reconnoissances were made some twenty-five miles to the south without finding any signs of the enemy, and thereupon Taylor returned to Monterey.²

In other quarters events had occurred during the month of November which to a certain extent changed the conditions affecting the further prosecution of the war. In the

¹ Same to same, Nov. 12, 1846; *ibid.*, 374-376.

² Same to same, Nov. 24, 1846; *ibid.*, 377.

first place, General Wool, with his column, had successfully invaded Mexico. He had under him six hundred and twenty-two regulars, composed of a battery of artillery, five companies of dragoons, and three companies of infantry. He also had two regiments of infantry from Illinois and one mounted regiment from Arkansas, numbering, in all, two thousand three hundred and ninety-nine volunteers.

With this force of over three thousand men Wool set out from San Antonio late in September under instructions to proceed to Chihuahua—nearly due west—and he crossed the Rio Grande near the presidio of San Juan Bautista on October 11, 1846. A march west from there was impracticable, and he turned south. Following the line of the present railway that crosses the river at Eagle Pass, he marched through Nava to Monclova, which he entered on November 3, and there he was met by orders from Taylor informing him of the armistice entered into at Monterey, and instructing him not to advance until its expiration.

At Monclova Wool began to discover some important facts about the topography of Mexico. He discovered that the only practicable route he could take to reach Chihuahua would be to go toward Saltillo, and then, shortly before reaching it, to turn west upon the road leading through Parras. Under these circumstances he decided that a march to Chihuahua was useless. He thought he could seize Saltillo and thence march on San Luis Potosí; and he therefore wrote to Taylor on November 14, by Lieutenant W. B. Franklin, of the engineers, and again on the nineteenth by his aid, Lieutenant Irvin McDowell, urging the importance of an early movement. He urged this upon the ground that inaction was exceedingly injurious to the volunteers, who were getting restless, and though he had thus far succeeded in controlling them, he found it increasingly difficult to do so.

McDowell on his return brought orders notifying Wool that the Chihuahua expedition was abandoned and ordering him to advance and occupy Parras. Wool, however, had already started from Monclova, and he occupied Parras on December 5, not having exchanged a hostile shot in

his entire march of over three hundred miles since entering Mexican territory.¹

The navy also had not been idle during the six months since war was declared. Throughout the oppressive heat of the summer and the occasional gales of early autumn, the home squadron under command of Commodore Conner had maintained a strict blockade of Vera Cruz.

"While the people illuminated their cities," one of the blockading officers wrote, "and lighted bonfires in the country, in celebration of the victories of the army, the toils and hardships of the navy were not only forgotten, but this branch of the service was loaded with obloquy for not performing impossibilities. With the exception of Vera Cruz, there was no town in the whole Gulf coast of Mexico, within effective cannon range of which, a sloop-of-war could approach. The maritime towns of the enemy were more effectually defended by reefs, sandbars, and shallows than were the inland towns by redoubts and intrenchments. . . . Although Vera Cruz, by reason of the dangerous ground in its vicinity is one of the hardest ports in the world to blockade, especially during the violent gales of winter, I venture to say that the history of no other blockade presents so few instances of the successful attempts of cupidity to evade the vigilance of cruisers."²

The wearisome round of duty was, however, varied by attempts to attack some of the other points along the Gulf coast, although at first without any great success. In August and again in October, 1846, Commodore Conner endeavored to capture the small vessels composing the Mexican navy which had been placed for safety in the harbor at Alvarado, a little over thirty miles south of Vera Cruz. The strong current and the shoals forming the shifting bar off this entrance combined to make it extremely difficult to enter the harbor—even with vessels drawing only ten feet of water—in the face of three Mexican batteries that commanded the channel; and both attempts were unsuccessful, although no serious losses were sustained.

¹ Detailed reports of this prosperous march, with maps, sketches, and topographical details by Lieutenant W. B. Franklin and other officers, are printed in Sen. Doc. 32, 31 Cong., 1 sess., 5-61.

² Semmes, 77, 78.

A more fortunate result attended an expedition late in October under Commodore Matthew C. Perry, the second in command of the squadron. On October 23 Perry with the steam frigate *Mississippi*, a small steamer to serve as a tug, a steam revenue cutter and four schooners, reached the bar of the River Tabasco and captured the town of Frontera without difficulty, together with two small useful steam-boats and some other vessels. The next morning the small steam-boats, with three of the schooners and some barges in tow, steamed up the rapid river, and on the following day, October 25, arrived in front of the town of San Juan Bautista, the capital of the department of Tabasco, which was taken after a little desultory firing. Commodore Perry, having no adequate force to land and hold the town, seized as prizes five merchant vessels and returned to join the commodore off Vera Cruz.¹

Early in November, pursuant to orders from the Navy Department dated September 22, Conner began his preparations for the descent on Tampico.² His departure from Vera Cruz was considerably delayed for want of provisions, but on the tenth and eleventh of November, three sailing frigates left, with instructions to rendezvous off Lobos Island, where good anchorage could be found in case of bad weather.³ On November 12 the *Mississippi* and *Princeton* steam-ships followed, towing two small steam-boats and four schooners; and at daylight on November 14 the whole force reached the bar of Tampico, where they fell in with the vessel blockading the port. Her commanding officer had carefully examined the bar and was prepared to act as pilot. By ten o'clock in the morning a detachment of three hundred officers, seamen, and marines in boats, together with the schooners—all in tow of the two small steamers—crossed the bar and passed up the river without

¹ See reports in H. R. Doc. 4, 29 Cong., 2 sess., 630-639.

² These orders were discussed by the cabinet on Sept. 19 and 20, immediately after receipt of Rejón's reply declining negotiations for peace.—(Polk's *Diary*, II, 145-148.)

³ This small island lies about seven miles off shore, and sixty miles south of the Tampico entrance.

opposition, the fort at the entrance as well as the town having been abandoned by their garrisons more than two weeks before. The town was at once peaceably occupied by Conner's force.

"The excitement upon our arrival," Conner reported, "was trifling, and has since entirely subsided. The inhabitants that are left appear not to have the least objection to this change."

As a military post, he considered the possession of Tampico to be of the greatest importance; and he wrote that a garrison of three thousand troops should be supplied, which would be amply sufficient to hold the place against any Mexican force that could be sent against it. Two merchant vessels and three Mexican gun-boats were made prizes in the river.¹

Immediately after capturing Tampico, Conner despatched Commodore Perry in the *Mississippi* to the United States with the news of this important event, and an urgent request for troops to garrison the place, as it was considered that the large detachments from the ships left them too short-handed to be exposed off the dangerous bar of Tampico during the frequent "northers." Perry succeeded so well in his mission that he persuaded the authorities of the army to send reinforcements direct to Tampico without consulting General Taylor—very much to the displeasure of the latter. But Taylor, having received the news of the occupation of Tampico, himself sent orders to General Patterson to despatch troops thither, so that early in December the town was adequately garrisoned.²

About this same time events had also occurred at home which greatly affected the views of the administration. Of these, the most important were the congressional elections on the third of November, which must have proved a bitter

¹ Conner to Mason, Nov. 17, 1846; Sen. Doc. 1, 30 Cong., 2 sess., 1171-1173. The details as to the abandonment of Tampico are set out at some length, with many accusations of incompetence and treachery against the Mexican commanders, in *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra*, 78-90.

² Taylor to Adjutant-General, Nov. 26 and Dec. 14, 1846; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 378-381.

disappointment to the President and his cabinet, and forewarned them of the domestic difficulties with which they would soon have to contend. It was never unusual or surprising for an administration in its second year, when suffering from the curse of patronage, to lose the House of Representatives, and Polk's unimpressive character and his lack of the essentials of leadership added nothing to the popularity of his party; while his undertaking a war which—in the northern and eastern parts of the country at least—was much disliked by a large part of the community, was another cause of defeat in an election that was not very keenly contested. The result was that the Whigs in the House of Representatives of the Thirtieth Congress (which was to meet in December, 1847) had a small majority, but enough to threaten embarrassment to the administration.¹

As soon as the elections were over, Senator Benton returned to Washington, where he arrived on the sixth of November, and on the following evening he called and had a long conversation with the President as to the proper manner of prosecuting the Mexican war.

"He expressed," Polk wrote, "the opinion that a bold blow should be struck at once. He thought the City of Vera Cruz should be taken at once & with it would fall the Castle at that place, & that after this was done there should be a rapid crushing movement made from Vera Cruz on the City of Mexico. He said that commissioners composed of the first men in the country of both political parties, should accom-

¹ The numbers were 117 Whigs, 110 Democrats, and 1 "Native American." The views of Buchanan as to the causes of the defeat in Pennsylvania and the views of the President as to the defeat in New York are set out in Polk's *Diary*, II, 217, 218. Buchanan blamed the recent tariff bill. The President thought that the main cause in New York was the lukewarmness "of that portion of the Democratic party calling themselves Old Hunkers. This faction shall hereafter receive no favours at my hands if I know it." In the slang of New York politics, the "old hunkers" were the supporters of Texas annexation—"northern men with southern principles"—whose leaders were Daniel S. Dickinson and William L. Marcy. The "barnburners" were the pro-Van Buren, anti-Texas men, or "radical Democrats," who were likened to the farmer who burned his barn to clear it of rats. Their leaders were Silas Wright, John A. Dix and others; and from them was ultimately evolved the Free-Soil Democracy. Wilmot would have been, in New York, a barnburner. Of course the President could not have carried out his hasty threat against the hunkers so long as Marcy remained in his cabinet.

pany the Head Quarters of the army, who were authorized to offer peace before a battle, during the battle, & after it was over. He said this had often been done in the European wars. . . . He condemned the policy which had been suggested in some quarters of holding the Mexican territory which we had acquired, & not prosecuting the war further into the Mexican territory. He said the war would be much protracted by such a policy, & might not be ended for years. He said further the late elections have gone against the administration & that if such a policy of inactivity was adopted the patriotic spirit of the country would flag & the Democratic party would be overthrown. He said ours were a go-ahead people, and that our only policy either to obtain a peace or save ourselves was to press the war boldly."¹

This conversation with Benton, coming on the heels of the defeat of the Democrats in the congressional elections, proved to be the turning point in the conduct of the war.

As it happened, on the morning of that same day the cabinet had been discussing the question of appropriations for the War Department, and Buchanan "was of opinion that we should hold what we had." Marcy believed that fifteen thousand regulars and twenty-five thousand volunteers would be a force necessary to prosecute the war with proper vigor and that "if a war of invasion was to be pushed into the heart of Mexico, a less number would not answer." The general question of a plan of operations was left for future decision, but it was unanimously agreed that the estimates for the next fiscal year should be made on the basis of an army of thirty-five thousand men in all.

During the next few days Benton and the President were in constant communication, the former insisting that the mere capture of Vera Cruz would not result in peace unless it was followed by an attack upon the city of Mexico. This naturally led to a discussion of the proper person to command so important and difficult an expedition, and Polk expressed his opinion of General Taylor as "a brave officer but not a man of capacity enough for such a command." Benton concurred, and said also that he had no confidence in General Scott.

¹ *Ibid.*, 221-223.

"Some other officers were named by me," Polk continued in his diary. "He then said that there ought to be a Lieutenant-General of the army who should be General in chief. He said it required a man of talents and resources as well as a military man for such a command, & that with a view to obtain peace more depended upon the talents & energy of the officer than upon mere bravery. He then said that if such an office was created by Congress, he would be willing to accept the command himself."¹

This amazing proposal of Benton's seems to have awakened no surprise in the President's mind nor (with his constitutional lack of humor) was he at all able to see its ridiculous features. He gravely informed the cabinet of his conversation, and again there was a long discussion as to the mode of conducting the war, which again ended in no decision being arrived at, it being deemed prudent to wait for Taylor's answer to the despatch of September 22.² Day after day the President and his various advisers talked over these questions. Taylor's answer was received on the tenth of November, but "contained no satisfactory information." Marcy was "disappointed and dissatisfied," and the President thought Taylor was trying to shift responsibility from himself. More and more, therefore, the President turned to Benton, a man who was never troubled by doubts or misgivings or diffidence.

But the President told Benton that he did not think it probable Congress would create the office of lieutenant-general, and Benton declined a proposal to make him a major-general, as he would then be the junior in that rank. He repeated his views as to "a large and overpowering force" marching upon the city of Mexico, which he insisted was the only mode of bringing the war to a successful end. Buchanan, however, still remained strongly opposed to sending any expedition against the city of Mexico, because he thought "such an expedition would cost a vast sum of money, that it was doubtful whether it could be successful, and if it could there was no object to be obtained by it, as it would not, as he thought, facilitate peace." Finally,

¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

² *Ibid.*, 228-230.

without deciding the main question, it was agreed that nine additional volunteer regiments to serve during the war should be called from the states.¹

Some weeks before this time Marcy and Mason, the Secretaries of War and the Navy, had talked over with Scott the question of the conduct of the war and the possibilities of the proposed expedition to Vera Cruz; and on October 27 Scott had submitted to the Secretary of War a memorandum entitled "Vera Cruz and its castle," in which he expressed the opinion that the possession of Vera Cruz and the castle of Ulúa was "not likely to be worth one-tenth of the lives, time, and money, which their capture would cost us," unless, indeed, it was intended to open a new line of operations against the city of Mexico. He was now persuaded, he said, that the city of Mexico must be taken, or at least placed in imminent danger of capture, and this must be mainly through the city of Vera Cruz. He believed that the castle could not be taken without heavy loss of life and waste of time, and it would therefore be preferable to capture the city first and then proceed against the castle.

As to the means required, he began with the proposition that the people of Mexico seemed to present this dilemma to the United States: "If you come with few, we will overwhelm you; if with many, you will overwhelm yourselves." This he thought was particularly true of the line of operations through Saltillo and San Luis Potosí, where a large army could not be subsisted. The danger by way of Vera Cruz lay, in his judgment, principally in the approach of the yellow-fever season in the spring; and he therefore thought that an expedition should be set on foot early in the year, which should consist of at least ten thousand men, leaving Taylor at Monterey with what Scott called a "threatening force."²

¹ The call was issued Nov. 16, 1846. The form of the requisition addressed to the governors of the several states called upon—Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas—is printed in H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 479, 480.

² *Ibid.*, 1268-1270.