

CHAPTER XXXIII

PALO ALTO AND RESACA DE LA PALMA

On the fourth of February, 1846, General Zachary Taylor received the order from the Secretary of War, dated three weeks earlier, which directed him to march with the force under his command from Corpus Christi, where he was then encamped, and to occupy a position on the east bank of the Rio Grande "as soon as it can conveniently be done with reference to the season and the routes by which your movements must be made."¹

It was evidently not the intention to hurry Taylor, nor would it have been easy for him to move at once. The army was necessarily supplied by sea, and a movement to the Rio Grande involved the complete abandonment of the post at Corpus Christi and the establishment of a new base near the mouth of the Rio Grande. "The occupation of Point Isabel or Brazos Santiago as a depot," Taylor reported, "will be indispensable. That point, and a position on or near the river opposite Matamoros will I think answer all present purposes."²

The breaking up of the camp he had occupied for six months, the removal of the stores and hospital, the organization of transport, and the reconnoissance of routes for the march all required time; and it was not until the eighth of March, 1846, that the cavalry, with one battery of light artillery, started from Corpus Christi. The roads were reported to be in good order, the weather fine, and the troops in excellent condition for service.³ On the two following days the brigades of infantry marched out "in tip-top health

¹ Marcy to Taylor, Jan. 13, 1846; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 90.

² Taylor to Marcy, Feb. 4, 1846; *ibid.*, 116.

³ Same to same, March 8, 1846; *ibid.*, 118.

and spirits," and on the twenty-fourth of March the cavalry reached Point Isabel, where the transports and their naval escort were just arriving. The greater part of the infantry encamped that evening at Palo Alto (tall timber), a place between Point Isabel and Matamoros, distant some nine miles in a straight line from the latter.¹

The coast of Texas is fringed by a succession of islands, with shallow bays between them and the main-land; and Point Isabel, or Fronton de Santa Isabel, as it was called by the Mexicans, projects on such a bay, forming a bluff directly opposite an entrance from the sea, which went by the name of Brazos de Santiago. Facing this entrance, a person standing on the bluff could see to his left the long sandy island of Padre Vallin stretching away interminably, while on the right was the smaller island of Santiago. South of Santiago was the Boca Chica, a smaller entrance to the bay. On the south side of the Boca Chica a sand-spit stretched some three miles to the mouth of the Rio Grande. The shallow bay between the islands and the main-land, the Laguna Madre, was not available for heavy draught vessels, so that the transports were compelled to anchor off the entrance, perhaps four miles from the main-land, and all communication with Point Isabel was by boats.

Having thus established a base at Point Isabel, and left a suitable guard, Taylor rejoined the main body of his little army, and on March 28, 1846, reached the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros. His arrival, he reported, seemed to have created a great deal of excitement in the town, and a great deal of activity was displayed in the preparation of batteries. The attitude of the Mexicans was decidedly hostile; but his march had been unopposed.²

The order directing Taylor to advance to the Rio Grande was not then known to the American public, but at a later day Polk and his administration were bitterly blamed for

¹ Henry's *Campaign Sketches*, 52-64, gives an intelligent and amusing account of the incidents of this march day by day. The author was a graduate of West Point and an officer of the fourth U. S. infantry.

² Taylor to Marcy, March 25 and 29, 1846; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 129, 132.

giving it. Their purpose, it was said, was to bring about a collision, to try to bring on a war, and the administration was accused of wishing to provoke the Mexicans to attack the American forces, so that it might appear to the world—and especially to so much of it as sat in Congress—that the war, if war ensued, was one of defence and not of aggression. No direct contemporaneous evidence was then produced in support of this assertion, and none seems to be now available. All the public utterances of the party in power were in favor of peace; and to the inquiry whether the executive officers of the United States were secretly trying to bring about a war no positive answer can be given. Conclusions more or less plausible may of course be reached from a consideration of the general situation in the winter of 1846-1847, and of the character and the wishes and policy, at that time, of Polk and his cabinet.

The President himself was a man without wide culture or knowledge, wholly devoid of imagination, untravelled, unacquainted with either the Spanish or the Mexican character, and with little experience in the conduct of foreign affairs. To a strong intelligence he added a dogged strength of will, such as few of his contemporaries possessed; and with all the obstinacy and persistence of his nature he desired to acquire California. But he then hoped, and probably believed, that California might be got by negotiation; for all the evidence seemed to show that it was independent of Mexico in all but name, and that it could only be governed by such expenditures for men and ships as Mexico was hopelessly unable to make. He was also aware that Mexico was in dire need of money—money to pacify her foreign creditors and money to set her internal affairs in some sort of order.

For California Polk was ready to pay most liberally; and if it could have been bought, precisely as Louisiana had been bought, and as Florida had been bought, there was no reason to doubt that the Senate would have consented to the bargain, and that Congress would have voted the purchase-money. But the President could hardly have felt any

confidence that Congress, under the existing circumstances, would have been willing either to declare war or to vote the money necessary to carry it on.

The northeastern states, with a strong and growing feeling in favor of limiting the area of slavery, would certainly not have looked with favor upon a war which, it would be asserted, was prosecuted for the purpose of acquiring more slave territory. New England and the Middle states had consented, at the election a little over a year before, by a small majority, to the annexation of Texas, but there was no particular desire apparent on their part to expand further at the expense of Mexico. In the northwestern states—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan—the desire for territorial expansion was undoubtedly very much greater than on the Atlantic coast; but even in the northwest the feeling against the extension of slavery would probably have made a war with Mexico at that time generally unpopular.

It was asserted, however, that the South desired a war. For what possible reason the South, in January, 1846, should have desired a war it is hard to see. That a majority of the people of that section desired the annexation of Texas is quite true; annexation had been peacefully accomplished more than six months before; the United States was in undisturbed possession of Texas, and there was no reason whatever to believe that Mexico could make any serious effort to recover it. It was perfectly clear that Mexico was less capable of recovering it then than at any time in the previous ten years, and the latest information was that another revolution was on the point of breaking out, which would still further incapacitate her.

President Polk came from a southwestern slave state, and, it may be assumed, shared fully the views of the people of Tennessee. But though Polk earnestly desired expansion, he was fully occupied in trying to secure it in the northwestern corner of the country by gaining as much as he could of the territory of Oregon. In the month of January, 1846, a settlement with Great Britain was by no means assured. The temper of Great Britain and the temper of

the American Senate were most uncertain. It can hardly be supposed, therefore, that Polk should have wished to provoke Mexico into a war at that particular time.

But even if Polk himself, as a Southern man, had desired to bring about a Mexican war, no such motive could have existed in the minds of his Secretaries of the State, War, and Navy Departments, who were all Northern men. They were perfectly well aware that a war then would not be popular in either Pennsylvania or New York or Massachusetts. They were men who were accustomed to speak their minds. The Secretary of State in particular had shown himself in cabinet discussions extremely voluble in disapproving measures which he thought might possibly lead to war; and he was dreadfully alarmed at the possibilities which the Oregon question seemed to offer. But in this instance neither Buchanan nor Marcy nor Bancroft seem to have spoken a word of protest.

What the cabinet really knew of Mexico was very little. They were aware that it had for years threatened war on Texas, and that it had never fulfilled its threats. They had every reason to suppose that the members of Herrera's administration were individually favorable to negotiation, and although Slidell had certainly not been greeted with cordiality, his letters were hopeful. In the despatch of December 17, 1845, received from him on January 12, 1846, he had said:

"A revolution, and that before the meeting of Congress, is a probable event; a change of ministers almost a certain one. Notwithstanding the desire, which I believe the present administration really entertains, to adjust all their difficulties with us, so feeble and inert is it, that I am rather inclined to the opinion that the chances of a successful negotiation would be better with one more hostile, but possessing greater energy."¹

The American cabinet on the thirteenth of January, therefore, knew that Slidell had not yet been received, that it

¹ Slidell to Buchanan, Dec. 17, 1845; *ibid.*, 26. And see Buchanan to Slidell, Jan. 20, 1846; *ibid.*, 53.

was probable he would not be, that Herrera's government was unstable, but friendly, and that the chances of success under a new government might be better. With this knowledge before them, it was agreed, apparently without discussion or dissent, to order Taylor to move from Corpus Christi to the Rio Grande. The President, who noted so fully all discussions in his cabinet, only wrote as follows:

"Tuesday, 13th January 1846.—There was a regular meeting of the Cabinet to-day; all the members present except the Attorney General, who was understood to be officially engaged in the Supreme Court of the U. States. Despatches from Mexico, which had been received last evening, were read and considered. Some other public matters not important were also considered. Had a dinner-party to-day."¹

This was all. Polk's silence as to the orders to Taylor was, of course, not inconsistent with an expectation on the President's part that Taylor's movement would provoke the Mexicans to warlike deeds. But it was also entirely consistent with the belief which Taylor had expressed more than three months before, that the forward movements of the army and navy were calculated to produce very different results.² In the first place, a display of force might serve as a strong hint to the Mexican government of the advisability of receiving Slidell. In the second place, *beati possidentes* was an old maxim of diplomacy, and actual possession of the east bank of the Rio Grande might be a useful card to play if it came to framing a treaty. And in the third place, if a war ever did result, an advanced position might prove of distinct benefit from the military point of view.

That this display of force provoked the Mexicans, and induced them to fight rather than to bargain, proves nothing as to the intentions of the American cabinet. It shows,

¹ Polk's *Diary*, I, 164.

² Taylor to Adjutant-General, Oct. 4, 1846; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 107-109. There were "a thousand reports" in Taylor's camp as to the future movements of the army. One young staff-officer wrote to his wife in December that if the result of Slidell's negotiations proved unfavorable, "I think we will be thrown forward to occupy the line of boundary as claimed by the United States, and take forcible possession of it, and let Mexico do what she can."—(*Life and Letters of General Meade*, I, 39.)

perhaps, nothing more than their ignorance of Mexican nature. John Bull might be looked straight in the eye, and spoken to firmly and boldly to some advantage; but John Bull had a good deal to lose, while Mexico had nothing except her dignity. But she valued dignity above money or land. "The Mexican," said Henry Addington, who was Under-Secretary in the British Foreign Office, and knew the Spanish character well, "the Mexican is like a mule—if you spur him too much he will back off the precipice with you";¹ and Polk and his advisers had yet a good deal to learn both of mules and men.

The Mexican government had long before declared their intention of doing nothing to precipitate war, and to await attack from their opponents. The Mexicans, however, asserted, and Polk's critics at home echoed the assertion, that the American troops were the first aggressors by their advance to the westward of the Nueces River, which, it was said, had always constituted the recognized boundary of Texas. And if this statement was correct, Taylor's seizure of Point Isabel and his march to the Rio Grande were as much an invasion of the department of Tamaulipas as if he had landed near Tampico and had advanced on that town through the southern portion of the same department.

From a Mexican point of view the inquiry as to the western boundary of Texas was, strictly speaking, illogical. The Mexican government had always insisted that it had never parted with its ownership of Texas; it had declared repeatedly that the annexation of Texas by the United States was of itself a *casus belli*; and in this aspect of the case it was as bad for an American army to enter Texas as to enter Tamaulipas. Moreover, Taylor had been encamped west of the Nueces since the beginning of August, 1845, and therefore in reality the invasion had been begun at that time.

From an American point of view, however, the inquiry was of real importance. Congress had authorized the incorporation of Texas into the Union, but it had never authorized the invasion of Mexico; and if the President, in

¹ Jones, 370. Addington had been for some years British minister in Spain.

moving troops west of the Nueces, had sent them beyond the limits of Texas, he had plainly acted without any color of law. Whether he had really exceeded his authority depended on the answer to the question: Was the Nueces recognized as the boundary?

Historically there could be little doubt that prior to 1836 it had been so regarded. The Spaniards and their successors all through the New World, it is true, were notoriously careless about boundaries. Every country in South and Central America was involved in disputes with its neighbors over boundary questions, but the Spanish maps and descriptions of Texas made in the first years of the nineteenth century, with quite unusual unanimity, agreed that the Nueces, near the Gulf, divided Tamaulipas from Texas.¹ The republic of Texas, however, by one of its earliest legislative acts, following their treaty with Santa Anna, had declared that Texas was bounded by the Rio Grande from its mouth to its source, and the leading Texans attached very great importance to that line. The United States had acquired all the rights of Texas, whatever they might be, and the claim to a disputed boundary was regarded in Washington as an asset of much value in effecting a definite settlement with Mexico.

The value of the territory for purposes of bargaining was certainly undeniable, although when it came to formulating the arguments by which the claim of Texas and the United States could be sustained, serious difficulties were experienced. Donelson, the American chargé in Texas, had stated the case fully,² and Buchanan, in preparing the instructions for Slidell, had also tried his hand, though without much success. The jurisdiction of Texas, it was said, had been extended beyond the Nueces, and representatives from the country between it and the Rio Grande had sat in her Congress and convention. This, however, was only an assertion of actual possession, and not a very strong

¹ An accurate summary of the evidence of "the official Spanish delimitation of Texas" will be found in Garrison's "Westward Extension," *The American Nation Series*, vol. XVII, 98-106.

² Donelson to Buchanan, July 11, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 103.

assertion at that. The claim of a *right* to possession was based solely on the ground that "this portion of the territory was embraced within the limits of ancient Louisiana." The evidence as to the extent of "ancient Louisiana" has already been stated in sufficient detail;¹ and as even Buchanan was forced to admit that the United States by the Florida treaty had ceded "all that part of ancient Louisiana within the present limits of Texas," the important inquiry narrowed itself to the question of what was "the extent of the territorial rights which Texas has acquired by the sword." In other words, the controversy really resolved itself into the question of fact as to what was the extent of the Texan conquests, and how far Texas had actually exercised her jurisdiction.

Upon that point the evidence was reasonably clear. The remnants of Santa Anna's army, after San Jacinto, were instructed by him to retire beyond the Rio Grande; and they did, in point of fact, ultimately retreat to Matamoros. From that time forward the country lying between the line of the Nueces and the Rio Grande was practically neutral ground, permanently possessed by neither party, and only crossed occasionally by smugglers and Indians. At Corpus Christi the Texans had a small settlement west of the Nueces, and they may be said to have occupied the whole valley of the Nueces. Opposite Matamoros there were a number of scattered Mexican ranches, and what might be called villages on the island of Santiago and at Point Isabel; while higher up the river, at Laredo, there was a Mexican settlement of some size on the east bank. The Mexican ranches or villages, however, were not far back from the Rio Grande, a fact recognized in General Woll's proclamation of June 20, 1844, in which he announced that any one found more than one league from the river would be shot.² The proof of actual and permanent possession of this whole territory by the Texan government was therefore lacking, for in fact neither they nor the Mexicans exercised any actual control over the entire region in dispute.

¹ See Vol. I, Chapter I.

² See Vol. I, page 655.

The government in Washington was well aware of these salient facts of the case. Donelson, the American chargé d'affaires in Texas, had informed the Secretary of State that Texas had established no posts on the Rio Grande; that the territory west of the Nueces had been in the possession of both parties; and that the ownership of the country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was "a disputed question."¹ It was in full view of these facts that the orders to Taylor were issued. He had been first told to select and occupy a healthy post "on or near the Rio Grande,"² but six weeks later he was informed that he was expected to "approach as near the boundary line—the Rio Grande—as prudence will dictate. With this in view the President desires that your position, for a part of your forces at least, should be west of the river Nueces." Much latitude was therefore allowed as to the precise point for a camp, and when Donelson suggested the occupation of Corpus Christi, "said to be as healthy as Pensacola, a convenient place for supplies, and *the most western point now occupied by Texas*," Taylor announced that until further orders he would confine himself to the line of the Nueces, "which covers all the settlements." These movements were expressly approved.³

No further orders seem to have been sent to Taylor during the summer of 1845; but early in the autumn he wrote, apparently as his own suggestion, that although Corpus Christi had thus far been the best possible position, yet he thought it a question whether the views of the government would be best carried out by his remaining longer at that point.

"If our government," he wrote, "in settling the question of boundary, makes the line of the Rio Grande an ultimatum, I cannot doubt that the settlement will be greatly facilitated and hastened by our taking possession at once of one or two suitable points on or quite near that river. Our strength and state of preparation should be displayed

¹ Donelson to Buchanan, June 4 and 23, 1845; Sen. Doc. 1, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 66, 83.

² Bancroft to Taylor, June 15, 1845; H. R. Doc. 60, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 81.

³ Taylor to Adjutant-General, July 8, 1845; Marcy to Taylor, July 30, 1845; *ibid.*, 802, 807.