

THE EFFECT OF THE MEXICAN AMERICAN WAR ON THE CIVIL WAR

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The Mexican American War, fought between 1846 and 1848, was a significant conflict of the 19th century that had far-reaching consequences. It served as a training ground for the officer corps of the United States Army, and it forced military planners to reevaluate and update their doctrine to better reflect the realities of modern warfare. Furthermore, if the Mexican American War had not occurred, the outcome of the subsequent Civil War may have been very different. The acquisition of vast territories, including California and Texas, because of the war also had a profound impact on the nation's expansion and development. Overall, the Mexican American War played a pivotal role in shaping the United States as it is known today.

The Mexican American War was a result of the dispute over the annexation of Texas by the United States, which had previously been a part of Mexico. As a result of this action, Mexico threatened war as highlighted by Nathan A. Jennings, "Mexico threatened war over American annexation of its former territory."¹ This quote illustrates the tension that existed between the two countries before the outbreak of war. Before the war was officially declared there were minor skirmishes along the border between opposing forces. The war ultimately ensued over the territory of Texas and served as a valuable training opportunity for new officers from both the United States and Mexico. Many officers were trained during the Mexican American War and fought in the Civil War, among these officers are Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, George McClellan, P.G.T. Beauregard, and many others, but the most predominant among them are Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.

1. Nathan A. Jennings, "Expeditionary Land Power: Lessons from the Mexican-American War," *Military Review; Fort Leavenworth* 97, no 1 (2017): 44, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1861025257?accountid=12902&pq-origsite=primo>.

The Mexican American War was the best training ground for new officers, these new officers could learn how to campaign and fight in the field instead of just learning in the classroom. One of these officers was Ulysses S. Grant, born in Point Pleasant, Ohio, he joined the Army and graduated from West Point. During the Mexican American War Grant was assigned as a quartermaster in the Mexican American War, this job would teach him a lot about operating without a secure supply line, something that he would do during the Vicksburg Campaign.² During the Vicksburg Campaign, Grant captured Jackson and laid siege to Vicksburg, Mississippi, a key Confederate stronghold. This campaign was one of the major turning points in the war, giving the Union control of the Mississippi River and showcasing Grant's strategic and tactical skill as a commander. With these feats under his belt Grant would eventually take command of all Union forces. Grant could not have achieved this if the Mexican American War never happened.

During the Mexican American War and even before it had started Grant showed just how talented he was, this eventually caught the eye of the high command who moved him to a different position. This “reassignment had come directly from General Taylor, who had noticed Grant’s diligent work ethic as far back as Corpus Christi.”³ Taylor recognized Grant's talent and potential, so he decided to move him to a role that would best utilize his skills and abilities. This change in career path allowed Grant to gain a deep understanding and proficiency in the

2. Kevin Dougherty, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.eznvcc.vccs.edu/lib/nvcc/reader/action?docID=515587>.

3. Martin Dugard, *The Training Ground : Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2008), https://web-s-ebshost-com.eznvcc.vccs.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzc2Mjg1NV9fQU41?sid=ffd1f0c0-ce4b-40c3-a6fa-45b1c3b7f74a@redis&vid=0&format=EK&lpid=chap_18&rid=0.

intricacies of logistics and their crucial importance on the battlefield. Through this new role, Grant was able to hone his skills and make significant contributions to the war effort, ultimately leading to his success as a commander. These skills would be showcased when he became commander of all Union forces. Grant could not have learned these experiences without real-world experience.

Another promising officer who took part in the Mexican American War was Robert E. Lee. Before the war, Lee had served in the U.S. Army for over 15 years serving as an engineer but had not yet made a significant name for himself. However, during the war, Lee was given the important role of leading reconnaissance in the Battle of Cerro Gordo. According to Kevin Dougherty, “not only was Lee responsible for finding the route and building the road, but Scott also entrusted him to serve as a guide for Brigadier General David Twiggs' division in the conduct of the attack.”⁴ Lee's expertise in reconnaissance allowed Scott to outmaneuver a larger force by successfully encircling them with a well-defended position. This battle showed the world that the Americans are a formidable fighting force. This mission was a pivotal moment for Lee, as it earned him recognition and respect from his peers and commanders, which ultimately led to his leadership of the Confederate forces. If it were not for the Mexican American War, it is unlikely that Lee would have gained the experience and recognition necessary to attain such a position.

Lee eventually became a highly trusted officer of Scott and was appointed as one of his chief aides. Because Scott trusted him so much, he “appointed Lee as one of the commissioners ‘to arrange terms of surrender,’ and then make ‘a perfect draft’ of the castle ‘for the information

4. Dougherty, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience*

of our own Government.”⁵ This trust in Lee was demonstrated during the Mexican American War, where Scott appointed Lee as one of the commissioners to negotiate the terms of surrender with the Mexican army. Scott also tasked Lee with drafting a detailed report on the castle for the information of the U.S Government, which further showcases the level of trust and respect that Scott had for Lee as a military officer. Lee would not have gained this fame if it was not for the Mexican American War, without this fame he would not have been able to be a pivotal figure in the Confederate army.

Lee was a very talented officer during the years of the Mexican American War. He had gained the respect of not only his peers but also his superiors. Despite Lee’s accomplishments, “his reputation rested principally on his service on the staff of Winfield Scott during the Mexican War and on the praise, Scott lavished on Lee thereafter”⁶. Being praised for only one thing would often stop officers in their tracks, with little hope for advancement. But Lee excelled where others failed. He climbed through the ranks and eventually became the superintendent of West Point, overseeing the education of a generation of officers. He was also in command of the assault on Harper's Ferry to retake it from John Brown. Lee did not allow his service on Scott's staff to be his only defining moment; he proved himself to be one of the best. Without his motivation to step out of Scott's shadow, the generation of officers trained at West Point would have turned out differently. Lee's accomplishments during and after the Mexican American War

5. Allen C. Guelzo, “War Is a Great Evil: Robert E. Lee in the War with Mexico,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (July 2018): 65, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://muse-jhu-edu.eznvcc.vccs.edu/article/699019>.

6. Gabor S. Boritt, *Jefferson Davis's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.eznvcc.vccs.edu/lib/nvcc/reader.action?docID=281192&ppg=46>.

put him on the path to becoming the leader of both the North and South armies during the Civil War.

This war was not only about the officer and men involved but also about the tactics and strategies used and developed. At the start of the war, the United States was heavily outnumbered almost four to one. Zachary Taylor was sent down to the border to help maintain security and to deter the Mexican Army. This came to a boiling point on April 25, 1846, when a Mexican raid attacked a seventy-man patrol, “for Taylor and his small army, deterrence soon failed and both sides moved to seize initiative.”⁷ Taylor seized the initiative and managed to win three major battles at the start of the war, these actions put the Mexican army on the back foot for the rest of the war eventually leading to their surrender. These ideas, taking the initiative whenever possible, lead to much of the military planning leading up to and during the Civil War. If these lessons were not learned during the Mexican American War, the Civil War would have been much more passive with no one wanting to take risks.

These ideas on how to fight a war are by no means new, they have been around for many centuries before. However, this is one of the first times this style of fighting has been so effective in American history. This is highlighted in *The Principles of Strategy*, which states, “act against the weakest part of the enemy; against his center if his forces be not united, and against his flank or rear, if they are concentrated.”⁸ This book was prominent in the years before the Civil War and is a great reflection on the current military thinking of that time. Many officers on both sides

7. Jennings, *Expeditionary Land Power: Lessons from the Mexican-American War*

8. Emil Schalk, *The Principles of Strategy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co, 1863), <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.campaignsof1862101scha/?sp=17&st=image&r=-0.09,0.275,1.358,0.834,0>.

who fought in the Civil War would have learned this style of combat from this book or others like it. We can see these types of operations on both the tactical and strategic levels in the Vicksburg Campaign, Gettysburg, Pickett's Charge, and the Atlanta Campaign. Many of these battles were pivotal moments in the Civil War leading to its conclusion. Without these ideas being learned from the Mexican American War, the officers of the Civil War would have had a very different view of the war.

At the start of the Civil War, the Union was in disarray, no one knew what to do or how to act, something like this had never happened before this was not helped by the Union's first major defeat of the war at the Battle of Bull Run. When Major General George B. McClellan was given command by President Abraham Lincoln on September 2, 1862, he "immediately set about trying to do so, instilling order and discipline in the Union forces around Washington and turning the disorganized rabble bequeathed by McDowell into serious soldiers."⁹ This was an army that was shattered after Bull Run but McClellan found a way to pull the units together and rigorize them into a proper fighting force. McClellan learned much from the Mexican American War from flanking and sieging to organization and discipline. McClellan's leadership was instrumental in turning the tide of the war for the Union. He implemented strict training regimens and modernized the army's tactics and equipment, which led to several Union victories on the battlefield. Even if McClellan was removed from command soon after taking charge his efforts set the foundation for a Union victory. Had McClellan not learned how to lead so effectively in the Mexican American War, there is a high chance that the Union army would have shattered.

9. Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), https://web-s-ebshost-com.ezrvcc.vccs.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzMxNDA1NF9fQU41?sid=a6b59767-6414-4b09-95a0-521d866a9de3@redis&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_52&rid=0.

Even though McClellan was not in command for long, he had a major impact on the early planning for the war. McClellan had many different plans but not all of them got off the drawing board, one of these was an invasion via the Mississippi river. McClellan “wanted and advance down the Mississippi river with 20,000 men, plus those raiders in Kentucky and eastern Tennessee.”¹⁰ Most of these plans involved taking the initiative while attacking hard and quickly, these were the same ideas presented during the Mexican American War, a war McClellan took part in and learned from. McClellan's military experience in the Mexican American War influenced his plans and tactics during the Civil War. He believed that the key to success was a strong, well-trained army that could quickly and decisively defeat the enemy on the battlefield. Despite his eventual removal from command, McClellan's ideas, ideas formed because of the war 13 years prior, and tactics continued to shape the Union's strategy throughout the Civil War.

Robert E. Lee was a predominant officer fighting for the Confederacy during the Civil War. At the start of the war Lee was approached by both nations seeking to lead their armies, Lee ultimately sided with the Confederacy. Lee was an aggressive general not afraid to take risks, he “learned the value of turning movements from Winfield Scott's Mexican examples.”¹¹ Many of Lee's attacks and strategies include outflanking his enemy to attack their side. Some of these battles include Second Manassas, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, in all these battles Lee was heavily outnumbered, but they all turned out to be Confederate Victories. Lee's experience as a military engineer in the Mexican American War and his knowledge of battlefield terrain

10. Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War*

11. Allan Peskin. "Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 1 (2009), accessed January 17, 2023, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A194278506/UHIC?u=viva2_nvcc&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=69926dcd.

heavily affected his strategies. He often used the natural features of the landscape to his advantage and was known for his ability to move his army quickly and efficiently. Despite often being at the disadvantage in many of his battles, Lee was able to achieve significant victories due to his aggressive tactics and ability to outmaneuver his opponents. Lee picked up most of what he knew on the battlefields which he reconned in the Mexican American War, without the Mexican American War, Lee would have not been able to compete with the Union if he was even given command.

The time during the Civil War was uneventful for Grant, but once the nation was at war, he quickly took command. Grant's doctrine didn't differ too much from what he learned 13 years prior, he "explained his philosophy regarding strategy, tactics, and his thoughts concerning war generally. He told the surgeon, 'the art of war is simple enough; find out where your enemy is, get at him as soon as you can, strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on.'"¹² These thoughts on the way war should be waged fall in line with what Scott did on his march south. Even more, Grant showed just how effective it was when done properly, he executed the army portion of the Anaconda Plan, a plan put forth by General Scott at the start of the Civil War, this plan was meant to strangle the south of trade and force it to capitulate. The plan was to march down the Mississippi River to New Orleans while also blockading the south cutting off its trade. The march down the Mississippi was a bold and daring campaign as it was a thrust into the Confederate heartland, the manifestation of the doctrine developed in the Mexican American War. When Grant was eventually promoted to Lieutenant General and given command of all

12. David Alan Johnson. *Battle of Wills : Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and the Last Year of the Civil War* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.eznvcc.vccs.edu/lib/nvcc/reader.action?docID=5890601&ppg=116>.

Union forces his ideas and doctrine can be seen in the battles that were fought, these battles are very reminiscent of the ones from the Mexican American War.

The campaigns that Grant waged in the western part of the United States caught the eye of many people in congress and the rest of the army. The most predominant of these campaigns was the Vicksburg Campaign where he captured Jackson and laid siege to Vicksburg. With all this gravitas around him, Lincoln eventually sent a letter to Congress stating, "I nominate Ulysses S. Grant, now a Major General in the military service, to be Lieutenant General in the Army of the United States."¹³ With the promotion to Lieutenant General Grant would be given command of all Union forces. This nomination proved that Grant was one of the best officers of his time. The year after Grant was given command of the Union forces saw the major invasion of the south, reminiscent of the one Scott waged against Mexico. These pushed resulted in the Second Battle of Fort Fisher, Bentonville, Five Forks, the Third Battle of Petersburg, and finally the Battle of Appomattox Court House. With these victories, Grant successfully ended the Civil War and forced Confederate General Robert E. Lee to surrender at Appomattox Court House. This solidified Grant's reputation as a skilled military strategist and commander and cemented his place in history as one of the most successful generals of the Civil War. Becoming this famed and well know would not have been possible if Grant did not have experience in the field and not just a classroom.

The Mexican American War has been proven to have played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the subsequent American Civil War. As Kevin Dougherty states, "officers who served under Winfield Scott witnessed the era's most professional soldier in action. They learned

13. Abraham Lincoln, "Message of President Abraham Lincoln Nominating Ulysses S. Grant to Be Lieutenant General of the Army" (Washington D.C, 1864).

the importance of reconnaissance,"¹⁴ logistics, maneuvering, attacking, and defending. These officers, who had the opportunity to observe the tactics and strategies employed by the most skilled soldiers of the time, were able to develop their leadership abilities and command skills. This training, acquired during the Mexican American War, is one of the crucial factors that ultimately influenced the outcome of the Civil War.

The experience gained by Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant during the Mexican American War is considered to have been instrumental in his emergence as one of the most accomplished military leaders of his era. Again, Dougherty states, "on April 9, Lee wrote that he had received Grant's terms and was willing to talk. He surrendered his forces the same day."¹⁵ Through his strategic maneuvers, Grant outmaneuvered and ultimately defeated Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who was widely regarded as one of the most formidable military leaders of the Confederacy. It can be argued that without the training and experience gained during the Mexican American War, Lieutenant General Grant may not have possessed the tactical insight necessary to secure such a decisive victory over his Confederate counterpart.

It is often argued that if the Mexican American War never happened the outcome of the Civil War would have been the same. The claim is that with the invention of new arms and means of transportation, the strategies and tactics at the time become obsolete. For the Mexican American War people often state soldiers "learned a way of waging war in a limited fashion that would lose much of its relevance by the time of the Civil War."¹⁶ While this might be true the

14. Dougherty, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience*

15. Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War*

16. Dougherty, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience*

core of military operations has stayed the same throughout history. Just the weapons employed, and the way people see them from a sociological perspective have changed drastically. Wars have been fought with sticks, stones, blades, muskets, and rifles, but the ideas of attacking, defending, logistics, and reconnaissance have changed. The Mexican American War was a test bed for the ideas that would be implemented in the Civil War.

The Mexican American War has had a significant impact on American history. The outcome of this conflict shaped the trajectory of the subsequent Civil War, and its effects are still felt today. Without the Mexican War, the impact and outcome of the Civil War would have been much different. The Mexican American War served as a valuable training ground for the officer corps of the Civil War, and without this training, it is possible that the Union forces would have faltered under the pressure from the Confederacy. Additionally, the Mexican American War had a profound impact on military doctrine and logistics. The lessons learned from this conflict shaped how the United States military approached warfare, and these principles continue to be relevant to this day. It is worth considering how American history would have been altered had the Mexican American War never occurred. The war not only had an impact on the Civil War but also on the way the military operates, and society viewed war. Overall, the Mexican American War is a significant event in American history.

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