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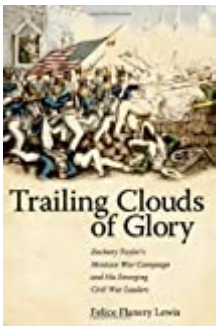

Felice Flanery Lewis. *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil War Leaders.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010. 352 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1678-5.

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Zachary Taylor's War

As the sesquicentennial of the Civil War commences, Americans will engage with renewed vigor in one of their favorite past times–arguing over the talent level of numerous Yankee and Confederate generals. Devotees of the epic struggle are well aware that the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 served as a training ground for many of those officers. Except for the few who endured the heat and mosquitoes of the recent Second Seminole War in Florida, the well-scrubbed graduates of West Point had little or no combat experience.

Felice Flanery Lewis seeks to place these men, at least those who fought in northern Mexico with Zachary Taylor, in historical perspective. To her credit, the author makes no exaggerated claims for the learning curve of her subjects. Instead, she argues that while they obtained valuable experience in the conflict, it is difficult to project particular lessons learned in the smaller context upon the grander stage of the Civil War. Diaries and letters infrequently reflect on such schooling, but rather emphasize the passionate desire for combat (at least initially), friendships made, and friends lost.

Taylor is clearly the hero of the volume. âOld Zach,â as Lewis repeatedly dubs him, is dispassionate and compassionate. A thoughtful, practical, and down-to-earth commander, he bore an affection for his men and little animosity towards the enemy. No wonder that he was widely admired by both friend and foe. Taylor nobly did his duty in dealing with the Mexican army, but wanted a quick end to the war and moved on several occasions to achieve a compromise settlement. James K. Polk is the villain of the volume. The meddlesome president had little respect for âOld Rough and Ready,â rarely took him into his confidence in terms of war planning, and sought to marginalize him as quickly as possible. Even as he completed his triumphant stint in late 1847, Taylor failed to receive the recognition he well deserved from either Polk or the War Department.

Lewis opens her tale in the spring of 1844 with Taylor assembling a sizeable force of regulars at Ft. Jesup, Louisiana. His mission was to guard the Texas border and provide reassurance for wary Texans as they awaited the ratification of a proposed treaty of annexation to the

United States. The reason President John Tyler selected Taylor for this duty is unclear. While the sixty-year-old officer had fought small groups of Indians in the Old Northwest and Florida, his career had not been one of great notoriety. When the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly rejected the Texas treaty in June 1844, tensions along the border only temporarily abated. Tyler finessed an annexation agreement by joint resolution from the Congress in March 1845. The newly inaugurated Polk dispatched Taylor and almost 3,500 soldiers to disputed territory: first to Corpus Christi in July and then to the Rio Grande in January 1846.

Lewis discusses in great detail the activities and movements of Taylor and his men as they established supply lines at Point Isabel on the Gulf coast and maneuvered into position across the river from Matamoros–and a Mexican army–in the spring. Throughout the work, she frequently takes the opportunity to draw biographical sketches of soldiers who would become famous (among them, George Gordon Meade, George B. McClellan, Thomas J. Jackson, James Longstreet, Braxton Bragg, Robert E. Lee, and U.S. Grant) and many others who would die in obscurity. The author emphasizes that the Americans, while told that their presence on âMexican soilâ constituted an act of war, still believed that bloodshed was unlikely.

When American dragoons were ambushed and sixteen killed in April along the north bank of the Rio Grande, Polk had his *casus belli.* The author does not deal with the struggle between the president and Congress, but keeps her focus on the battlefield. Each of Taylorâs engagements which gained the Americans control of northeastern Mexico–Palo Alto (May 8), Resaca de la Palma (May 9), and Monterrey (September 21-23)–are examined very carefully in terms of both tactics and leadership. Lewis candidly discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Old Zachâs subordinates, but remains defensive of Taylor himself whether considering his role at Monterrey or his controversial decision to offer Mexican commander Pedro de Ampudia an eight-week armistice. An infuriated Polk viewed the armistice as a lost opportunity to bring the Mexican army to heel and further advance American territorial gains. In the presidentâs mind, the action further diminished Taylorâs already shaky reputation.

While Taylorâs army remained in occupation in Monterrey, Lewis uses the lull to discuss John Woolâs aborted expedition to take Chihuahua in the fall of 1846, and Stephen Watts Kearnyâs triumphant (and fortunate) advance from Kansas through New Mexico to California. Since American victories had produced no peace settlement, the administration decided to proceed with the planned Vera Cruz-to-Mexico City operation to be led by Winfield Scott. The victorious Taylor was thus twice insulted; first, by being ignored for the new command and second, by having 4,700 regular soldiers stripped from his army. In August 1862, a corporal in McClellanâs Union Army stumbled across a small bundle of cigars in a Maryland field that outlined the order of march of Leeâs divided army towards Antietem. In a somewhat similar incident in January 1847, Mexican soldiers killed an American dragoon and discovered sensitive dispatches from Taylor to Scott detailing upcoming U.S. operations. Arguably, General Santa Anna acted with greater dispatch than âLittle Macâ in seizing the moment.

Americans generally view the resultant Battle of Buena Vista, then and now, as a great victory. A twenty-page chapter explores this engagement, analyzing how the badly outnumbered Americans managed to seize victory from the jaws of potential defeat. Leadership counted, especially at critical points, and so did the devastatingly effective artillery. The author makes the interesting point that Jefferson Davisâs celebrated stand with his Mississippi Rifles has been much overblown. Neither were his tactics brilliant nor did he make a great contribution to the victory. While the American public lauded Taylorâs triumphs and the talk of his presidential candidacy accelerated, Polk marginalized him and his army, both of which had largely âoutlived their usefulnessâ (p. 217). Old Zach, disgruntled but loyal, waited until September 1847, when Scott took Mexico City, before asking for a six-month leave from command and embarking on the road to the White House.

Studies of the Mexican-American War have grown steadily over the past decade. While classic military history has not been left behind (Martin Dugardâs *The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* [2008] and Christopher Dishmanâs *A Perfect Gibraltar: The Battle for Monterrey, Mexico, 1846* [2010] consider some of the same issues as Lewis), fresh topics have received consideration as well. Paul Foos, in *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict in the Mexican War* (2002), offers an unflattering portrayal of the average American soldier, while Brian De Layâs *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (2008) reveals the extraordinary nature of the âIndian problemâ in the provinces of northern Mexico. Timothy Henderson, in *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States* (2008), provides a

welcome Mexican perspective.

Readers who enjoy a more traditional approach, however, will delight in Lewisâs volume. By design, the narrative emphasizes regulars and officers. She details the dated arrival and departure of various companies and regiments, along with the deployment, command, retirement, injury, and death among officers ranked from general to lieutenant. Her research is most impressive, the footnotes rich in primary sources, congressional and War Department documents, but especially the personal papers and diaries of the participants. She is also aware of and engaged with current scholarship, a point reflected in her extensive bibliography and throughout the volume where she parries thrusts against the military reputation of Old Zach. Polk, nevertheless, more than Winfield Scott or Secretary of War William Marcy, remains Taylorâs chief antagonist. The president has his defenders, but Lewis does not fully address their arguments made in some studies, such as Robert W. Merryâs *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the North American Continent* (2009). While Lewis contends that her fine account is about the budding and uneven early careers of more than 170 future generals, concurrently, it is also the most able narrative and defense of Zachary Taylorâs command in Mexico that has been recently published.

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