

WAR FOR THE WEST: ALTA CALIFORNIA IN
THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR

by

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requirements for the degree

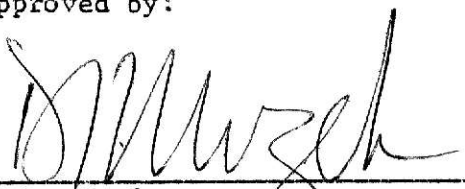
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PREFACE

The Mexican-American War in California has not been ignored by historians, but it has not received its due either. Most books written on the subject treat the campaign for Alta California as a sideshow, concentrating instead on the more "glamorous" activities of Generals Scott and Taylor in Mexico proper. Many books and articles on certain aspects of the war in California have been published, but there is still no single monograph on the subject. This thesis is an attempt to call attention to this shortcoming in Mexican-American War historiography, and bring together some of the recently published material on the subject. A great deal of primary source material exists in the Bancroft Library in California, however, I have had to rely on published primary sources and secondary works due to financial constraints and the time factor involved in preparing this paper.

This project originally was to include a study of the entire western theater of operations in the Mexican-American War, but was narrowed to the campaign for Alta California. The first half of the thesis deals with the development of Californian military forces and the factors which brought Americans to the western coast of North America during the 19th century. The latter half of the paper deals with the American conquest of California and its immediate results. It is this author's conviction that the long-term development of the military contingents of both the United States and California was a crucial factor in explaining the outcome of the several battles fought on California soil. In the course of writing this paper I attempted to answer many questions concerning the evolution of the California military establishment, the conduct of the American campaign, and the problem of determining who was the rightful military governor during the occupation of the

province. Perhaps I raise more questions than I answer, but there is still much that can be done with this topic.

I wish to express my thanks to Mr. John Philip Langellier, a fellow graduate student and good friend, who aided me in choosing the topic for my thesis, and is locating certain materials for this project. I also would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Donald Mrozek, Dr. Robin Higham, and Dr. George Wilcoxon for their helpful suggestions in preparing the final draft. Their guidance has been greatly appreciated. As always, any errors which survived the final proofreading of this paper are mine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	ii
Chapter	
I: SOLDIERS OF CROWN AND CROSS, The Spanish Military Experience in Alta California, 1769-1821.....	1
II: THE SPANISH INHERITANCE, The Military Forces of Alta California, 1822-1846.....	21
III: RUMORS OF WAR, American Interests in California, 1789-1846.....	42
IV: WAR ON A SHOE-STRING, The Campaign for Alta California, July 1846-January 1847.....	71
V: WHO IS GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA? The Military Occupation of Alta California, January 1847- August 1848.....	106
VI: "A BRIGHT STAR IN OUR UNION," Some Concluding Thoughts on the Campaign in Alta California.....	134
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	147

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CHAPTER I

SOLDIERS OF CROWN AND CROSS

The Spanish Military Experience in Alta California, 1769-1821

As this realm of the Californias becomes pacified and its natives concerted... the Spaniard can go on settling other districts... suitable for effecting the conversion of souls, and affording them profits and advantages, for if the Spaniard does not see any advantage he will not be moved to do good, and these souls will perish without remedy if it is understood that no profit will be drawn from going there. But if they are lured by self interest they will go on discovering new lands every day.

Father Ascension on the need
for a colony at Monterey.

The Mexican military forces that met American naval and military forces in Alta California derived from the Spanish military establishment founded there during the last half of the eighteenth century. Since the Spanish armed forces consisted of colonial troops assigned to colonial duties and were the precursors of the Mexican soldiers of 1846, the history of the settlement of California and the role played by the military in this last act of colonization by the Spanish Empire is vital to comprehending the military traditions of the Mexican army and their relationship to the society as a whole.

California had been known to the Spanish conquerors of Mexico since the sixteenth century; but it was not until 1769 that a serious attempt was made to colonize Upper, or Alta, California. The Spanish had established several small settlements in Baja California beginning

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in 1697, at the insistence of the Jesuit priest Eusebio Kino. His reason for creating an outpost at such a distance from New Spain was ostensibly religious, the conquest of more souls for the Catholic Church; but the existence of pearlbeds off the coast undoubtedly made the venture more palatable to the secular authorities who had to finance it. Alta California, on the other hand, held no such promise. Rumors of gold and wealthy civilizations abounded; but the reality, as revealed by Spanish explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gave no evidence to support the myths. The only real interest shown by the Spaniards in Upper California prior to the eighteenth century was based on the desire to provide a way-station for the Manila galleons that sailed down the coast on their way to Mexico. Even this was not enough to prompt colonization of California since the ships that crossed the Pacific had only a few days remaining to their voyage by the time they reached the west coast of North America; nor pressure from the Church did not persuade the Spanish to establish themselves in Alta California either. Only when the Spanish frontier was threatened by another European power did the colonial authorities decide upon sending an expedition into California north of the Baja, with the intention of settling the area in the name of Spain.¹

Russian exploration of the Pacific Northwest began in 1741 with a voyage by Vitus Bering, down the coast of Alaska and as far south as Washington and Oregon. News of this expedition reached the Spanish through various written accounts late in the 1750's and immediately prompted concern over the presence of another European nation in Spain's South Sea. England's victory in the Seven Years' War further enhanced Spain's concern over Alta California since Great Britain now held title to much of the territory France once claimed in western Canada. It seemed apparent to Spanish officials in New Spain that England had designs on northern

California (which meant the entire Pacific coast to the Spaniards), and that Russia would soon establish a colony in this area, if it had not already done so. This left the frontier provinces of New Spain open to attack by Indian tribes supplied by competing European powers, much as northern Mexico had been earlier in the century. To prevent the southward spread of the undesirable British and Russian presence, the government of Spain authorized the colonization of Alta California.²

The Spanish army that occupied Alta California in 1769 was a product of over two centuries of Spain's frontier experience in the Americas. The soldiers were tough, experienced Indian fighters, whose protective leather clothing earned them the title soldados de cuera (the leather-jacket soldiers).³ In addition, a small contingent of light infantry constituted part of the "Sacred Expedition" to colonize California. These troops, numbering no more than 51 in all, were mainly presidial troops who would garrison the first two forts established in Upper California. This small force was the vanguard for future settlers and soldiers bound for California, and a deterrent to the Russians and British to the north.

The second arm of the Spanish occupation force took the form of four Franciscan missionaries and a group of Christianized Indians. This proselytizing contingent of the Sacred Expedition had proved its worth in New Spain; by converting the Indians to Christianity, the friars performed the dual service of conquering souls for the Kingdom of Heaven and citizens for the Kingdom of Spain. The Catholic missionaries had a difficult task to accomplish in "civilizing" the California Indians, for, as one friar of the original expedition noted, the Indians were "...totally nude, as Adam in Paradise before his sin."⁴ Reinforcements for the soldiers of Christ as well as the soldiers of the Spanish Crown arrived in the 1770's to aid in the conversion of California and its inhabitants into a province

of New Spain. The pattern of future settlement was greatly influenced by an uprising of Yuma Indians in 1781, which effectively blocked the land route from Sonora to California. Further colonization was made only by sea; a contributing factor to the slow increase of the colony's population.

Once the initial settlements had been made, the job of transforming a wilderness into a habitable land began. The agents of change were the time-proven Spanish institutions--the mission, the pueblo, and the presidio. The missions, of which there were 20 by the end of the Spanish period, were run by Franciscan friars and loyal Indian converts. Theoretically, the Franciscans were to be relieved by members of the secular clergy who would continue to run the missions. In practice, this rarely ever happened because of the great distance involved in transporting priests and their religious paraphernalia and the shortage of clergymen on the frontier as a whole. The goal of the mission was threefold--to convert, civilize, and exploit the Indians. Herbert Eugene Bolton, a noted California historian, described the function of the missions as follows:

Every mission was in the first place, a Christian seminary, designed to give religious discipline. Religious instruction, the elementary sort suited to the occasion, was imparted by a definite routine, based on long experience, and administered with much practical sense and regard for local conditions.⁵

Most missions taught the virtues of modern civilization through the word of God and the whip of the friars and overseers. In addition, most California missions employed Indians as skilled and unskilled laborers on the vast farm and grazing lands granted them by the Crown. Indian workers supplied the missions with food and manufactured goods such as cloth, ironware, and cattle hides. That the neophytes were exploited so was probably a result of the curious and contradictory attitude towards them held by the missionaries. The Indians were to be civilized, yet they were always held to be inferior by the very men who worked to save their souls. This may have been due to

the necessity for the men of God to manage temporal things such as the economies of their own missions, and their own human fallibilities. For even the clergy were subject to the temptations of enslaving other men, as was the case with the Indians of California.⁶

Towns, or pueblos as they were called by the Spanish, also played an important role in settling California. The need for farming communities arose in the 1770's with the complaint by the padres that the missions could not adequately support the garrisons of the four presidios. As a result, Governor Felipe de Neve collected a small group of settlers, mostly the families of presidial soldiers, and founded the first agricultural town of California at San José. This project was entirely funded by the government; the colonists received about 32 acres of land per family, tools to plant crops, and tax exemptions for the first five years until the community could produce a good surplus. Later communities followed the same pattern of settlement as San José, with the additional benefit of a yearly subsidy of rations and up to 120 pesos a year as an incentive to colonization.⁷

In spite of the possibilities offered by the California frontier, the pueblos attracted neither the quantity nor the quality of colonists desired by the colonial government. Those settlers who came to California in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were from the lower classes in New Spain, men who had little hope of improving their condition in the old provinces. The colonists were a lively topic of discussion in California, especially for the friars who ran the missions. Several padres complained of the immorality of the pueblo residents feeling that they provided a bad example to the Indians. Father Lasuen of the Santa Clara mission noted that the San José residents used mission Indians "indiscriminately for all their house and field work. They are an immense hindrance to the conversion of the pagans, for they give them bad example, they scandalize them,

and they actually persuade them not to become Christians, lest they would themselves suffer the loss of free labor."⁸ Government officials, too, were desirous of attracting a better class of people to California and tried to induce artisans and craftsmen to emigrate to the newly found province. Skilled workers were offered a salary of 1,000 pesos a year if they would come to California, but few chose to make the long trip and give up their livelihoods in New Spain. More often than not, the governor of California had to settle for poverty stricken settlers of mixed blood and convicts who were exiled to the province, usually to serve out their sentences as soldiers at the presidios.

The most visible signs of Spanish military presence in Alta California were the four presidios, or fortified settlements, at San Diego, San Francisco, Monterey and Santa Barbara. The presidio evolved out of the Roman military tradition of fortifications and was further modified by Spanish peoples during the Reconquista of the Iberian peninsula during the Middle Ages. When the Spaniards began to settle the New World in the sixteenth century, the presidios were employed much as they had been on the frontier with the Moors for centuries. The presidios of New Spain played an essential role in the subjugation of the Americas as a military outpost to deter aggression by hostile Indians. In addition, these small forts, much like the American cavalry posts of a later century, provided protection to nearby towns, escorts for merchants, and were themselves important as civilian centers for the families of the garrison's soldiers. In northern Mexico, the presidios also contributed to the pacification of hostile Indians by providing farming tools, blankets, and other items essential to "civilized" life, to those Indians who would settle in towns. This "peace by purchase" policy worked well up to the end of the Spanish period and aided in the assimilation of the Indian into Spanish colonial society. The policy was

not as prominent a role for the presidios of California since the Indians were more passive than those in northern Mexico; and communications with California were too difficult to provide a great deal of material aid to the colonists, much less the native Indians.⁹ In short, the California military outposts were meant to deter the Russians and the English in the Pacific Northwest, while providing the settlers with the same services rendered by the presidios of the Provincias Internas (Internal Provinces).

The frontier presidios provided shelter for the troops who occupied them and their families, but beyond that, their efficacy was questionable. Most presidios could not withstand a prolonged siege. This was due in part to their structural weaknesses, being made out of adobe and wood, and the poor locations in which they were often built, sometimes without a good water supply nearby. The distance between these outposts, especially the coastal presidios of California, made it difficult for the garrisons to support one another. These shortcomings did not go unnoticed, however, as one observer, Captain George Vancouver of the Royal Navy, noted in 1792: "Should the ambition of any civilized nation tempt it to seize on these unsupported posts, they could not make the least resistance, and must inevitably fall to a force barely sufficient for garrisoning and securing the country...."¹⁰ In all fairness to the presidio, one should note that the criticisms of these military posts were made from a European perspective.

A more balanced opinion of the frontier presidios in New Spain is presented in Max Moorehead's book The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands. In the following passage, the author summarizes the gradual development of the presidio and its inherent strengths and weaknesses:

In general, however, the presidio had evolved through the centuries from a miniature version of the medieval castle with high walls flanked by circular towers to a rather severe but far more spacious quadrangle where walls were

flanked by formidable angular bastions. Simple, archaic, and fragile though it was--a mere suggestion of its Old World prototype, the frontier presidio was eminently suited to its purpose. Since the hostile tribes of the region had neither the inclination nor the patience to place it under a prolonged siege, nor the firepower necessary to batter down its wall, the frontier presidio was seldom in jeopardy for all its architecturally antiquated features.¹¹

To the Indians, then, the presidio was a very formidable manifestation of the Spanish presence in the provinces.

The soldiers who manned the presidial outposts of Spain's Empire in California reflected the mixed nature of colonial society. Each presidio was a microcosm of the society, and represented the autocratic and oftentimes corrupt practices of the bureaucracy that it sought to defend. The officers were middle class in origin, seldom of pure Spanish descent. The rank and file of the army in California were composed of lower-class individuals, many of whom had no alternative livelihood and joined the army as a means to escape starvation. Although the class distinction between officer and enlisted man was rigid and distinct, the numerous land grants made to the soldiers gave them more social mobility than their counterparts in the older established provinces of New Spain. Presidial commanders were forbidden to own large ranchos; but this was a mere technicality, and in reality the officers accumulated huge land holdings for their herds of cattle. This meant less time for soldiering and too much concern over the commercial interests of the soldier/entrepreneur. The effect these private estates had on California society was great. "In California, the soldiers and settlers who had served the crown well were able to amass large landholdings rather easily, and within a generation had transformed themselves into a powerful provincial aristocracy."¹²

With a military force stratified along strict social lines, it should come as no surprise that abuse of power was a common occurrence in the

California garrisons, as it was in the Provincias Internas. The governors of New Spain had been wrestling with this problem since the sixteenth century, with special attention to the system of procurement and pay. No matter what reforms were attempted, a soldier could always count on receiving less than his authorized allotment of food, clothing, and equipment. The problem lay in the channels through which the Spanish soldier's pesos had to flow. Every bureaucrat down the line took out his share of handling expenses until the average trooper's pay was reduced by nearly 20 percent. Presidio commanders also got their share by purchasing goods for the garrison and charging the soldiers exorbitant prices.¹³ In California the problem was accentuated by the distance from the central authorities which made supervision of the presidio commanders more difficult, while the fearsome journey to Spain's lonely outpost on the Pacific placed the arrival of supply ships in question. The class distinction, though not quite as pronounced as in the Provincias Internas, was probably the primary cause of this form of corruption. "Indeed, the presidio Captain was as much a patron as a commandante, for he looked upon his troops (who were most often his economic, social, and even racial 'inferiors') as his personal vassals."¹⁴

Distance from the center of Spanish colonial government and the supplies that were vital to California's existence was not an insurmountable problem. The province could be made self-sufficient with an increase in population and an easing of the trade restrictions that made commercial endeavors a monopoly of the established business firms of the home country.

In 1794, Don Miguel Costansó filed a report at the request of the Viceroy of New Spain, Marques de Branciforte, on the problems of the presidios. Costansó was an engineering officer in the Spanish army, one of 11 such officers assigned to New Spain. His report on the need for

strengthening the defenses of Alta California is both insightful and revealing. Costansó recognized the military impotence of the presidios and proposed the establishment of regular artillery batteries at each of the portside presidios, namely San Francisco, Monterey, and San Diego. But Costansó's evaluation of the defenses of California went much further than proposing only a larger military presence in the province:

The measure of strengthening the presidios located in the ports... besides being most important, as I pointed out before, is perhaps somewhat risky because each fortification is situated in an area devoid of resources and help and the garrison of which does not know upon whom to rely for aid due to the lack of population.... It will therefore have to surrender even after a most vigorous defence has been made, and it will necessarily be much more difficult and costlier to regain the lost fort and its surrounding territory.

Therefore, it is my judgment that the first thing that we should consider is populating the territory. Of what value are immense areas of territory to us if we do not populate them? Of nothing more than an insufferable load without the least expectancy of receiving any benefit.¹⁵

Besides the more obvious point that a few thousand pesos investment in better defenses was more cost effective than financing an army to recapture the province if it fell to an invader, Costansó addressed the crucial question of populating Alta California. In order to assimilate better the Indians and make the province an asset to the Spanish Empire, Costansó argued that "there are no means more efficacious than from the beginning of a new establishment to introduce among them [the Indians] gente de razón (as European Spaniards, the Creoles, and the people of mixed blood are called in order to differentiate them from the native Indians), provided they are hardworking and useful."¹⁶ According to Costansó's plan, artisans would be sent to California to live in the missions and teach the Indians a trade. Over the course of 20 to 25 years, the missions would become towns, populated by civilized Indians and colonists of mixed blood. This vision of progress for the Indians was not shared by

the friars of the California missions, however. The gente de razón, the people with which Costansó proposed to populate California, were the same class the mission padres opposed because of their iniquitous behavior. The reason for this clerical opposition was undoubtedly self-centered, as the friars saw themselves as the only men capable of transforming the pagans into Christian subjects of the Spanish Crown. Thus, when a few gente de razón were sent to the missions to fulfill Costansó's plan, the friars pleaded poverty and could not find enough food and money to support the artisans in their role as teachers of trades.¹⁷

The Costansó report also alluded to the restrictive trade regulations that governed California. Because of a lingering mercantilist outlook on trade in the Pacific, there were no privately owned sailing vessels engaged in commerce in California and the Pacific coast of Mexico. Costansó believed that free trade among the colonies in Spain's South Sea would increase California's productivity and enrich the coffers of the Royal treasury through customs dues. The potential market for California meat and produce, according to Costansó, was great; these products could bring a good price at San Blas and ease the shortage of food on the western coast of Mexico.

But the business interests of Cadiz--fearing that shipping would diminish the demand of its products, when it could only have an opposite and generally favorable effect--managed to destroy that budding enterprise very early by repeatedly making unjust claims, and the vassals engaged in the nascent endeavor, who were forced to seek another type of livelihood, for their families, began neglecting shipping as well as abandoning coastal life.¹⁸

Although an attempt to increase California's population and train the Indians in some skills was attempted in the decade of the 1790's, the endeavor failed to solve the long term problems of the province. Of the few artisans who came to Upper California, whether prisoners or under contract from the government, most returned to Mexico when their "sentences"

expired. Resistance from the mission fathers was only part of the problem. Lack of resolve among government officials to ensure that colonists sent to California had everything they were promised in the colonization plan also contributed to the meagre growth rate of the province. In many cases, the supply ships that were supposed to bring tools and initial rations for new settlers carried nothing of the sort. California was always a low priority in Spain's New World Empire, and it remained so throughout the Mexican period of administration as well.

When Costansó sent his report to the Viceroy in 1794, the total military strength of Alta California was 218 officers and men, divided evenly among the four presidios. Later that same year, a force of about 70 Catalan Volunteers was sent to augment the strength of the province while Spain was at war with France.¹⁹ In 1803, a gradual decline of military forces, both qualitatively and quantitatively, began which the best efforts of the Governor could not change. The first soldiers to leave were the Catalan Volunteers who were withdrawn when the French threat ended. The Governor of California, Diego de Borica, requested 230 infantry and cavalry troops as both replacements and reinforcements for the Catalans, and an additional 25 recruits to be sent yearly to replace soldiers who retired from the service. Borica also requested a naval presence of three ships to be stationed in California waters in order to halt the by now rather lucrative, and illegal, sea otter trade being carried on by English and American merchant ships. While Borica's pleas for additional forces were certainly heard in the capital, nothing was done to further the defense of California at this time because of the high cost involved in stationing more troops so far from Mexico proper.²⁰

With no help forthcoming from Mexico City, measures to increase the effectiveness of California's military establishment were taken by

local authorities. In 1805, 77 soldiers, including three captains and nine NCO's, were recruited from the colonists. Recruitment was always a problem during this period since most young men had a better alternative to military service in the numerous ranchos that dotted the California countryside. As a result, those who did have an inclination towards military service joined militia units, taking advantage of the favorable military laws, which exempted them from certain civil laws, under whose jurisdiction they now fell.²¹ A militia artillery company was also organized in 1805, consisting of 62 privates and eight corporals. This unit, commanded by one Alferez Jose Roca, had the unique distinction of a 100 percent literacy rate among its soldiers, although the cannon with which they were to be armed were in Mexico. Presidial garrisons, like the majority of the Californios, were notorious for their high illiteracy rates.²²

The military forces in California continued to decline throughout the last years of Spanish rule. The 1810 revolution in Mexico contributed to the deterioration of the frontier forces by halting the annual supply ships that brought the soldiers' pay. For the next 11 years, the presidial garrisons, and newly arrived colonists, were supported by the missions. The only other effect of the revolutionary movement on California was to give the governor of Alta California, Pablo Vincente Sola, more ammunition in the battle over the secularization of the missions. In spite of the great material aid provided to the presidios by the missions during these years of scarcity, Sola considered the friars nothing more than managers for the temporalities of the mission Indians. Father Payeras, president of the California missions, dissuaded Sola from secularizing the missions by arguing that friction would be created if non-mission officials were appointed to account for the temporalities of the Church, another of Sola's proposals, and by convincing the governor that not enough secular clergy existed in

California to staff the parishes that would be created in the wake of secularization. The missions maintained their status in California society for 20 years after the secularization decree was published in Mexico in 1813.²³

The only invasion of California by a hostile force during Spanish rule took place in November and December of 1818, and illustrated the weakness of the province's defenses. On 20 November 1818 two ships flying the flag of Buenos Aires appeared off the coast of Monterey. The ships were commanded by a Frenchman, Hippolyte de Bouchard, and carried letters of marque from the rebellious province of Argentina as privateers. According to Hubert Howe Bancroft, the nineteenth century California historian, Bouchard had some knowledge of the Monterey defenses from spies or other sources, possibly in Hawaii where his expedition prepared for its journey to California. He did not know that prior warning had allowed the Spanish to deploy a battery of 18 pounders on the beach at Monterey, commanded by a Corporal Mariano Vallejo.

The following day, 21 November, saw a two-hour bombardment of the coastal battery at Monterey by one of the privateers, at the end of which the ship ran up a white flag of surrender. The battery of guns commanded by Corporal Vallejo added to the fire of 15 Spanish artillery pieces from Point Potreros overlooking the beach, and put an end to the day's cannonade. On the 22nd, however, both of Bouchard's ships drew close to the shore of Monterey and sent nine boats with probably 200 men plus light field artillery ashore. This force quickly seized the presidio and scattered its few defenders to the hills. Governor Sola, who was personally in command at Monterey, sent for reinforcements from the presidio at San Francisco and gathered his forces at a rancho five leagues from the capital.²⁴

The insurgents weighed anchor on the 26th and proceeded down the

coast where they raided a rancho at Refugio and the mission of San Juan Capistrano. Because Sola had been warned of the pirate raid over a month before Bouchard arrived, most of the portable property of the missions and civilians had been removed from the coastal regions and taken inland a few miles. After finding little of value in California, Bouchard and his men sailed on, the Californians believing they had won a great victory, though once the raiders got ashore, no effective resistance was offered them by the military forces of the province. At Monterey, the presidio was quickly overrun and no attempt to retake it was made even after Sola had received reinforcements from San Francisco. At San Juan Capistrano, a group of Spanish soldiers observed the activities of the insurgents from a hilltop at some distance from the mission. At no point were the pirates of Hippolyte de Bouchard offered any serious resistance.²⁵

The problems of California's coastal defense were made clear by the Bouchard raids of 1818. As long as hostile ships were kept at a distance by friendly artillery, the Spanish had no difficulty in deterring an aggression on their soil. Once the pirates mounted a determined landing, however, and got ashore in strength (although this was certainly never the 400 man force Governor Sola attributed to the insurgents), the Spaniards fled. The presidial outposts were not able to provide support to one another because of the great distances separating them, although the total military strength of the province probably exceeded that of the strongest hostile landing force. In this instance, the Spanish could not concentrate their forces at any one point because of the advantage in mobility held by the sea-borne invaders. The lack of resistance by the inhabitants of Alta California, with the exception of Vallejo's artillery exchange with one of Bouchard's ships, was indicative of the defense establishment. Although the province was armed with field pieces and its defenses faced the sea,

the Spanish military forces there were frontier units more suited to the pacification or chastisement of Indians, depending on the disposition of the latter.

The success of Bouchard's expedition brought a response from the authorities in Mexico that proved to be one of the last acts of the Spanish regime with regard to California. In the summer of 1819, the Viceroy of New Spain sent reinforcements to California in the form of two detachments, one of cavalry and one of infantry. The cavalry, a 100 man force from the Mazatlan Escuadron, arrived at San Diego on September 16 following an unscheduled landing on the coast of Baja California and overland march to the port. These troops were professionals, well disciplined, and a welcome sight to the Californios. The infantry unit was another matter. They had been recruited at the last minute by government officials at San Blas, and arrived in California during July and September. Although known officially as the San Blas Infantry, the inhabitants of the province they had come to protect gave them the rather unbecoming sobriquet "Cholos," meaning, in essence, "scum of the earth." "They belonged to the criminal and vagabond classes; were taken for the most part from the jails or picked up by press-gangs in New Galicia, and they were altogether ignorant of military discipline or the use of arms."²⁶ The 200 men of the Mazatlan and San Blas units were evenly divided among the four presidios, and served to strengthen the garrison of California; but, they also placed a greater burden on the resources of the province to support them.

From the beginning of the Spanish colonial experience in the Pacific, California was an isolated outpost of a dying empire. The great distance from New Spain made the Californias very unattractive to new settlers, in spite of inducements offered by the government to populate the province.

This became critical after the only land route to California was cut off by the Yuma Indians in 1781. Travel by sea, against the most favorable winds, became the rule for California's pattern of settlement. It also contributed to the cost of maintaining California's defenses, something which permeated the thoughts of military and civil authorities alike. "What is important now," wrote Miguel Costansó in his 1794 report, "is to find some means by which to avoid, without greater expenses, the dangers and evils that now threaten us and to become jointly more aware of the nearness of the foreigners already settled in the coasts of New California."²⁷ Finding economical solutions to the vexing problems of defense was important to all of Spain's colonial possessions in general and to California in particular. California was a low priority from the perspective of New Spain, as exemplified by the sending of prisoners as colonists and soldiers. In a sense, California was the Botany Bay of the Spanish Empire in America, and the government may have had this thought in mind when they sentenced criminals to live in California.

Probably the greatest shortcoming of the colony of California was its lack of population and a commercial class. The outmoded mercantilist policies of the Spanish Crown served to hinder the development of a prosperous colonial empire by leaving the monopoly on trade with the great commercial houses of the home country.²⁸ As a result, there were no privately-owned commercial vessels operating out of Pacific ports under Spanish colonial registry. This in turn further discouraged the settlement of Alta California since little or no trade existed with the colonies of Mexico and South America. Without the potential for profit, the California authorities were unable to attract colonists of the desirable social classes and had to be satisfied with criminals, soldiers, and small farmers who sought a better life.

The Spanish military presence in California was, in essence, more symbol than substance. This was true from the initial occupation of Alta California up to the final years of Spanish rule.

The garrison of California was a frontier army assigned the additional task of deterring aggression by unfriendly European powers along the borders of New Spain. The inability of the Spanish army to defend the territory against Bouchard's quasi-European force revealed the weaknesses of the Spanish military system. This legacy, enhanced by the political instability of 11 years of revolution, was Spain's gift to the newly created Republic of Mexico in 1821.

ENDNOTES

¹Most California histories devote considerable space to the period of Spanish colonization. For a textbook approach to the topic, see Walter Bean, California: An Interpretive History, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1968), pp. 13-33. Robert Glass Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), provides a good narrative history of this period.

²C. Alan Hutchinson, Frontier Settlement in Mexican California, 1769-1835, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 1-42. Luis Navarro Garcia, "The North of New Spain as a Political Problem in the Eighteenth Century." in David J. Weber, ed., New Spain's Far Northern Frontier, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), pp. 204-215.

³Standard equipment for the soldados de cura included a leather or cotton layered cuirass, a bull's hide shield, leather chaps, sword, lance, and pistols. With food, gunpowder, and other essentials, the total weight of the cavalryman's equipment was about 159 lbs. With this inventory, it is little wonder that the soldiers took between six and 10 remounts with them on marches of any distance. Max Moorehead, The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).

⁴Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, p. 61. I must admit that I was tempted to add a comment to the effect that the Spaniards succeeded in tossing man out of paradise again, but thought better of it. Such speculation does not belong to the realm of history.

⁵Herbert Eugene Bolton, "The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish American Colonies." in Weber, ed., New Spain's Far Northern Frontier, p. 61. Bolton does not stress many of the negative aspects of mission life, particularly the harsh discipline and high death rate from disease.

⁶Alexander Avilez, Population Increases in Alta California in the Spanish Period, 1769-1821, (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1974). The Spanish government was reluctant to send equipment to the missions in California as early as 1780. In part this was due to the cost of purchasing and transporting tools to California. For the friars, according to Avilez, "No implements of house and field signified no agricultural or mechanical industries, no communities of laboring neophytes, no temporalities for the friars to control," p. 43. In a sense, then, the missions were self-defeating because they required extremely self-righteous individuals to manage the secular affairs of their own household.

⁷C. Alan Hutchinson, Frontier Settlement in Mexican California, 1769-1835, pp. 61-64.

⁸Ibid., p. 61.

⁹Perhaps the best work on the presidios of Mexico, Arizona, and New Mexico is Max L. Moorehead's The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands. Moorehead notes in his introduction that the presidios of California and Texas were different than those of the Provincias Internas (Internal Provinces), and does not attempt to deal with them in this work.

¹⁰Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, p. 94.

¹¹Moorehead, The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands, p. 176.

¹²Leon G. Campbell, "The First Californios: Presidial Society in Spanish California, 1769-1822." Journal of the West (October 1972): 594.

¹³Moorehead, The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands, pp. 220-221.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 26. This situation was alleviated somewhat by the land grants off which the soldiers had to live. Towards the end of the Spanish period, with a rebellion raging in Mexico, the supply ships with pay for the soldiers ceased to make their already infrequent appearances.

¹⁵Manuel P. Servin, ed., "Costansó's 1794 Report on Strengthening New California's Presidios." California Historical Society Quarterly 74 (September 1970): 225.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 226. Brackets are mine.

¹⁷Janet R. Fireman and Manuel P. Servin, "Miguel Costansó: California's Forgotten Founder." California Historical Society Quarterly 74 (March 1970): 14. Costansó's attitude toward the California Indians was much more humanitarian than that of the Franciscan friars. His view of the Indians, though somewhat enlightened, still reflected a kind of medieval mentality. One quotation that may be of interest follows: "The King gives a soldier arms for the defence of the nation. It is not less compatible with the pious intentions of His Majesty that for the growth of his kingdom the new settlers receive tools and farming equipment...as time passes, those distant lands will be seen to prosper, benefitting the state. But without trade and industry, the Indians will never be able to be men and useful vassals." Servin, ed., Costansó's Report." CHSQ 74 (September 1970): 226.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 228. Costansó here refers to the free trade that once existed among the provinces of Sonora, New Galicia, and the coasts of the South Sea (Pacific Ocean).

¹⁹Avilez gives the total strength of the Spanish army in the province as 275 in October 1794.

²⁰Avilez, Population Increases in Alta California in the Spanish Period, 1769-1821, p. 30.

²¹Campbell, "The First Californios," p. 590.

²²Avilez, Population Increases in Alta California in the Spanish Period, 1769-1821, p. 30.

²³Hutchinson, Frontier Settlement in Mexican California, pp. 90-95. Secularization was decreed in Mexico in 1813, but the law was not published in California until 1821. It should be noted here that Father Payeras had his own reasons for maintaining the integrity of the Franciscan missions: "...many of the missions were beginning a new spiritual conquest of the Tulares region in the interior, and non-Christianized Indians were coming in large numbers to be baptized. This was a time when the missionaries needed the temporalities, and this was what they were for. 'The Indians with whom the missionaries dealt were not rational civilized persons like those whom the Apostles baptized, but so rough and animal like that it is necessary to teach them how to be people.' To domesticate and tame them, he said, required 'bread in the hand, clothing and exquisite patience, and above all the gentle yoke of the gospel,'" (p. 93).

²⁴Hubert Howe Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 19, (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft + Company, Publishers, 1885), pp. 220-235.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 236-249.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Servin, "Costansó's 1794 Report," p. 223. Max Moorehead's work on the presidios in the Provincias Internas also emphasizes the Spanish concern for cost effective solutions to problems of defense.

²⁸This point is emphasized in C.H. Haring, The Spanish Empire In America, (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1947. reprint ed., 1963).

CHAPTER II

THE SPANISH INHERITANCE

The Military Forces of Alta California, 1822-1846

Armed forces are a reflection of the society from which they are drawn. In the case of California, the gradual change of society from the Spanish colonial period to the 1840's, marked a change in the province's military establishment as well. The years of revolution started the decline of the presidial system as it existed in the eighteenth century. The years following the revolution, 1821-1845, were characterized by political instability, with no consensus among the population as to the form of government in California. This confusion, combined with the evolution of society in the territory, created the unique military units which faced the Americans in 1846.

The success of the 1821 revolution against Spain and the subsequent establishment of a Mexican Republic represented little more than a change of flags to the inhabitants of Alta California. Although the Californios remained loyal to the Spanish Crown throughout the turbulent years of revolution, 1810-1821, the transition from a Royal Spanish province to an Imperial province of Augustin Iturbide's empire took but four months to complete. California remained virtually untouched by the violence of the preceding 11 years, the one notable exception being Hippolyte de Bouchard's raid on the capital at Monterey and several ports along the coast. That the military forces were unable to repulse the raids of the

patriot-pirates was due in large part to the state of the Spanish military establishment in the province. This, above all else, was the one lasting legacy of the Spanish Empire in California--a nominal defense establishment in a steady state of decline. Governments would come and go, as Iturbide's did just 18 months after its inception, as would over a dozen Mexican governments in the years before the American invasion of California in 1846. But the Spanish military tradition, with its inherent strengths and many weaknesses, provided California with little more than a facade of martial strength.

The decade of the 1820's witnessed a continuing decline in the power of the central authorities in California. The first Mexican governor of the province, José Maria Echeandía, arrived in California in 1825, along with a small infantry unit known as the Fijo de Hidalgo and an artillery detachment. Most of these soldiers were convicts, like their predecessors under the Spanish system, and succeeded in alienating the locals by their scandalous behavior and irritating habit of procuring goods by foraging on the farms and ranchos. In 1829, the province was sent an allotment of 320 muskets to distribute among the militia, along with a copy of the Spanish regulations for artillery militia. The Mexican government showed the same attitude towards California in this action as the Spanish had in their 52 years of governing the Californias; the Pacific coast settlements would remain a very low priority, and any attempts at improving the defenses of the state would be merely symbolic.¹

Governor Echeandía, like the Mexican government, was very much concerned with the problems of defending California from outside aggression. The perpetual threat to California remained the Russian trading outpost at Bodega Bay and its Fort Ross. As early as December 1821, the young Mexican government perceived an increasing menace from their far northern neighbors.

A committee on foreign relations in Mexico City described the Russian Empire as: "This great power which extending its arms over Europe and Asia seems to be going to dominate the Old World, has also very advanced designs on the new." There was, in fact, a brief attempt to persuade the Californians, specifically the civil and military officials in San Francisco, to shift their allegiance to the Tsar. The project came to naught, however, as it was an independent action by a Russian naval lieutenant and appears not to have been sanctioned by his government.² There was also no sympathy for another change of flags among the Californians themselves.

In the view of Echeandía and the Californians, the Russian menace was more economic than anything else. Although trade restrictions had been eased somewhat with the change of governments, Mexican merchant shipping remained virtually non-existent. Conversely, the amount of trade carried on by British, American, and Russian ships increased during this period because of the profits to be gained in the California cattle hide and tallow business. The Russians were the closest competitors to the Mexican Pacific provinces, and the popular California view of them as economic imperialists is best illustrated by a passage from a pamphlet of the period: "The Russians are in possession in Bodega and all that immense coast; have built forts and brigs; the very lighters used at San Francisco were built by them; they are extending their relations by means of trade."³

The threat of encroachment through trade from forces outside California was not the only economic difficulty facing the province. In the decades of the 1820's and 30's, California's political scene was dominated by factional strife between the northern and southern aristocratic families. These were the real powerbrokers in California, and their successful rise to prominence hinged on their ability to sell hides and tallow to foreign merchants. There were but two customs houses in

California during this period, one at Monterey and the other at San Diego. The governor at Monterey was often directed by the Mexican government to close all of California's ports save the one at the provincial capital to foreign merchant ships in order to control smuggling.

Southern ranchers then had to transport their goods north to Monterey where the appropriate duties could be paid. This situation not only made it unprofitable for the southern ranchers to export their products, but it also served to enrich the governor and the northern faction with the income derived from the only functioning customs house. This fact created a movement among the residents of California south of Santa Barbara to make Los Angeles the capital of the province. These economic imperatives served to divide the territory politically into northern and southern regions.⁴

The rivalry between the aristocratic factions detracted from the authority of the Mexican governors who were sent to rule the turbulent province of California. Governor Echeandía discovered very quickly that his policies, particularly the movement to secularize the missions, received but lukewarm support from the residents. Lack of funds from the central government in Mexico also contributed to the ineffectiveness of Echeandía's rule and led to two revolts by the army in 1828 and 1829 concerning the soldiers' back pay. The 1829 altercation led to the resignation of Echeandía and illustrated the problem of administering California's scarce fiscal resources. The annual cost of government, including support of the military establishment, was about \$130,000 per year. "Theoretically, the national treasury should have paid the territorial expenses and received the net product of the territorial revenue; but practically, the territory was left to pay its own expenses...."⁵ California's income during this period from customs duties

and taxes amounted to barely half of the total needed to run the province, and even this was reduced by the corrupt collection and distribution practices of government officials. Without sufficient funds to pay the presidial garrisons, the soldiers revolted. They were led by a citizen of Monterey, one Joaquin Solis, who took command of a rag-tag army of sorts, consisting of soldiers from the presidios at San Francisco and Monterey. Echeandía, in the meantime, gathered a force at San Diego and marched north to meet Solis in battle near Santa Barbara. "In the vicinity of the town Echeandía's troops had taken their stand. When Solis reached there, cannonading began and the troops on both sides kept up the firing, although both took care to keep outside of shooting range, until the powder had been used up."⁶ The revolt subsided after this bloodless battle at Santa Barbara, but Echeandía was so discouraged by this no confidence vote in his ability to govern that he retired in 1830.

Political instability in the Mexican home provinces reached California in the year 1831 with the arrival of the Centralist Governor Manuel Victoria. Prior to his arrival, the outgoing Republican government had sent José María Padrés to govern the Californias, but he never took office because of the Centralist overthrow of the government. Padrés gained quite a following among the Californians primarily because of his espousal of secularization for the missions. The end of Franciscan rule in California's missions would mean the conversion of the clerical domains into towns for the Indians, and the division of the remaining lands, which were quite large by this time, among Californians. Before Echeandía retired as governor, Padrés was able to persuade him to issue a secularization order, which Victoria naturally rescinded upon his arrival. The result was insurrection by the aristocracy of the south, led by José Antonio Carrillo and ex-Governor Echeandía, and another "battle" between

rival factions at Cahuenga Pass near Los Angeles on 4 December 1831.

In this engagement, two men were killed and Governor Victoria lost what little support he had gained. He was returned to Mexico on the next ship.⁷

To secularize or not was a vital question that had to be addressed during the decade of the 1830's, for the missions still played an important role in California's defense establishment. Since the years of the revolution against Spain, the missions had supplied the soldiers with food and what crude clothing could be produced by the Indian laborers. This situation existed throughout the 1820's when the garrisons of the four presidios drew rations from the missions and paid for this support with drafts on the Federal Bank; which, parenthetically, were never paid by the Mexican government.⁸ Liberal sentiment in Mexico after the revolution against Spain encouraged secularization on humanitarian grounds. The harsh discipline and poor living conditions of the missions were well known by the time; and many Indians in fact, rather than put up with the hard work and authoritarian rule of the mission padres, escaped. This trend of declining population among California's missions combined with the desire on the part of many Californians to enrich themselves by picking up the pieces of land following secularization, provided the impetus to do away with Franciscan rule and convert the missions into pueblos for the Indians.⁹

The man chosen for the task of secularizing the missions was Brigadier General José Figueroa, a soldier with a fine record from the revolution against Spain. He was probably the most capable Mexican governor to be sent to California during the years of Mexican rule. An experienced soldier and clever political man, Figueroa had survived the upheavals of Mexican politics in the 1820's, and emerged as a reluctant supporter of President Anastasio Bustamante. Figueroa was not without his weaknesses,

however:

He had deserted his wife shortly after marrying her, and the government had been forced to subtract a modest amount from his salary so that she and his son should not starve. He lived openly with a mistress. He was inordinantly fond of gambling and had run up considerable gambling debts while he was in Sonora, which he still owed when he left it.¹⁰

Figueroa arrived in Monterey in January 1833 and proceeded cautiously with the process of secularization. The question of who would benefit most from the change of habits in the California missions was complicated by the arrival of over 200 colonists from Mexico, whose leaders sought to appropriate what was perceived by the Californios as more than their fair share of mission lands and cattle. Governor Figueroa sided with the native Californians: "There can be little doubt that Figueroa's attitude on this crucial matter coincided with that of many of the leading Californians, who felt that they had more right to mission lands than immigrant Mexicans, for whom they had little use."¹¹ Figueroa also believed that the mission Indians had a claim on at least part of the land that would be made available once the missions were secularized. He was opposed by the Directors of Colonization, José María de Hjar and José María Padrés, both of whom felt the mission lands belonged to the public domain and should not be reserved for the Indians. This conflict of interests was resolved when a member of the Hjar-Padrés colony was implicated in an attempted revolt, and the governor responded by having the two Directors of Colonization arrested and deported to Mexico in 1834. As for the missions, 10 of the 21 were secularized in 1834, with native Californians appointed to administer their temporalities. The few Indians who remained on mission lands received a portion suitable for farming, while the better part of the land, suitable for grazing, was parceled out to influential members of the province. Governor Figueroa

died in 1835 and left the Californians to decide for themselves how the remaining missions were to be divided.

After the death of Figueroa, very little sympathy for any kind of central authority deriving from Mexico remained in California. Santa Anna was in power in Mexico, and his Centralist policies were not favored by the Californians. On November 7, 1836 the new governor declared California "a free and sovereign State" until such time as Mexico repudiated Centralism.¹² This declaration of independence was never recognized by Mexico, but it would be eight years before Mexican authority reasserted itself in California.

The successor to Governor Figueroa was a native Californian, Juan Bautista Alvarado, who was once president of the representative body known as the Diputación. Alvarado shared power with his uncle Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who helped him overcome the political opposition offered by the Centralist faction. Their rule was not without its problems, however, as the southern Californians continued to agitate for removal of the capital to Los Angeles. A decree by the Mexican Congress in 1835 did, in fact, declare Los Angeles a ciudad (city) and the new capital of the province, but this action was nullified by Alvarado. In order to placate the southerners, Alvarado appointed a sub-governor to rule California south of Santa Barbara.¹³

The impact of California's instability and years of neglect on the defense establishment of the province was tremendous. In 1830, the number of men in active military service dropped below 400: "The presidial cavalry companies numbered about 220 men; the Mazatecos, 50; the artillery, 40; and the San Blas infantry, 40." The total number of artillery pieces of all calibres was 54, many of which were unserviceable.¹⁴ The decline in troop strength is evident in a comparison between the strength of the

garrison at San Francisco between the years 1826 and 1833. There were 76 cavalry soldiers at San Francisco in 1826, along with a few artillerymen, "distributed between the presidios and the missions, and consequently not more than half a dozen are at any time in one place."¹⁵ By 1833, the number had fallen to 36, including the commandante of the presidio, Mariano Vallejo. Throughout the province the situation was the same; poorly clothed, ill-equipped, and seldom paid soldiers maintained a semblance of military preparedness in a land the Mexican Republic seemingly forgot.

The federal government expected California to be self-supporting, but this remained an impossible dream. The easing of trade restrictions in the wake of the revolution against Spain failed to alleviate the perpetual indebtedness of the provincial government. The soldiers had expressed their dissatisfaction in the revolutions of 1828 and 29, and looked for new masters for their sustenance. "Our soldiers are all of one mind," wrote an officer of the San Francisco garrison; "whoever pays them the arrears due from the Spanish government is their master; he purchases him [sic] and to him they belong."¹⁶ The secularization of the missions completed the disintegration of the bonds between the common soldiery and the California government. Without the means to pay the army appropriately, there developed in California factions based primarily on the north/south lines drawn by the economic conditions of the province. Without pay, many soldiers retired and sought a living on the ranchos or by farming. For those who remained in active service, and by 1842 this meant only the presidial company split between San Francisco and Sonoma, their paymaster became none other than the cattle baron of the north, Mariano Vallejo. According to an American traveler of the period, Vallejo controlled ranches with assets that numbered 50,000 cattle, 24,000 sheep, and 2,000 horses; and kept 600 hired hands at one ranch near Petaluma.¹⁷

The San Francisco company remained under the personal direction of Vallejo, who was the military commandante of California, from 1835 to 1842. Early in 1836, Vallejo removed all but a housekeeping contingent from the presidio at San Francisco so he could keep a better watch on the Russians at Fort Ross, and his own ranchos as well.

The last Mexican governor of California arrived in August, 1842, along with the last reinforcements the province would receive before the outbreak of war with the United States. Manuel Micheltorena was not unlike his predecessors from Mexico City. He did, however, come at a more opportune time than Echeandía and Victoria, neither of whom got much support from the Californians. By 1842, Governor Alvarado and Commandante Vallejo were no longer cooperating; and they welcomed Micheltorena as an alternative to the anarchy that prevailed prior to his arrival. The new governor's army was not as welcome as he, however, since his men consisted of convicts and other undesirables. Micheltorena's "army" originally was to consist of 500 men, of which 200 would be regulars, but only about 350 reached California--the rest deserted along the way.¹⁸ One man who witnessed the coming of the Batallion Fijo de Californias was an American settler by the name of Alfred Robinson. His description brings to mind the convict company sent to California by the Spanish in 1819:

They presented a state of wretchedness and misery unequalled. Not one individual among them possessed a jacket or pantaloons; but naked, and like the savage Indian, they concealed their nudity with dirty, miserable blankets. The females were not much better off; for the scantiness of their mean apparel was too apparent for modest observers. They appeared like convicts, and indeed the greater part of them had been charged with the crime either of murder or theft. And these were the soldiers sent to subdue this happy country.¹⁹

Upon reaching San Diego, Micheltorena had his troops clothed and gave them some kind of military training as well.

Micheltorena's reign as governor of California lasted about two and a half years. During that time, he had become somewhat popular with the people and took some small steps towards improving education in the province, which was virtually nonexistent, and reforming the Church. In spite of his widespread personal acceptance, the deprivations visited upon the inhabitants of California by Micheltorena's troops plus the governor's failure to placate the southern aristocracy by moving the capital to Los Angeles brought about his downfall in 1845. Juan Bautista Alvarado and José Castro led a revolt in January of that year by overcoming the garrison at Los Angeles. Their army of some 400 Californians met the forces of Governor Micheltorena at Cahuenga Pass on 20-21 February; and, after two days of indecisive volleying by five cannon, Micheltorena gave up the struggle and returned to Mexico the following month with his soldiers. He lost one mule during the battle at Cahuenga Pass--the rebels lost a horse.²⁰ Pio Pico, a southern rancho owner, became the new governor and succeeded in making Los Angeles the capital, but his influence only extended as far north as Santa Barbara. The new ruler of northern California was Jose Castro who controlled the customs house at Monterey along with most of the government's income.²¹

During these years of nominal Mexican rule over the province of California, the remnants of the Spanish defense establishment virtually disappeared. The presidial company at San Diego was discontinued in 1842; the fort was in ruins and there were no arms left. A few men remained at Santa Barbara up to 1843, but most of these retired to earn a living for their families and themselves. Hubert Howe Bancroft noted that a commandante was listed at Santa Barbara as late as 1845, but what precisely he commanded at this time remains a mystery.²² The patron of the old San Francisco company, Mariano Vallejo, continued to maintain some 40 to 50

soldiers at Sonoma at his own expense. This business cost him about 1,000 pesos per month, and had become a family affair--his brother Salvador was the commandante of the post. (Antonio Pico, a relative of the governor, held the rank of lieutenant and commanded the company).²³ The state of affairs at Monterey were no better than at the other coastal presidios as Duflot de Mofras, a French traveler of the period, related in his memoirs:

There is embellished with the name of castillo (chateau) a small battery on a platform, situated on the slope toward the anchorage..... The old carriage, two or three hundred balls of bronze, the trucks, the powder carts of ancient Spanish materials all are on the ground, abandoned.²⁴

The evolution of California society that began under the Spanish was completed by the 1830's. Life under the Spanish had always been subject to a degree of despotism, especially for a soldier in the presidial companies. The abundance of land for the officer corps of the Spanish army created a provincial nobility capable of supporting themselves by means of cattle ranching and trade with foreign merchants. The Indians provided cheap labor for the maintenance of various industries at the missions, thus making the Franciscan padres rather wealthy and essential to the economy of the province. This was particularly true in the case of the presidios which depended on the missions for food and clothing during the sparse years of Mexican rule. In a sense, the common soldiers of the Spanish and Mexican garrisons were the property of their officers. When the missions were secularized beginning in 1835, there could be doubt that the former presidial troops were little more than a private army for their officer/employers. The case of Mariano Vallejo is an appropriate example of this trend. It would not be wholly inaccurate, therefore, to describe California society as semi-feudal, with a ruling nobility sharply divided along both economic and political lines,

struggling for dominance in the state's affairs. This split manifested itself in the north/south quarrels over the location of the capital and status of the custom houses of Monterey and San Diego.

Ironically, these years of anarchy and political strife have been idealized in the writings of many historians and novelists. One description of the "Golden Age" of California by Robert Glass Cleland exemplifies this point:

It was 'the day of the Dons,' the era of the private ranchos, the idyllic interlude during which a people of simple wants, untroubled either by poverty or the ambition for great wealth, gave themselves over wholeheartedly and successfully to the grand and primary business of the enjoyment of life.²⁵

While Cleland's passage may well apply to the few aristocratic families of California, the majority of the population lived in the towns or on the ranchos and certainly had more concerns than the mere enjoyment of life.

The battles fought in California by rival factions in this period have often been described as "comic-opera" affairs. Two confrontations at Cahuenga Pass in 1831 and 1845, along with the 1829 "battle" at San Diego might best be described as battles full of sound and fury, signifying very little. Part of the reason for the inconclusiveness of California battles in this period was the close relationships between the members of different factions. Members of the ruling elite had intermarried over the years to the point that there was a real danger of killing a brother-in-law.²⁶ Another thought that must have been in the minds of the soldiers of these contending forces was their family life. Very few men were willing to risk their lives for the cause of some would-be governor knowing that he had a rancho or farm nearby that supported him and his family better than the promises of the California politicians. The members of California's nobility might have been willing to fight to the last cholos,

but the common soldier saw no advantage to be gained by his death in a fight that was not wholly his concern. Thus, California battles took on a rather unique character wherein bombastic remarks made by one faction were returned in kind. Losses, however, were kept to a minimum. Thomas O. Larkin, the American consul in San Francisco, gave a fine description of the second battle of Cahuenga Pass fought in 1845 between Governor Micheltorena and the rebel forces of José Castro and ex-Governor Alvarado: "Tis said there was a battle fought in some part of Mexico where 6,000 ball cartridges were fired and high mass said the next day, giving thanks there was no bloodshed."²⁷

After 1840, the Russian threat to California subsided. During the previous decade, the settlements at Bodega Bay began to cost more than they were worth. A representative of the Russian-American Company that operated out of Bodega frequented the port of San Francisco to watch after the ships sent by the Russians to buy wheat from the Californians. Some Russian goods were sold in California as well, but not enough to make up for the rising debits of the colony. As a result, the Russians resolved to sell out and attempted to get the Mexican government to purchase their assets. There appeared to be little interest on the part of the Mexicans in this venture, so the final sale was made to a foreign settler who already had large landholdings in California, John Sutter. Although the Russians were no longer to be feared on the northern California frontier, there was a new threat in the form of the United States of America.²⁸

In order to defend the province against a rising tide of American infiltration, General Mariano Vallejo called for reinforcements from Mexico. This occurred early in the 1840's. The response by the federal government was Micheltorena's "army"; and, since this proved

unsatisfactory, Vallejo agitated for the formation of militia units for the defense of California. Micheltorena created Vallejo's militia in a pronunciamiento (decree) on July 16, 1844, which provided for the enrollment of all men from the ages of 15 to 60 for possible service in a cavalry force of two regiments, each one numbering 110 dragoons.²⁹ These troops were required to provide their own uniforms and equipment, while the provincial government supplied the officers. Training for the ranchmen who belonged to the militia was to be held weekly, but in fact, the only practice undertaken by the militia was in actual battle. Discipline in this force was very lax, as it was in the Mexican army as a whole. Salutes were rendered collectively by presenting arms in formation, and officers had some difficulty controlling their men.³⁰ There were also no provisions for resupplying this force once it took to the field. The soldiers took care of themselves, however, by foraging for the needed supplies. Quite a few deserted, too, and returned to their homes where they could be sure of getting a decent meal. Firearms consisted of whatever could be had. The primary weapons were antiquated carbines and English Tower muskets, as well as pistols and flintlocks. Perhaps the most effective weapon in the entire inventory was the lance, for California was cavalry country; and, if the Californians were lacking in modern equipment, they excelled in horsemanship. This factor would prove important in the upcoming war with the Americans.

The militia law promulgated by Governor Micheltorena before his departure remained the cornerstone upon which California's defenses were built for the American invasion in 1846. In practice, the several shortcomings of the system, specifically the lack of logistical support and desertion, wrecked havoc with the militiamen, creating very uneven resistance on their part. After a decade of factional infighting, the leaders of various cliques seemingly settled their differences with the

coming of the Americans; but the people were tired of war. More often than not, citizens had to be coerced into service. One prospective California general seized the horses of a group of rancheros while they were at Mass and forced them to "volunteer" for active service. The continuous calls to arms and subsequent dismissals shortly thereafter during 1846, must have raised some serious questions in the minds of the soldiers about the cause for which they fought. Perhaps more than a few Californians, by their ambivalent attitude toward fighting for their aristocratic leaders, were more inclined to accept American rule as an alternative to the chaotic conditions of the previous decade.³¹

Frontier life in California during the years of Mexican rule changed very little from the preceeding 52 years under the Spanish. The problems present under the Spanish regime were passed on to the Mexicans, and their solutions proved to be no more effective than the remedies attempted by the previous owners. California was held in low esteem by the Mexican government just as it had been under the Spanish. Maintenance of a defense establishment in the face of a perceived Russian threat remained extremely difficult given the relative harshness of life on the frontier. The Mexican government tried to solve the long standing problems of restrictive trade regulations and the lack of population, but both of these ran afoul of local political intrigues and never reached fruition. The Híjar-Padrés colony was opposed by the native Californians because it became entangled with the question of secularization and who would receive the extensive lands controlled by the missions. Besides this, the more than 200 colonists could have been a very influential force in California politics and disrupted the delicate balance of power that existed between the northern and southern factions. The freeing up of trade restrictions

met a fate similar to the colonization attempt because of the customs house question. Neither the northern nor the southern aristocrats could agree on California's future development, thus they resorted to the family feud or "comic-opera" battle. When they did resolve their differences and unite against a common foe, it was too late. The Californios had neither the means nor the will to resist because of the divisiveness of the previous decade.

The deterioration of California's defenses coincided with the rise of a local "nobility" in the form of wealthy families who were often ex-soldiers. The federal Mexican government did not put much into the defenses of their far away frontier province, and received but nominal support in return. Mexican governors of California reigned as long as the ruling elite allowed, while members of their own caste were, with some difficulty, better able to cope with the internal affairs of the province. In a sense, there were three Californias; Baja, northern Alta, and southern Alta California. Because of the disagreements between the aristocratic families of the northern and southern factions, the standing defenses of the territory in the form of the presidial garrisons slowly disappeared and were replaced by private forces supported by wealthy rancheros. Mariano Vallejo was probably the most powerful of these men. He was not, however, insensitive to the plight of the declining military establishment and tried to reinvigorate the army through the creation of militia companies. Governor Micheltorena enacted the legislation and as of 1844, California's defense hinged upon the questionable loyalties and uneven quality of several hundred reluctant vaqueros (cowboys) and rancheros. Bereft of nearly everything necessary for a successful defense, the citizen soldiers who answered the call of their state in 1846 represented the best and the worst of California's oligarchic society.

To call the territory of California during the years 1822-1846 "Mexican" seems inappropriate. While the province shared many of the laws and institutions of the Mexican Republic, all of which derived from a common Spanish heritage, the society that developed in California was unique and rather independent of the "home" country. The Californians were a novel collection of individuals who disagreed on everything but their agrarian and pastoral way of life. Comparing them to the ruling class of medieval Europe does not seem altogether incorrect either as the history of California during the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century indicates:

On the march these pastoral dragoons must have cut a picturesque figure against the summer-browned hills of the California coast, the colors of their serapes catching the sunlight, their leathern cuirasses and defensas flapping in the breeze and their colored lance-pennants fluttering above them. An occasional shield with its Castilian heraldry, too, must have betokened the semi-feudal and languishing order they sought to defend.³²

The coming clash of arms between this irregular, semi-feudal society and a rather curious assortment of American soldiers, sailors, and frontiersmen would provide a colorful chapter to the history of both Mexico and the United States.

ENDNOTES

¹John Langellier, "Under the Eagle and Serpent: Mexico Takes Command." (unpublished manuscript), pp. 16-23.

²C. Alan Hutchinson, Frontier Settlement in Mexican California, pp. 98-103.

³John Langellier, "Under the Eagle and Serpent," p. 23.

⁴C. Alan Hutchinson, Frontier Settlement in Mexican California, p. 138.

⁵Bancroft, History of California, vol. 3, p. 58.

⁶Englehardt, Mission Dolores, p. 198.

⁷Bean, California: An Interpretive History, p. 66.

⁸Ibid., p. 65.

⁹Resistance on the part of the mission Indians to their Catholic task masters is emphasized in an essay by George Harwood Phillips, "Indians and the Breakdown of the Spanish Mission System." in Weber, ed., New Spain's Far Northern Frontier, pp. 259-268. Phillips sees the Indians as active agents in the demise of the mission system since they resisted authority, much as prisoners in a state correctional institution attempt to resist the authority of the warden. More traditional historians, like Herbert Eugene Bolton, do not recognize this aspect of California's declining missions. Instead, they tend to emphasize the corruption of officials in the system that tried to create Christian serfs out of pagan Indians.

¹⁰C. Alan Hutchinson, Figuerro's Manifesto to the Mexican Republic, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 5

¹¹Ibid., p. 13. Hutchinson takes a dim view of Figuerroa's actions with regard to the Hajar-Padrés colony: "...he set out to prove that Hajar and Padrés were traitors and conspirators who were undermining Mexico's hold on California. It is here that Figuerroa is at his weakest; indeed, his paranoid style has the unfortunate effect of casting suspicion on his own motives. Perhaps the controversy may be set to rest by reflecting that there were honest differences of opinion separating Figuerroa and Hajar, which were sufficient in themselves to explain their mutual animosity," (p. 15). At least Figuerroa reserved a place for the mission Indians in his secularization program, which is more than can be said for Hajar and Padrés.

¹²Bean, California: An Interpretive History, p. 68.

¹³Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁴Bancroft, History of California, vol. 2, pp. 672-673.
Bancroft mentions that the records from this period are poor and his figures given here may be a bit optimistic.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶John Langellier, "Under the Eagle and Serpent," p. 18.

¹⁷Davis, 75 Years in California, pp. 135-138.

¹⁸Eldredge, Beginnings of San Francisco, pp. 236-239.

¹⁹Charles E. Chapman, A History of California: The Spanish Period, (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1936), p. 480.

²⁰Ibid., p. 483.

²¹Bean, California: An Interpretive History, p. 70.

²²Bancroft, History of California, vol. 4, pp. 617-618.

²³Ibid., pp. 677-678.

²⁴Helen V. Shubert. "The Men Who Met the Yankees in 1846." California Historical Society Quarterly 13 (March 1934):43.

²⁵Robert G. Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, p. 225.

²⁶Bean, California: An Interpretive History, p. 61.

²⁷Robert G. Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, p. 123.

²⁸Bancroft, History of California, vol. 4, pp. 158-189.

²⁹Helen V. Shubert, "The Men Who Met the Yankees in 1846," p. 43.

³⁰Angelinas Nieto, John Brown, and Joseph Hafter, The Mexican Soldier, 1837-1847, (Apartado 517 Mexico 1, D.F.: Nieto, Brown + Hafter, 1958), p. 53.

³¹Helen V. Shubert, "The Men Who Met the Yankees in 1846," pp. 46-51.

³²Ibid., p. 52.

CHAPTER III

RUMORS OF WAR

American Interests in California, 1789-1846

Be all these things as they may, from the time of Mr. Monroe, the United States have said that no European Government should plant colonies [sic] in North America. Mr. Polk reiterates this assertion, and his Government will make it good. And the day that the European Colonists by purchase or the European soldier by war places his foot on California soil, that day shall we see the hardy sons of the West come to the rescue.

Thomas Oliver Larkin
U.S. Consul at Monterey

While the Californians were caught up in their internal affairs, events were taking place outside Alta California that would ultimately decide the fate of that turbulent province. As early as the 1780's there was a hint of things to come. Merchant ships of the young American republic, in search of new markets, made their first calls on Canton in China. This event in and of itself had little to do with the Spanish province of California; but over the course of several decades, the notion of gaining a foothold in the China market and eventually expanding that trade would play a vital role in the movement to acquire California for the United States. For once the myth of a vast market for American goods in the Orient took hold, the search for a port on the Pacific Ocean as a way-station for American merchantmen soon began.

The westward movement of Americans in the early nineteenth century also aided in developing the idea that California would one day belong to the United States. The settlers who moved west during the first

decades of the nineteenth century stimulated popular notions about the form of the expanding republic and the role it would have in claiming the wilderness of North America for civilization. The growth of these ideas in the minds of men coincided with the growth of the United States. California played a role in this popular mythology first as the natural boundary of the nation, later as a "Gold Coast" where fortunes were to be made.

California served as a focal point of both regional and national interests in the years 1789-1846. The regional interests of the New England merchants first brought California to the attention of other Americans. Pioneers of the west found in the Pacific Ocean a boundary that was not to be crossed until 50 years after California was signed over to the United States. Continentalists who wished to increase the power and prestige of the nation saw a way to create an American "Empire" through the acquisition of California. In varying degrees, then, California was always a part of American mythology. It was the California of this mythology which drew Americans into the province and eventually made it an objective of American foreign policy. This was also an idea readily serviceable to groups as diverse as western farmers and New England capitalists in advancing their own regional interests.

California came into focus as an objective of United States' foreign policy in the nineteenth century because of the aforementioned dynamic forces at work within American society. A brief survey of these forces is essential to understanding the drive to the Pacific in general and the attention given to California in particular.

The first Americans to take notice of the Spanish province of Alta California were merchants of the large commercial firms of Boston.

In the years immediately following the adoption of the Articles of Confederation, these men set out to open the Pacific to American merchant ships. The first commercial vessel to visit the Far East on behalf of the New England merchants was the Empress of China, which set sail for Canton in 1784. The halfowner of this ship that visited the Orient was Robert Morris, a prominent man in the newly found republic. Morris was so pleased with the results of the first commercial visit to China that he encouraged other wealthy entrepreneurs to send ships to the Far East. He was aided in these efforts by the first tariff to be levied under the Constitution, which provided for lower rates of taxation on American vessels bringing tea from China. This early trade with the East increased steadily during the last decade of the eighteenth century, largely as a consequence of favorable tariffs and the efforts of New England merchants to secure an opening in the Pacific. Between 1795 and 1810, imports from China grew from just over \$1,000,000 to 5,745,000.¹ The China trade remained a small part of total imports during these years, and it was probably for this reason that a government in search of new revenues kept the tariffs on Chinese goods low. The China market began as a low risk venture from the government's point of view, but the possibility of expanding the embryonic trade relations with Canton were not lost on merchants or trade officials. One way to increase the China market was the acquisition of a port on the Pacific Ocean, an idea that began as a popular myth in the late eighteenth century and seemed more feasible as the volume of trade increased.

Regional interests not only made Americans aware of California in the early nineteenth century, but they also created problems for the leaders of the new nation. Even before the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, differences of opinion existed as to what the United States should be and the role of the federal government in charting the future course

of the nation. The two rival ideologies have been referred to as Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian interpretations of the Constitution, both of which grew out of regional commercial and political interests, as well as the philosophies of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. These sectional differences complicated national issues; what was good for the commerce of the northeast was not necessarily beneficial to the agrarian economy of the south. The result was a northern preference for protective tariffs and internal improvements through federal aid, as proposed by Hamilton, and a southern preference for low tariffs and less federal interference in the affairs of the states, Jefferson's position on the role of government.

What to do with the unsettled portions of the continent was also a point of contention between the politicians who represented various regional interests. While three and sometimes four major European powers had claims on portions of the North American continent in the first half of the nineteenth century, actual physical settlement of the vast wilderness was sparse, to say the least. But the west was there, and Americans were moving into it in ever increasing numbers. Thomas Jefferson was the first President of the United States to address seriously the question of what to do about the uncharted forests and deserts west of the Mississippi River. Jefferson's firm belief in the democratic institutions of the country and his own agrarian background originally limited his vision of American expansion to the Mississippi; the land beyond would be useful for Indian settlements to keep the savages away from the civilized world. This view changed in 1803 with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. In that year Jefferson sent an expedition to explore the Pacific Northwest headed by William Clark and Meriwether Lewis. The purpose of the mission was ostensibly scientific, but the lure of the Far

East trade was implicit in Jefferson's orders; the explorers were "...to explore the Missouri river, and such principal streams of it as by its course and communication with the water of the Pacific Ocean may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent, for the purpose of commerce."²

The result of the first expedition to the Pacific Northwest was an increase in both official and private interest in the commerce of what was at that time the Spanish "South Sea." Meanwhile, the natural resources of the Oregon territory, already manifest in the large fur trade, encouraged an international competition for political control of the area around the Columbia River. The existence of the British Hudson's Bay Company, the Russian-American Company, and John Jacob Astor's fur trapping enterprise gave impetus to the American drive to the Pacific. Along with the Lewis and Clark explorations, Astor's settlement laid the basis for American claims to the Oregon Territory.

Besides the scientific information brought back by Lewis and Clark and the claims that could now be made to the Oregon Territory as a result of the expedition, their journey itself contributed to the westward movement of Americans. They had proved the feasibility of moving beyond the pale of civilization into a region that had hitherto been part of a myth--a Northwest passage to China. Henry Nash Smith discusses the impact of this exploration in his book Virgin Land and concludes that Jefferson's brainchild gave the people as a whole a vision of a wild, untamed land, ready to be subdued. "It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea, and established the image of a highway across the continent so firmly in the minds of Americans that repeated failures could not shake it."³ One of the earliest attempts to make the dream of an overland route a reality was the endeavor to colonize the mouth of the Columbia

River by the New York merchant John Jacob Astor. Besides the fur trapping business, Astor wrote that his objective in settling the area around the Columbia River was:

...to make an establishment at the mouth of Columbia river, which should serve as a place of depot, and give further facilities for conducting a trade across this continent to the river, and from thence, on the range of Northwest coast &c., to Canton, in China, and from thence to the United States....⁴

The Columbia settlements of John Jacob Astor were one of the failures to which Smith alluded in his book, for they had to be abandoned to the British during the War of 1812. This was but a temporary setback to American expansion, one that would be made up for during the 1830's and 40's.

The boundaries of Jefferson's American Empire reached out to the Mississippi River and later suggested the Rocky Mountains as the terminus of the United States. These parameters on expansion, however, were self-imposed; Jefferson did not believe that the ideal institutions of the nation could survive too great an augmentation of territory. His republican bias did, however, suggest that several independent states could be erected on the North American continent. These states would be republics, rooted in the Jeffersonian tradition of democratic government with as little power in the central authority as possible. The vision that the continent would one day be filled with American colonists was born in the mind of Thomas Jefferson, nurtured by the apparent ease of settling the wilderness during the 1820's and 30's, and eventually came of age when Americans reached the once distant horizon in California. It was, in fact, the Jeffersonian pattern of colonization, a "squatters' rights imperialism," that prevailed in the case of Texas and the Oregon Territory.⁵ During the 1840's, many Americans believed that California too would become part of the nation as a result of what was known in the popular parlance as "the Texas Game." Jefferson's agrarian nationalism had its limits, but once

the commercial interests of New England found expression in the years following the War of 1812, expansion to the shores of the Pacific soon became part of American foreign policy. George Dangerfield makes note of this trend in his work entitled The Awakening of American Nationalism:

Thus the agrarian nationalism of Thomas Jefferson appears to have stopped at the so-called desert, an impassable barrier, which only his agrarian colonialism is able to overleap, and the connection between Louisiana and the Northwest in terms of territorial expansion and of the Asian trade begins to emerge more clearly in the neomercantilist mind of John Quincy Adams.⁶

After an interlude during the War of 1812, the Americans continued the drive to the Pacific for the China trade under the aegis of President James Monroe. One facet of the desire for a port on the Pacific was the final agreement between the United States and Spain in 1819, pertaining to the border between Mexico and America. The Adams-Onís Treaty obtained the territory of Florida along with a claim formerly held by Spain to the land between the 42nd and 49th parallels. Once again, the shadow of the China trade and concurrent need for a port at the mouth of the Columbia River was uppermost in the mind of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. Adams was convinced that America needed a port on the Pacific for the extension of trade to the Far East, and the diplomatic crisis in the wake of the South American revolutions provided the United States with an opportunity to issue a statement with the dual purpose of preventing European colonization in the western hemisphere and reserving the remainder of the North American continent for American Settlement. The Monroe Doctrine, then, represented not only an ideological stand against possible European intervention in North and South America, but it also reflected the strong influence of the New England merchants and the desire on the part of government officials to increase the China trade. That Adams became convinced that America had a right to a Pacific port was evident in his correspondence with Richard Rush, ambassador to

Great Britain. "It is not imaginable...that any European Nation should entertain the project of settling a Colony on the Northwest Coast of America....," Adams wrote in July 1823. "That the United States should... is pointed out by the finger of Nature, and has been for years a subject of serious deliberation in Congress."⁷

Other than the extension of trade to the Far East, the incentive for Yankee merchants who first visited the Pacific coast to do business there was provided by a small fur-bearing creature known as the California Sea Otter. The British explorer Captain James Cook wrote about these animals after his 1776 visit to the Pacific. The effect of this publicity on the sea otter trade was great. Spanish merchants had already taken large numbers of otter pelts to the Far East on the annual galleons which plied the waters between Manila and California. Over a five year period, 1786-1789, 9,729 pelts were sent to Manila on the Pacific galleon. The market for this fur trade was China, where the going price for a single pelt varied between 80 and 120 dollars. After Cook published the stories of his travels in the great Pacific Ocean, the best kept secret of Spain's commercial hold on the South Sea trade was secret no more-- American merchants began to smuggle sea otter pelts out of California in 1796.⁸

The task of breaking down the mercantilist barriers to trade in the Pacific was not an easy one. American merchants conducted a clandestine trade with California Indians and did some hunting of sea otters on their own in spite of Spanish laws prohibiting such actions. It did not take the Spanish long to recognize the Yankee threat to their monopoly, and American ships which came into California ports under the pretext of replenishing their supplies were denied permission to land men for this purpose. Despite the efforts of the Spanish, there were several

alternative methods of procuring the much sought after otter pelts from the coastal regions of the Californias; and the American traders tried several methods during the peak years of the fur trade, 1803-1830.

The most efficient means to hunt sea otters available to the Americans was the contract system between the Russian outpost at Sitka Island and the Yankee ships of the large Boston firms. American merchants hired out Aleut Indian hunters from the Russians, transported them to the hunting fields along the coast of California, and split the catch evenly with the Russians. This system offered both parties the chance to make rather good profits and created a symbiotic relationship; the Russians got the transportation they lacked to reach the California hunting grounds, while the "Boston men," as Americans were often referred to, utilized the expertise of the Aleuts to provide them with larger catches than would be possible otherwise. Following the establishment of the Russian outpost at Bodega Bay in 1812, there was no need for the Russians to deal with the American sea captains, and the contract system was terminated. This left the Russians with a virtual monopoly on sea otter hunting along the coast since the revolution in Mexico ended Spanish shipping between California and the Far East, and the Aleuts did not come ashore long enough to be pacified by the Californians.⁹

After a brief hiatus in sea otter hunting during the War of 1812, Yankee merchantmen returned to the Pacific and continued to widen the breach in Spain's mercantilist hold on the trade of the South Sea. New Spain was in the throes of revolution, but the only effect on California was an intensification of the ubiquitous shortages of food and manufactured goods which existed in all Spanish provinces prior to the revolt. Nonetheless, the Spanish authorities in California were better prepared to combat contraband trade, even with the meager resources at their disposal; and several Americans found themselves prisoners in Spanish jails as a result

of these better enforcement efforts. In 1816, 21 American sailors were prisoners of the Spanish Crown. One captured American sea captain, a man by the name of Wilcocks of the Traveller, objected to the restrictive policies of the Spanish in California. Noting the widespread shortages among the Spanish residents of the Pacific coastal provinces, Wilcocks argued that his activities should be considered a service to the King of Spain, not a crime. Yankee merchant ships brought much needed supplies, according to Wilcocks, and his statement at a hearing in his own defense gives some indication of the extent of these shortages along the Pacific coast:

It is true that I have sold my goods in California, but in no other part of Spanish domains have I done it, and I am glad that the guilt for this upon myself, if it is guilt to give something to eat to the hungry, and to clothe the naked soldiers of the King of Spain, for it is well known that not only in California but here in Guadalajara and Mexico that there was not one grain in Loreto for supplies on the first occasion that I was there, and that in that presidio and all those of California most of the soldiers and other people could not go to Mass because of lack of clothes, and that also the most Reverend Fathers had neither vestments nor ornaments appropriate for the use of the Churches, nor tools to till the fields.¹⁰

The problem of shortages continued to plague California even after the revolution, but it became clear that American sea captains would continue to risk imprisonment in order to get sea otter pelts from the Californians.

When the supply of sea otters began to diminish in the 1820's, much of the slack in the American trade was taken up by California hides and tallow. Large Boston firms, such as Bryant and Sturgis, perfected the practice of taking otter pelts from the Californians as partial payment for goods they brought from China. American merchants began to settle in California to take advantage of the steadily increasing trade in cattle hides, for while the number of sea otters declined, California cattle herds showed no signs of decreasing in size. The fur trade did not disappear completely during the 1830's and 40's, however. Mexican laws

now encouraged its citizens to hunt otters and created stiff penalties for illegal hunting. Merchant ships continued to carry pelts to China, albeit in fewer numbers, as late as 1848. The hide and tallow industry probably provided for a greater volume of trade and may have been more profitable than the otter trade, but one cannot deny the importance of this marine creature in attracting American merchants and directing United States' foreign policy to the Pacific. Adele Ogden, author of The California Sea Otter Trade, sums up the impact of this trade on American Pacific policy:

The first call for a United States warship 'to afford protection to our commerce and citizens' came from one of the leading American merchants in the Hawaiian Islands who had vessels engaging in the otter trade....The first known petition for a United States consul was respectfully solicited 'with others, my fellow citizens, resident merchants in California,' by Johnathan Warner who established himself financially on the coast through otter hunting.¹¹

The idea of a Pacific port to enhance American trade with the Far East began with Jefferson and grew greater during the administrations of Monroe and John Quincy Adams. As the hide and tallow trade waxed on the Pacific coast, so too did American attempts to obtain a port there. The Columbia River proved unsuitable for this purpose because of its distance from "civilization" and the fact that the mouth of the Columbia was difficult to navigate. British claims to the area also made the establishment of a port in the Oregon Territory doubtful until Americans decided they were willing to fight for it during the 1840's. California, on the other hand, seemed hardly a part of Mexico--it was rebellious, unprofitable under the present government, and too distant from the capital at Mexico City to be brought under effective control. While the idea of creating an "Empire on the Pacific" had existed since the turn of the century, it was not until Andrew Jackson became president that the acquisition of a California port, namely San Francisco, became

an explicit objective of American policy.

American ministers to Mexico City during the 1820's and 30's were not the most diplomatic individuals of their day. Their appointments were more often born out of political patronage rather than any special ability to deal with a foreign government. This was no less true of Andrew Jackson's Chargé d' Affaires in the Republic of Mexico, Anthony Butler. During his six years as official representative of the United States, Butler succeeded in alienating just about every Mexican official with whom he had occasion to deal.¹² In 1829, Butler was instructed to purchase Texas from Mexico and settle the boundary dispute between that province and its present mother country. Butler's dealings with several Mexican officials failed to achieve the desired results. Some of the Mexicans suggested Butler try to bribe the men who were "stumbling blocks" to the American purchase attempt. When he reported to the State Department in 1835 that \$500,000 "judiciously applied" would secure a treaty transferring not only Texas, but upper and lower California as well, the President ordered Butler to return to the United States. The idea that Mexican territory could be purchased did not end with Butler's recall, however. President Tyler's agent in Mexico, Waddy Thompson, continued to send reports to the President on the possibility of buying Mexican territory.¹³

Following the failure of Butler's rather unorthodox diplomacy, President Jackson attempted to purchase California north of the 38th parallel in the mistaken belief that it contained the much wanted Bay of San Francisco. Had the Mexicans been willing to part with their real estate, Jackson would have succeeded in acquiring only a portion of the great bay on the Pacific, and that without an outlet to the sea. But, \$3,500,000 was not enough to persuade the Mexican government to part with

their distant province. Where Jackson had failed in securing what was seen as the most valuable part of the Pacific coast, politicians of the next decade would surpass his demands in an effort to create a continental empire.

There was a hint of a new force in American political life when Andrew Jackson made his Farewell Address in March, 1837. The growing confidence in the republic, particularly its democratic institutions, had created a greater national unity than heretofore. This growing belief that the United States was a more perfect form of government manifested itself in the idea that the Americans had a mission to save the world from the iniquitous monarchies of Europe. Human rights and dignity could only be saved by the democratic institutions of the United States; men were free under the American flag because this nation had been chosen to fulfill a divine plan. Andrew Jackson alluded to this concept of the country's historical mission in his Farewell Address when he proclaimed that Providence had selected the American people to be "the guardians of freedom to preserve it for the benefit of the human race."¹⁴ This new force in American society, which was the ultimate expression of an economic and agrarian nationalism, served to justify the expansionist policies of the politicians who led the nation during the 1840's. Newspaper editor John L. O'Sullivan gave this spirit the nomenclature by which it became known in an 1845 editorial. "Manifest Destiny" became the catch phrase for a generation of Americans who sought to increase the size of the country at the expense of its neighbors.

The ideology of "Manifest Destiny" expressed American nationalism and served to rationalize the acquisition of territory in the west. Professor Norman Craebner, in the introduction to his book Manifest Destiny, argues that this force in American society of the nineteenth

century was nothing more than political rhetoric. The sense of mission in American history directed by divine Providence was nothing more than a means to justify the territorial expansion of the United States. "The natural right of the United States to a continental empire," according to Graebner, "lay in its power of conquest, not in the uniqueness of its institutions...."¹⁵ "Manifest Destiny" was more than mere political rhetoric, however, since it was widely believed by Americans at all levels of society. Elements of this national ideology can be found in the writings of prominent Americans, who took it for more than a justification of expansion. Men such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Quincy Adams firmly believed that in order to become a great power, ports were needed on the Pacific Ocean to exploit the China market. These men also believed that the United States had every right to the Mexican territories of the west because of the superior nature of American institutions and the natural superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. To dismiss "Manifest Destiny" as a tool of the expansionists overlooks the complex nature of this phenomena.

The pattern of expansion for the American "Empire" roughly followed the Jeffersonian concept of agrarian expansion, yet dominance of the trade routes of the west (what were then the Mexican borderlands) and the Far East, were common themes. The tradition of commercial interest in the Pacific has already been examined from a maritime perspective; but, one should note, there was another area which American merchants from a different quarter sought to monopolize--the trade routes of the southwest, specifically, the Santa Fe Trail. Professor Graebner points out that with regard to the economic interests of the United States, there were two cities of empire during the 1830's and 40's--Boston and St. Louis. In the 1820's, the Mexican government opened the southwestern trade routes, once a monopoly of the Spanish Empire in America. American merchants

took the opportunity to send manufactured goods and luxury items that were hard to come by in Santa Fe, across the inhospitable deserts to this new market. In spite of the difficulty of the long journey, profits were good and the Santa Fe Trail became an American commercial highway within a short time. Santa Fe was to the merchants and politicians of St. Louis what California was to their counterparts in Boston--a market for American goods which would better serve the interests of the nation under the flag of the United States.¹⁶

By the decade of the 1840's, the regional commercial interests of both Boston and St. Louis were well represented in the government of the United States. Daniel Webster, President Tyler's Secretary of State, and Thomas Hart Benton, Senator from Missouri, may have represented different sections of the country, but they did so for the same reason. Both men were interested in furthering the commercial relations of the United States with the Far East, and both were adamant about the acquisition of San Francisco. At a time when British machinations seemed on the verge of halting the American drive to the Pacific, so perceived because of Great Britain's attempts to prevent Texas from joining the Union and the interest in taking California for the British Empire, Webster stated his preference for California as an area of vital American interest: "You know my opinion to have been and it now is, that, the port of San Francisco would be twenty times as valuable to us as all Texas."¹⁷ Benton, too, believed San Francisco to be essential to the development of the United States. His rationale was that the nation which controlled the Asian trade had historically been the leader of world civilization and commerce. By increasing its commercial relations with the Far East, America would be able to break free of the yoke of European civilization and become the greatest empire in the world. This idea is expressed in a very few words,

inscribed on Benton's tombstone: "There is the East; there lies the road to India." His notion of an American commercial empire did not go to the grave with him.¹⁸

In addition to the internal forces at work within the United States which brought California to the attention of the government, a perceived international rivalry for control of the province also worked on the imaginations of American statesmen. With the 1836 revolution against the Mexican governor and the establishment of a semi-independent government by Juan Bautista Alvarado, the possibility of foreign intervention in California increased. American merchants and proponents of "Manifest Destiny," however, were not the only ones to take notice of the virtues of the Pacific ports. Both France and Great Britain seemed to be interested in the stormy course of California's political relations with the rest of the world. Both nations were represented in the major ports by a small number of merchants. The French were considered a greater threat to the independence of California than they proved to be. This perception rested on a visit paid to the province in the early 1840's by a French naval officer, Duflot de Mofras. But the greatest threat to the future of California in American eyes was the British. It was Great Britain that opposed American expansion every step of the way across the North American continent. They supported an independent Texas, prevented the acquisition of Oregon up to the 54° 40' line, and had warships stationed off the coast of California as of 1840. British interests in all these areas were real; since Mexico owed a rather large debt to Great Britain, there was some talk of paying off the debt by giving California to Mexico's creditors. Along with the possibility of colonizing a large part of California with British and Irish nationals, this heightened the sense of urgency to obtain a port that American

politicians felt from 1842-1846. While Great Britain and France both had commercial representatives in California, neither nation was willing to go to war over this or any other Mexican province for that matter. British foreign policy was directed toward denying California (and Texas) to the United States in order to prevent the growth of American power in North America and further encroachments on British overseas markets. It was to this end that British diplomats worked, sometimes in concert with the French, from 1836, the year of Texas independence, to 1846.¹⁹

If Great Britain and France had vested interests in California, the American government had good cause to be concerned with the future of that Mexican province on the Pacific as well. American traders and trappers had operated out of San Francisco and several other ports as early as 1821. During the 1830's, the American community in California had grown to perhaps 100 individuals, mostly men and mostly involved in the hide and tallow trade which flourished in that decade. It remained, however, a very small, tightly knit community whose main concern was the continuance of their trade under a stable government. The question of sound government was the only one that plagued the American merchants, for the Mexican government and local California authorities as well, were anything but stable during the early 1840's. The small group of "Boston men" were joined after 1840 by a trickle of pioneers who settled in the Sacramento Valley. Many of the coastal merchants and inland farmers and ranchers agreed that the status quo in California was satisfactory for neither group; only a change of governments could bring the peace and stability that all the Californians desired. This was not strictly an American sentiment either since a small number of native Californians had become disenchanted with the bickering local politicians and desired new leadership. The country looked to for new administration was the

United States. The methods by which the change of flags was to be achieved, however, differed among the American residents of Alta California and the few Californios who went along with the idea.²⁰

The ruling elite of California remained quarrelsome and divisive in the period 1840-1846; aware that there were threats to their independence, but unwilling to take any kind of action to ward off foreign intrusions. Such was the case in 1842 when the American Pacific Squadron, under the command of Commodore Thomas AsCatesby Jones, captured Monterey under the mistaken belief that the United States and Mexico were at war. Jones took possession of the town on 20 October 1842, returning it to the California authorities the following day once the Commodore had been convinced that no state of war existed. The California militia, under José Castro, gathered at San José several miles from Monterey. The mounted Californians came no closer to the point of intrusion until Jones admitted his mistake, and then joined in a fandango thrown by the Governor in the name of good Mexican-American relations. The lack of opposition offered the Americans by California military forces was indicative of the political instability of the province and lack of resolve on the part of the leaders to risk combat.²¹

The reaction of the Californians to the peaceful infiltration of their province by American settlers was similar to the response to the seizure of Monterey. The numbers of Americans increased to about 700 by 1846; and among them were several agents of empire representing various commercial and private interests, dedicated to the end of Mexican rule over California. One of the most intriguing of these individuals was the Swiss-born adventurer, Johann August Sutter. Sutter arrived in California in 1839 and was granted a tract of land in the Sacramento River Valley by Governor Alvarado. The Governor, it seems, wanted to plant a thorn in

the side of his wealthy uncle at Sonoma, Mariano Vallejo. Sutter became more than this, for he was an inveterate borrower, living off the credit extended to him by his fellow Californians. This created quite a bit of tension between the founder of New Helvetia and the merchants of the coast; but this did not deter Sutter from consolidating his landholdings by building a rather formidable fort near present-day Sacramento and training a contingent of California Indians in contemporary European drill and ceremonies. Sutter became a Mexican government official in 1841; nonetheless, he encouraged immigration by Americans into his newly adopted homeland without asking for any compensation for those who enjoyed the hospitality of Fort Sutter. In spite of the benevolence Sutter showed toward newly arrived American settlers, his intentions were probably less altruistic than they appeared. James Zollinger, author of Sutter, The Man and his Empire, expresses the opinion that the "lord" of New Helvetia was merely a "good Samaritan." This judgment must be balanced by the fact that Sutter's welcome mat to the Americans had the effect of furthering foreign settlement of California. Sir George Simpson of the British Hudson's Bay Company noted that Sutter seemed to be an agent of American imperialism in California:

The Americans, as soon as they become masters of the interior through Sutter's establishment, will soon discover that they have a natural right to a maritime outlet; so that whatever may be the fate of Monterey and the more southerly parts San Francisco will, to a moral certainty, sooner or later fall in the possession of the Americans.²²

The idea that American settlers were hazardous to Mexican rule of California was not solely a British perception. Long-time residents of Alta California, American and Mexican alike, did not discount the notion that the United States might win the province by flooding it with settlers. Alfred Robinson, an American merchant, expounded this idea

in his own writings: "Once let the tide of emigration flow toward California and the American population will soon be sufficiently numerous to play the Texas game."²³ This would result in the province becoming more American than Mexican, and Alta California would change hands by virtue of a blood transfusion, so to speak. The vision of flooding the ports of California with immigrants did not come to pass, however, since the incentive for colonization remained low. Alta California lay at the end of a long, tortuous trek across the deserts of western North America. Oregon was much more attractive from the perspective of American pioneers setting out across the continent since, by the 1840's, there were already quite a number of American settlements in the Territory and the Oregon Trail did not cross as much desert as did the southern routes to the Pacific. In spite of favorable propaganda by American residents of California, like Alfred Robinson, only a fraction of the men and women who set out for the west made California their destination. On the eve of the Mexican-American War, Americans constituted perhaps 10 per cent of California's white population.

The problem that continued to confront residents of Alta California in the 1840's was the instability of the Mexican, and, more specifically, the Californian governments. One man who worked for a better and more stable regime was a New England merchant by the name of Thomas Oliver Larkin. Larkin arrived in California in 1833 and settled at Monterey, where he carried on a healthy trade with groups as diverse as American merchants and Mexican ranchers. His reputation for honest dealing placed him in good stead with his fellow American merchants and Mexican government officials as well. In 1843, Larkin was appointed United States consul in Alta California, largely because of the good relations he seemed to have with the Californios. John A. Hawgood,

editor of First and Last Consul, describes Larkin as a man loyal to his adopted country, yet one who was swept up by the tide of "Manifest Destiny." In May 1846, before word of the border incident in Texas which prompted the outbreak of hostilities reached California, Larkin sent a letter to newspaper editor James Gordon Bennet: "This country (perhaps [sic] my hobby....We must have it, others must not." The American consul was clearly convinced that California's destiny lay not with the corrupt and oftentimes comic antics of the local government. Only the United States could provide the requisite stability of government through its benevolent, democratic institutions. Larkin made note of the increasing dissatisfaction of the Californians with their government in a letter to a fellow Boston merchant in San Diego, Abel Stearns:

Their [the Californians] patriotism points that they still belong to Mexico, but that feeling is continually leaving every one who has his farm and cattle to take care of, and will be but as a thing of other days, unless the supreme [sic] Government lends California a helping hand in good faith and for the actual good of the inhabitants.²⁴

Since no help of this nature was forthcoming in 1846, consul Larkin dedicated himself to the protection of American interests, and encouraged the Californians to seek the aid of the United States in establishing a stable regime and putting an end to any outside threats.

The activities of the American consul in Monterey reflected the acquisitive policies of President James K. Polk. Conducting his campaign on an avowedly expansionistic platform, Polk had declared the annexation of Texas and all of the Oregon Territory to be prime objectives of his administration. The importance of obtaining a port on the Pacific coast to improve America's trade relations with the Far East were not lost on the President. His instructions to John Slidell, special envoy to Mexico for the year 1845, are most revealing on this point:

The possession of the Bay and harbor of San Francisco is all important to the United States. The advantages to us of its acquisition are so striking, that it would be a waste of time to enumerate them here. If all these should be turned against our country, by the cession of California to Great Britain, our principal commercial rival, the consequences would be most disastrous.²⁵

Polk's message is clear. California was essential to improving America's commercial relations in the Pacific. San Francisco became an imperative in the mind of the President because of the recent success of Caleb Cushing, a New England merchant of fine diplomatic talents, in negotiating a treaty with the Chinese giving American merchants access to ports opened by the British as a result of the Opium Wars. The United States received several other concessions, including a promise of "most favored nation" status in the Treaty of Wanghia, in 1844. With a port on the Pacific, American trade advantages in the Far East would be, in the words of President Polk, "striking."

The method by which California should be obtained remained a problem. In 1845, President Polk sent John Slidell on a special mission to Mexico City for the purpose of restoring "those ancient relations of peace and good will which formerly existed between the governments and the citizens of the sister republics." The Slidell mission was prepared to offer up to \$40,000,000 for California along with assuming the claims of American citizens against the Mexican government. Due to the volatile nature of Mexican politics, however, the present government was unable to recognize Slidell lest treating with the Americans be taken as a sign of weakness, giving the opposition parties an excuse for a rapid change of government. Failing this, Polk directed Thomas Larkin to encourage the Californios to sever all ties with Mexico. Secretary of State James Buchanan relayed the orders to Larkin:

Whilst the President will make no effort and use no influence to

become one of the free and independent States of this Union, yet if the people should desire to unite their destiny with ours, they would be received as brethren, whenever this can be done, without affording Mexico just complaint.

Polk, it seemed, was playing the "Texas game," but with a population not entirely of American descent.²⁶

In 1845, California welcomed, rather reluctantly, the American explorer and adventurer, John Charles Frémont. Frémont was a captain in the Army topographical engineers. Born the illegitimate son of a prominent Virginia woman and a transient French schoolteacher, John Charles had made a name for himself by leading explorations of American western territories and making several side trips into the Mexican borderlands. His marriage to Jessie Benton, daughter of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, furthered his prestige. Benton was also chairman of the Senate Military Committee. Frémont's third expedition to the west in 1845 brought him to California at the head of an armed band of 63 American soldiers and frontiersmen. This was hardly a scientific party, from the Californian point of view; thus the military commandante, José Castro, requested that Frémont leave the province. His letter, written in a discourteous tone, accused Frémont of stealing animals and his men of improper conduct toward some California ladies. This angered Fremont and prompted the explorer to take an unprecedented course of action--he fortified Hawk's Peak northeast of Monterey and refused to leave. After four days on the mountain and in the face of increasing numbers of California militiamen, Frémont retired northward into the Oregon Territory. The California he left behind on March 9, 1846, was on the verge of a new crisis.²⁷

Rumors had been circulating since the Fall of 1845 that the United States and Mexico were about to go to war. The tensions became

greater when the Mexican government refused to receive John Slidell as President Polk's special representative to settle the differences between the two countries. This, along with Frémont's rash actions in March of 1846, created a paranoia about foreigners in California. On April 11, a junta of military officers met in Monterey and decided to fortify the northern California towns, naming the military commandante, José Castro, commander of all the armed forces in California. Under the circumstances this was not a bad move, but the junta neglected to consult with the governor of Alta California, Pio Pico. The officers at Monterey did invite the governor to join the forces gathering in northern California, but the damage was done; Pico considered the meeting a treasonous act, made quite a fuss about it, and prepared to march north at the head of his own forces, with the intention of attacking Castro's troops. The factional strife that kept California divided in the past appeared once again at a time when unity of purpose was most needed.²⁸

Captain John C. Frémont returned to California in May to find that rising tensions had created the atmosphere for a revolution. The rumors about American designs on their Pacific paradise provided the California authorities with an excuse to seize the lands of all non-citizens. A declaration to this effect was issued on April 17. Frémont received this intelligence by way of a Marine Corps officer, Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie, who had been sent to the explorer by order of President Polk. There has been some debate as to whether Gillespie brought verbal orders to Frémont giving him permission to intervene in California affairs, but no solid evidence exists to confirm this. Gillespie made his way to California via Mexico after memorizing the instructions given him by the President. There is also the possibility that the young Marine gave Frémont some kind of private messages from

his wife and Senator Benton. Still, these would not have sanctioned any of the actions taken by the Army officer in May and June of 1846. The most likely explanation for Frémont's intervention in California's turmoil, given his impetuous nature, is that acted on his own. The combination of Californian proclamations against foreign settlers and news of Taylor's advance to the Rio Grande, also provided by Lieutenant Gillespie, prompted the explorer to return to California.²⁹

As the Californians prepared to eject American settlers and make war on each other, Frémont bided his time. He seemed convinced that news of war between the United States and Mexico would arrive any day, but was not bold enough to initiate hostilities on his own. Instead, Frémont waited for the forces of discontent among the Americans to turn revolutionary words into action. He did not have long to wait. On June 14, a small group of foreign settlers led by one Ezekiel Meritt slipped into the town of Sonoma at sunrise and took control of the barracks. Capture of this town yielded not only the contents of the arsenal, eight cannon and 300 stands of arms, but also made prisoners of Mariano Vallejo, his brother, and two foreign ranchers. William B. Ide, an American, raised the famous Bear Flag the following day. Frémont became involved after the seizure of Sonoma and lent both moral and material support to the rebels. Later he would take command of them when the Bear Flaggers became the California Battalion.

One attempt was made to retake Sonoma when General José Castro called out the militia and soldiers of California, about 400 of them according Larkin, and sent them in small groups to gather before the town. One group of 60 or 70 men commanded by Captain Joaquin de la Torre rode up the road toward Sonoma but recoiled at the sight of the Bear Flaggers galloping down upon them. The surprise was mutual and both parties retired,

de la Torre losing two or three men in the process. The men who had taken Sonoma received reinforcements and pursued de la Torre toward the village of Yerba Buena on San Francisco Bay but could not overtake the superior horses of the fleeing Californians. The insurgents kept the Bear Flag aloft for 23 days until Commodore Sloat of the Pacific Squadron intervened on July 7, 1846.³⁰

The environment for a change of governments in California resulted from the failure of local political leaders to rule without resorting to factional warfare. Although indecisive, the battles between the northern and southern aristocracies detracted from the ability of the governor to provide stability in the territory. The presence of a sizable community of foreigners increased tensions by drawing outside powers, such as Great Britain and the United States, into a position where they were obliged to defend the interests of their citizens. This was the rationale behind the establishment of the British Pacific Squadron in 1840 and the increased American presence in California waters during the same period. The fact that California was endowed with strategically located ports was evident to the great trading powers of Europe and the United States since the eighteenth century. This also heightened international interest in California during the 1830's and 40's. Commodore Thomas apCatesby Jones' 1842 seizure of Monterey illustrates not only American designs on California; but, seen in the context of competition between Great Britian and the United States, this incident shows a lack of respect for Mexican sovereignty and an appreciation of California's importance in the Pacific trade. It also demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining effective control over naval forces stationed so far from home waters.

The Bear Flag revolt was an expression of dissatisfaction with the

present government of California, the work of a small number of men backed by an American Army officer. The United States was one step closer to achieving a continental empire. All that remained was the occupation of the province by naval and land forces, or so it seemed. The dreams of New England merchants and the "divine will" of "manifest destiny" were about to be fulfilled. In Washington, Secretary of State James Buchanan had already raised the question of California's role in the American Empire. "How should we govern the mongrel race which inhabit it," he asked? The press, too, was concerned with the fate of California in the present war with Mexico. The Illinois State Register for July 10, 1846 carried the following sentiments of the popular perception of what California was and what it could become:

Shall this garden of beauty be suffered to lie dormant in its wild and useless luxuriance...? [As United States' territory] it would almost immediately be made to blossom like a rose; myriads of enterprising Americans would flock to its rich and inviting prairies; the hum of Anglo-American industry would be heard in its vales; cities would rise upon its plains and seacoasts, and the resources and wealth of the nation be increased an incalculable degree.³¹

Newspaper editors may have predicted California's fate as early as the Summer of 1846, but the actual battle for Mexico's far-flung territory had yet to be decided.

. ENDNOTES

¹Sister Magdalen Coughlin, "Commercial Foundations of Political Interest in the Opening Pacific, 1789-1829." California Historical Society Quarterly 50 (March 1971): 16.

²Ibid., p. 18.

³Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 17.

⁴Coughlin, "Commercial Foundations of Political Interest in the Opening Pacific, 1789-1829," p. 19.

⁵See Richard van Alstyne, The Rising American Empire, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 117. Also, Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 17-21.

⁶George Dangerfield, The Awakening of American Nationalism., 1815-1828, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 37.

⁷Coughlin, "Commercial Foundations of Political Interest in the Opening Pacific, 1789-1829," p. 21.

⁸Adele Ogden, The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), p. 31. reprint edition, 1975.

⁹Ibid., pp. 45-60. The contract system between the Russian fur traders and the American merchants prevented the monopolization of the otter trade by the latter in the years when Russian merchant ships were scarce. Ogden writes that "considering the Russian desire to keep the fur wealth of the Pacific from the Anglomans, the contract system was undoubtedly a means of preventing their rival from having the exclusive run of the new fields," (p. 57).

¹⁰Ibid., p. 78.

¹¹Ibid., p. 152.

¹²Joe Gibson, "A. Butler: What a Scamp." in Odie Faulk' and Joseph Stout, eds., The Mexican War: Changing Interpretations, (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1973), pp. 45-56.

¹³Ray Allen Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1956), p. 160.

¹⁴Norman Graebner, Manifest Destiny, (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs Merrill Company, Inc., 1968), p. xviii.

¹⁵Ibid., p. xxiii.

¹⁶Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955).

¹⁷Coughlin, "California Ports: A Key to West Coast Diplomacy, 1820-1845." in Faulk and Stout, The Mexican War: Changing Interpretations, p. 28.

¹⁸Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 23-32.

¹⁹Coughlin, "California Ports: A Key to West Coast Diplomacy, 1820-1845." See also A.P. Nasatir, "International Rivalry for California and the Establishment of the British Consulate." California Historical Society Quarterly 46 (March 1967): 53-70.

²⁰John A. Hawgood, "The Pattern of Yankee Infiltration in Mexican Alta California, 1821-1846." Pacific Historical Review 27 (February 1958): 27-38.

²¹George M. Brooke, Jr., "The Vest Pocket War of Commodore Jones." Pacific Historical Review 31 (August 1962): 217-233.

²²James Peter Zollinger, Sutter, The Man and His Empire, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 86.

²³Graebner, Manifest Destiny, p. xxxvii.

²⁴John A. Hawgood, First and Last Consul: Thomas Oliver Larkin and the Americanization of California, (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, Publishers, 1970), p. 59. Later in the same letter to Stearns, Larkin makes a revealing statement about where the Californians should look for leadership in the crisis facing their society: "Then where should he under imposition or state of distrust look to for assistance? Only to the United States of America. He will there meet a fellow feeling, with those who can and will participate in all his ideas & principles and hail him as a Republican and a citizen of the land of Freedom!" (p. 60).

²⁵Frederick Merk, The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism, 1843-1849, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 117.

²⁶Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860, pp. 161-62.

²⁷Allan Nevins, Fremont: Pathmarker of the West, (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1939).

²⁸Ibid., pp. 253-254.

²⁹Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860, pp. 164-65.

³⁰Larkin to Atherton, July 20, 1846, in Hawgood, First and Last Consul, pp. 133-135.

³¹Graebner, Manifest Destiny, pp. li-liiii. Brackets are Graebner's.

CHAPTER IV

WAR ON A SHOE-STRING

The Campaign for Alta California, July 1846-January 1847

War's great events lie so in Fortune's scale,
That oft a feather's weight may kick the beam.

Rev. Walter Colton
American alcalde in
Yerba Buena

The conquest of California in 1846 was the outcome of years of American westward expansion and international competition for a port on the Pacific. When intervention in California's civil war by the United States' Pacific Squadron finally came, the results seemed too good to be true. In a matter of days, Monterey, Sonoma, Sutter's Fort, and the Bay of San Francisco were all in American hands. Less than two months later southern California too was under the shadow of the "Stars and Stripes." This success was short-lived, however, since an uprising by the residents of Los Angeles threw the Americans on the defensive and required a second campaign in the south to subdue the Californios. Alta California's war ended, for all intents and purposes, in January 1847 when John C. Frémont negotiated the Treaty of Cahuenga with the Californian leader, Andres Pico.

The vicissitudes of the seven-month war in Alta California affected both the Americans attempting to wrest the province from its owners and the Californians who made several noble attempts to reconcile the differences among themselves. Several factors account for the rapidly

changing fortunes of the antagonists. These include the geography of Alta California, conflicting personalities within the two armed forces, and logistical limitations which made the movement and concentration of forces difficult. The Mexican-American War in California also represented the clash of two unique frontier institutions. The California militia was the product of more than two centuries of Spanish military experience, modified by 25 years of political independence and factional strife. The American forces which ultimately subdued California were a heterogeneous collection of sailors, soldiers, marines, and frontiersmen. A half-century of maritime duties and westward expansion formed the traditions of the several "branches" of the American forces, which coalesced into an effective fighting force for the duration of the war in California. The clash of these two frontier forces in Alta California constitutes the topic of this chapter

The Mexican-American War in California began not with a bang, but with a whimper. The province was already in a state of civil war when the American Pacific Squadron arrived in Monterey Harbor on 2 July 1846. Its commander, Commodore John Drake Sloat, was unaware that a state of war existed between his country and Mexico since early May. There had, however, been rumors of a clash of arms along the Rio Grande when Sloat left Mazatlan, Mexico, in June. The orders under which Sloat acted had been issued in the summer of 1845 by Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft, directing the commander of the Pacific Squadron to seize Monterey and any other ports within the squadron's means, in the eventuality of war.

Upon his arrival off the coast of California, Commodore Sloat received intelligence of the current situation in the province; this included Fremont's activities throughout the spring of 1846 and the Bear

Flag Revolt of 14 June. Neither word of Mexico's announcement of defensive war in April nor President Polk's signing of the declaration of war on 13 May had reached the Pacific. Without confirmation of the many war rumors, Sloat vacillated and refused to take any kind of action, so the Pacific Squadron remained at anchor for five days. Sloat's hesitation in this matter is understandable, for it had not been too many years since Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones' abortive capture of Monterey in just such a rumor-filled atmosphere. After conferring with Consul Thomas O. Larkin and believing that Frémont's support of the Bear Flag movement was officially sanctioned by some orders of which Sloat was not aware, American forces finally intervened in California. On the morning of 7 July, sailors and marines from the frigate Savannah landed and took possession of the town. Don Mariano Silva, the military commandante, told the Americans he had no authority to turn Monterey over to the Commodore, but the American flag was raised just the same with a 21-gun salute from the ships in the harbor. The war in California was off to a rather inauspicious start.¹

When the Pacific Squadron arrived in July, California was in the midst of a civil war. The Bear Flag Revolt of June 1846 placed a small group of American and foreign settlers backed by John C. Frémont in control of the northern settlement of Sonoma and Sutter's Fort in the Sacramento Valley. José Castro and his mixed force of vaqueros and rancheros were encamped at San Jose, while Governor Pio Pico remained in the south at Los Angeles. Both men were too suspicious of each other to cooperate against the rebels at Sonoma and so had kept apart for nearly a month. The American intervention forced the rival Californian leaders into a temporary alliance. Castro made his way south with his retinue to await the next move by United States forces.

The Americans lost no time in occupying the remaining ports in northern California but failed to agree on a plan of operations to conquer the south. Yerba Buena was occupied on 9 July by a detachment from the sloop Portsmouth, and the American flag was raised over Sonoma the same day. By 11 July, the Americans were in control of Bodega Bay and Sutter's Fort, being aided at these two places by Frémont's rebels.

Meanwhile, CPT Frémont and his second in command, Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie of the Marines, met with Commodore Sloat on the Savannah to hear the latest orders from Washington regarding the outbreak of war. There had been no new orders since June 1845. Sloat and Frémont met seeking justification for each other's actions, but found themselves acting without orders from a higher authority. Neither officer was satisfied by the meeting, and Sloat considered withdrawing from the province altogether when he learned that Frémont had acted without orders. For a time it seemed Sloat would be held responsible for another mistaken seizure of Monterey, but he had an alternative. After 30 years of service in the Navy, the Commodore was ready for retirement. On 15 July, the frigate Congress arrived at Monterey with Sloat's successor, Commodore Robert F. Stockton, on board. Stockton had orders to take command of the Pacific Squadron if Sloat determined to turn it over to him, but was as ignorant of the state of affairs between the United States and Mexico as the man he was sent to relieve. Six days later, Sloat ended his long naval career and sailed for Washington on the sloop Levant. With Stockton in command of American forces in California, there would be no withdrawal.²

Commodore Stockton took command of the Pacific Squadron on 23 July and immediately set about reorganizing his forces. His first action was to enroll Frémont's irregular forces as "the California Battalion of

United States troops," promoting Fremont to Major commanding the unit and Lieutenant Gillespie to captain. This was still not a legal force since an Act of Congress was required to allow for payment of the troops. Regardless of its status, the California Battalion would play a vital role in the upcoming campaign for California.³

Stockton's second task was to conduct an expedition for the conquest of southern California. With no Mexican vessels in the area, the Americans enjoyed undisputed control of the coastal waters. Stockton took advantage of this by planning a two-pronged assault on the city of Los Angeles from the sea. The California Battalion embarked on the sloop-of-war Cyane on 25 July at Monterey and arrived at San Diego four days later. Fremont and his 160-man force set out at once for Los Angeles. Stockton himself led the second contingent of American forces consisting of 360 men of the Congress and Savannah, which landed at San Pedro on 6 August. Leaving a 100-man garrison at San Pedro, Stockton marched on Los Angeles on 11 August after taking time to gather enough horses and cattle to supply his force, and listening to the repeated calls for a truce by Pio Pico.

There was brief interlude in the preparations for war at the beginning of August when Consul Larkin urged Stockton to treat with the Californians. Larkin corresponded with a fellow merchant in San Diego, who had close contacts with Pico and other prominent Californians. The American Consul wanted the Californios to form a new government and declare themselves an independent protectorate of the United States. In this way they could maintain some political power and the ability to negotiate in an uncertain situation--no one yet knew for certain that the United States and Mexico were at war.

In this initiative Larkin was following his orders from the

State Department to encourage the Californians to shift their allegiance to the United States; but Stockton would have none of it. He refused to meet with the Californians demanding instead that Pico recognize Stockton's authority without conditions.

With no room left for negotiating, both José Castro and Governor Pico fled to Sonora, accompanied by many of their men; the remnants dispersed or surrendered on 14 August and were paroled by the American commander. The Californians, it seemed, had been divided for too long and could not put up an effective resistance. Southern California fell to the Americans without a struggle.⁴

Once the Californios had been vanquished, it remained for Commodore Stockton to install some form of government to replace the erratic rule of Pio Pico and José Castro. In a series of proclamations from 14 to 22 August, Stockton outlined the rules he intended to enforce. California was declared a territory of the United States and put under martial law until civil authorities could be elected on 15 September. The Commodore declared himself military governor of the province and appointed Fremont the civil governor and commander of American forces in northern California; Gillespie was made deputy governor and commander of forces in southern California. Stockton also drew up a constitution for the newly won territory, but never published it. This document was sent back to Washington along with reports of the naval conquest.

What is interesting to note about Stockton's actions during the month of August is that he had no authority to establish a civil government. Word of the American declaration of war arrived at Monterey on 12 August and could not have reached Los Angeles before the 15th. By this time the Americans were in control of the rebellious southern territory and Stockton was formulating his plans for administering the

province. The Commodore acted on his own, without orders from Washington, from the time he took command on 23 July.

Stockton's military initiative in California was admirable, but his attempt at creating a civil government while planning offensive operations against the west coast of Mexico was a bit too ambitious. He withdrew the naval landing force which had captured Los Angeles at the end of August save for a 48-man garrison under the command of Captain Gillespie. Having thus secured California, the Commodore prepared for a naval descent on the western coast of Mexico at Acapulco, to be followed by a rapid march on Mexico City. Such a plan was too much for the force at his disposal, which had the additional duties of garrisoning Alta California and maintaining a blockade on Baja California and several ports on the west coast of Mexico. Stockton's failure to take into account the realities of the situation and decision to attempt such an ambitious project may have had something to do with his character. K. Jack Bauer, in his Surfboats and Horsemarines, describes Stockton as "vain, overbearing, tactless, and gloryseeking."⁶ The Commodore would have liked nothing better than to march on the enemy's capital and make a name for himself. In spite of shortages of both men and material, Stockton asked Major Frémont to raise 700 men for the expedition, a totally unrealistic number given the size of the Anglo population in California, about 800 in 1846, and the necessity of maintaining a garrison in the major ports and cities. Stockton continued into September to labor under the illusion of a quick and glorious march on Mexico City when events in southern California forced a change in plans.

The ciudad Los Angeles in 1846 was populated with some of the most unruly and unmanageable residents of California. The city had a

reputation as a center of dissent and unrest even under Spanish rule. About 1,500 people inhabited Los Angeles at the time of the American conquest in August 1846, most of whom seemed willing to tolerate the new civil government Commodore Stockton had installed. What had not been resolved by September of that year, however, was the exact status of military and civil laws. Elections for new government officials were carried out on 15 September, but martial law remained in force, and Stockton showed no sign of removing the strict regulations decreed in August.

While Stockton readied his forces for a landing at Acapulco, Captain Archibald Gillespie commanded the Los Angeles garrison of 48 men. Gillespie was a good Marine who followed the orders given him by his superior. Stockton ordered him to enforce a repressive set of martial laws, including a 10 p.m. curfew and a rule forbidding more than two people to gather on the streets during the day. Commodore Stockton thought these precautions wise in the current situation, but events proved otherwise.

Even allowing for some leniency toward those citizens who behaved according to the laws, Gillespie and his men failed to win the respect of the Californians. Unaccustomed to such strict laws, the people, turned against the garrison. On 23 September, a group of 65 Californians and Mexicans attacked Captain Gillespie's headquarters located in an adobe government house. The garrison beat off the first assault, but the Californians grew in numbers. By the end of the day, 140 insurgents kept a watch on Gillespie and his men. A few days later there were close to 400 of them. Meanwhile, the Americans lost no time in fortifying their headquarters and the surrounding buildings, but the superior numbers of the enemy proved too much for the tiny garrison. Gillespie withdrew to Fort Hill overlooking the town and took with him two 6 pounder cannons.

Unfortunately for the Marine officer, there was no water supply atop the hill. Gillespie negotiated a surrender agreement with his opponents, a very generous one at that, and marched out of the town on 30 September without loss to his force. The Americans were permitted to keep their arms and were to turn over their two field pieces upon reaching San Pedro on the coast. Gillespie and his party embarked on the American merchantman Vandalia after spiking the cannon formerly promised to the Californians. He rationalized this action at the time by claiming the rebels failed to provide beef for his march to the coast and thus broke their part of the agreement. The results of the bloodless August conquest were wiped out in a fortnight. By the end of September, the Americans were ousted from San Diego and Santa Barbara. Los Angeles became the center of resistance for the rebellion which swept the southern part of the province, under the leadership of General Flores and a cousin to the ex-governor by the name of Andres Pico.

Word of the revolt in Los Angeles reached Commodore Stockton on 30 September. He was most distressed at hearing news of the rebellion, more for the disruption of his own plans to invade Mexico proper than for the loss of southern California. But the Commodore did not hesitate to take action. He immediately ordered Captain William Mervine of the Savannah to sail for San Pedro and march inland to relieve the beleaguered garrison at Los Angeles. Not knowing that Gillespie had already surrendered, Mervine set sail from Monterey on 3 October, arriving off San Pedro three days later. There he met with Gillespie aboard the Vandalia and prepared a landing for the next morning. Mervine decided to march to Los Angeles in order to put an end to the revolt. The force available for the task consisted of 225 sailors and marines from the Savannah who were armed with an assortment of muskets, carbines,

boarding pikes, pistols, and cutlasses. Gillespie's force plus some adventurous souls from the Vandalia brought the total to 299 men. With this ad hoc unit, Mervine and Gillespie set out on 7 October to reconquer southern California.⁸

The American naval landing force marched inland for 12 miles on the 7th and encamped at the deserted rancho of the Domínguez family. Here Captain Mervine learned a costly lesson in California warfare. The Americans were without horses and had obtained only a few cattle from the Domínguez ranch. The Californios on the other hand, were well mounted and had determined to deny their enemy the same mobility they enjoyed by stripping the countryside around San Pedro of all livestock. José Antonio Carrillo, the Californian commander at San Pedro, observed Mervine's advance from a distance and harrassed the Americans after nightfall. While his tactics of firing rifle and cannon shots into the rancho/encampment of the Yankees caused no casualties, Carrillo sufficiently annoyed Mervine to cause the latter to send some of Gillespie's men out into the darkness where the only shots they fired were at other Americans.

After an uneasy night, the Americans continued the march on Los Angeles only to find Carrillo, reinforced to about 100 horsemen, blocking their way. Taking advantage of the superior horsemanship and mobility of the Californians, Carrillo deployed his men on the far bank of a dry creek, with a 4 pounder artillery piece hooked up to 8 or 10 horses in the center of his position. As the Americans advanced, Carrillo's lone gun opened fire. It took three shots before the Californians got the range, but the results were well worth the wait. Each time the small, mobile gun discharged a round, it was withdrawn several yards to prevent its capture by the Americans, who

tried desperately to seize it. After three or four unsuccessful charges, Mervine ordered a retreat to the Dominquez rancho. His losses that day were 10 men wounded, four of them mortally.⁹

Captain Mervine consulted Gillespie and his officers on the evening of the 9th and decided to retreat to San Pedro. The lack of artillery in the American force and the Californians' superior mobility precluded any thought of continuing the march toward Los Angeles; to reach the rebellious city would place the Yankees out of communication with the Savannah, at the mercy of the enemy in the midst of a hostile population. Why this had not been foreseen can only be guessed at. The fact that the Californians had not previously put up a fight may have been one reason for Mervine's decision to advance on Los Angeles. Nonetheless, the project was abandoned; and the Americans returned to San Pedro the following day. Mervine's total casualties for this abortive campaign were four killed and 10 wounded. The Californians took no losses.

Commodore Stockton abandoned his own plans for a campaign against Mexico City after hearing of Mervine's repulse at San Pedro and took his forces south to put down the insurgency. He prepared a combined land and naval offensive on the rebel stronghold by sending Frémont and the California Battalion overland to Santa Barbara and then on to Los Angeles, while the Commodore led the naval wing of this two-pronged assault first to San Diego, then northward to the objective. San Pedro was fortified by a garrison from the Savannah as Stockton continued south to San Diego aboard the Congress. Once there, he relieved the nine-man garrison, commanded by Ezekiel Merrit, and took complete possession of the town from Merrit's besiegers. Stockton was joined by the ships Savannah, Portsmouth, and Cyane in late October and early November,

giving the Commodore a force of several hundred men to effect the reconquest of southern California. The Americans were forced to wait at San Diego for nearly two months, however, while horses, cattle, and ammunition were collected for the upcoming campaign. Food was plentiful, but the Californios had effectively denuded the countryside of all livestock. Stockton's superior numbers was offset by his lack of mobility; for, without draft animals, his force could not transport the requisite supplies needed for the long march to Los Angeles.

The Americans were not the only ones with supply difficulties during the Fall of 1846, however. The lack of pay among the Californians prompted them to imprison their leader, General Flores, on at least two separate occasions. Flores was a Mexican and some of the native Californios believed one of their own should be in charge of the situation. Ammunition was a greater problem. K. Jack Bauer credits Flores with having a supply of only 40 cannon balls and 1000 musket balls during the month of October.¹⁰ This was hardly ample for the approximately 400 men the Californians had under arms during 1846. Some additional ammunition and gunpowder was produced at nearby missions, but the process of procurement was a slow one and the powder was of inferior quality to that used by the Americans. Two advantages the Californians had in southern California were mobility and a central position. Continually denied the livestock needed, the Americans were restricted to the coastal areas, unable to venture out into the countryside for fear of being cut off by Californian cavalry. Flores divided his troops into three separate commands. The first, about 100 horsemen, was stationed at San Luis Obispo to keep an eye on Frémont, who was known to be on his way south from Monterey. The second group of another 100 men patrolled the outskirts of San Diego to worry Commodore Stockton. The remaining 200

Californios under the command of Flores remained at Los Angeles as a reserve to counter any moves by Frémont or Stockton.¹² The Californians did the most they could with the resources available. As long as the Americans lacked transportation, the Californian position remained difficult to assail.

Commodore Stockton continued to gather his forces at San Diego for the eventual drive on Los Angeles. The shortage of livestock was alleviated by several forays into the surrounding countryside by what few mounted men the Americans had at their disposal. The sailors were drilled by their officers every day in the tactics of fighting in what was for them an unusual environment. Commands to dress right and form in columns of fours replaced the more familiar orders to raise and lower sails. Shoes were manufactured in great numbers for the sailors turned soldiers, and wagons were assembled for the upcoming march. These preparations continued throughout November and the first days of December when a messenger brought word to Stockton that the United States' "Army of the West" had just reached California and was refitting at Warner's Ranch some four days march from San Diego. The Commodore's reaction to this latest development in the war for California was mixed. Here at last was some aid from the United States, and perhaps further orders that would change the status of American forces presently under the command of the senior naval officer.

The Army of the West was a part of national grand strategy in the Mexican-American War, created by President James K. Polk who had ordered an overland expedition to march from the frontier outposts along the Missouri River to capture New Mexico and California in June 1846. The man chosen to lead this expedition was Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny, commanding officer of the First Dragoon Regiment.

Kearny was a career man with over 30 years of service by the outbreak of the war. He had been instrumental in the formation and training of the First Dragoon Regiment in the 1830's, and had been the unit's commander since 1836. In June 1846, Kearny was promoted to Brigadier General and ordered to prepare a force to march across the southwestern deserts, subdue the Mexican province of New Mexico, and push on to the Pacific. The General also had orders to establish a military protectorate and civil government upon reaching California. The Army of the West, as Kearny's Dragoons and Missouri volunteer regiment of mounted men were dubbed, left Fort Leavenworth on 30 June, 1846. In September, the 1,658 man force captured New Mexico with little difficulty and proceeded to fulfill several secondary missions. Most of the army remained in New Mexico on garrison duty, the Missouri regiment led by Colonel Doniphan marched into Sonora, and Kearny continued on to California with 300 men of the First Dragoons. On 3 October, Kearny met the famous scout Kit Carson near Socorro, New Mexico, and learned of the easy conquest of California by the Pacific Squadron. Carson's information was already dated, however, since he had left Los Angeles on 15 September, one week before the Californian uprising. With this intelligence, Kearny reduced his force by two-thirds and continued on his march with just over 100 men, the reluctant Carson in the lead. After a tortuous march over dry, rugged deserts, the Americans arrived at Warner's Ranch in California. Here they replenished their virtually exhausted supplies and obtained new mounts in the form of mules and unbroken horses. Learning of the new situation upon his arrival at the ranch, Kearny prepared his troops for the last leg of their journey against an enemy of unknown strength.¹³

The Americans left Warner's Ranch on 4 December and met a small force of 35 men under Captain Gillespie, which had been sent out from San Diego to link-up with the Army of the West. Nearby was a detachment of some 150 Californios horsemen commanded by Andres Pico, a relative of former governor Pio Pico. The Californios were apparently unaware of the proximity of Kearny's men since Pico ordered about half his force to a nearby village in search of livestock. He was carrying out Flores' strategy of denying resources to the Americans to keep them immobile. On the evening of 5 December, Pico camped in the Indian village of San Pascual. That night some Indians brought word that a large American force was only a few miles from San Pascual; but Pico discounted this intelligence, for the only enemy troops that could be in the area were Gillespie's 35 men who Pico believed were on a cattle foraging mission. Later on, the Californians were aroused by a sentry who saw several men run off into the darkness. A closer inspection of the perimeter revealed a Dragoon's coat and blanket marked with "US"--no more evidence was necessary. Pico ordered his men to horse and prepared for an attack.¹⁴

Ten miles away at the Rancho Santa Maria, Kearny contemplated the results of an unsuccessful reconnaissance. The coat and blanket found by Pico's men belonged to a party of Dragoons sent to observe San Pascual. Lieutenant Hammond, who had led the group, was careless and let the American presence be known. Kearny consulted with his officers, Gillespie, and Kit Carson on what should be done now that the element of surprise had been lost. A majority agreed that an immediate attack should be launched before dawn. Kearny concurred and ordered the Dragoons to mount at 2 a.m. The march to San Pascual in the dead of night would not have been easy under normal circumstances;

but in the wee hours of 6 December, it was complicated by a steady drizzle which froze the men and dampened the powder of the Dragoon's main weapon, the Hall's Carbine. This meant the Americans would have to rely on their sabres in the approaching battle--not a pleasant prospect against an enemy armed with eight-foot long, steel tipped lances. The column got underway just after 2 a.m. All were anxious to meet the Californians in their first real battle of the war.¹⁵

A rough outline of the action at San Pascual can be reconstructed from several first-hand accounts by American survivors. Before dawn, the Americans approached the enemy encampment and deployed for battle. Kearny ordered the column to trot toward the barely discernible enemy line, but the lead element of 12 Dragoons misunderstood and charged instead. Kearny's men were mounted on an assortment of mules and horses in varying degrees of control. The vanguard had the best horses and soon widened the distance between themselves and the main body. They were subsequently the first Americans to engage the Californian lancers. One volley was loosed from the Californian line before the first 12 Dragoons crashed into it. Two men, the captain in charge of the vanguard and a private, were killed by musket-fire, the only Americans to succumb to enemy bullets that day. The remaining soldiers in the American vanguard were either killed or wounded before the main body arrived.

The main body of Kearny's force, about 40 men in all, came upon the Californian line and chased the enemy across the San Pascual Valley. It did not take long for the Americans to be strung out along the valley floor because of their untrained mounts. Dr. John S. Griffin, assistant surgeon with Kearny's expedition, described the outcome of the charge in his diary:

Capt Moor [e].. ordered the charge to be continued and it was in the most hurly burly manner--not more than ten or fifteen men being in line and over forty altogether they went however--the Enemy continued to retreat for about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile further when they rallied and came at us like devils with their lances--being mounted on swift horses--and most of our firearms having been discharged or missed fire from the rain of the night previous, our advance was perfectly at their mercy.¹⁶

The Californians made excellent use of their superior horsemanship and lances at San Pascual. When they wheeled about and fell on the disorganized Americans, the Californios outranged their sabre-wielding opponents by several feet. In the ensuing melee, several Dragoons were lasoed by reatas, dragged from their mounts, and dispatched by the steel tipped lances. Most American casualties, both dead and wounded, had at least three and as many as eight lance wounds. General Kearny was wounded in three places and Captain Gillespie suffered a vicious chest wound and a smashed jaw. The Dragoons fought back as best they could; using their Hall's carbines as clubs they struck out at the enemy, attempting to knock the Californians from their horses. This melee continued for about 30 minutes until two cannon in the rear of the American column were brought up and fired. Without artillery support of their own, the Californios fled leaving 18 Americans dead and 17 wounded, three of them mortally. Californian losses were unknown since they were able to withdraw with all their wounded and slain.¹⁷

San Pascual was the bloodiest battle fought in California during the Mexican-American War. In his after action report, General Kearny listed the battle as a victory for American arms; but the truth of the matter was much more complex. The General called San Pascual a victory by virtue of having been left in control of the battlefield. While this was true, the position of the Americans after the battle

was hardly that of a victorious army. There were 17 wounded men to attend to and only one doctor to see to their needs. One officer, Lieutenant Hammond, died several hours after the battle. In addition, Kearny's force was still several hours away from San Diego in hostile territory and without much in the way of food. The dragoons camped on the battlefield that night and marched a few miles the next day, taking care not to make the wounded any less comfortable than they already were. The night of 7 December was spent on a small rocky knoll, dubbed Mule Hill for the animals that were killed and made into soup there.

Although word of the skirmish reached Commodore Stockton in San Diego on the evening of the 6th, it was not until 9 December that a relief force was sent to the aid of the dragoons after another message pleading Kearny's desperate position. The Californians made only one attempt to get at the Americans on Mule Hill by sending a herd of wild horses to scare off the few cattle and horses in the Army of the West. Apparently, they intended to force Kearny to surrender for lack of supplies. Kearny prepared to march for San Diego on the morning of 11 December in spite of the Californian horsemen that surrounded his camp. At 2 a.m., a force of 225 sailors from San Diego arrived and were cheered by the destitute soldiers. The united command marched into San Diego on 12 December.

There has been much debate over the years as to why General Kearny attacked the Californians at San Pascual and over the merits of the decision. Kearny's service record prior to this battle shows him to have taken few chances if the odds were not in his favor. He was a good soldier with a good head on his shoulders (which he came close to losing at San Pascual), so why did he order an attack? The debate as to Kearny's abilities and intentions was warped by partisan political

interests, particularly those of LTC Frémont and his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, both of whom tried to make the dragoon commander look bad in order to justify Frémont's actions in California during 1846. In order to explain Kearny's decision to fight, one must take several factors into consideration.

First, by December the Americans were spoiling for a fight. After crossing hundreds of miles of desert without any contact with the enemy, save the capitulation of New Mexico, the Dragoons desperately wanted to kill some Mexicans. Several first-hand accounts, including Dr. Griffin's diary and the report of a Topographical Engineer, Lieutenant W.H. Emory, attest to this fact.

Second, the Americans were in need of good mounts, and there was no better source of well-bred, well-trained horses than the Californians themselves. According to Dwight L. Clarke, Kit Carson had an influential role in Kearny's final decision; the former disdained the fighting abilities of the Mexicans and did not believe them capable of offering any kind of resistance, even to a 100-man force that had just crossed the hostile deserts of the American Southwest. Clarke also believes that Kearny was unfortunate to meet Kit Carson in New Mexico since the General would otherwise have taken an additional 200 men into California with him. Kearny's decision to reduce his force to 100 men was a sound one under the circumstances and seems to be justified by the difficulties he had in leading even this small detachment across the desert. All other things being what they were, the presence of an additional 200 men at San Pascual would not have altered the outcome of the battle given the tactical advantages held by the Californios. A larger force might, however, have intimidated the enemy into avoiding combat altogether.

Finally, one must consider Kearny's determination to reach the Pacific and his overall numerical advantage. The total American force, including Gillespie's party, numbered some 135 men. Of these, only about 55 were actually engaged due to the impetuosity of the American charge. The remainder of the "Army of the West" was out of action with the baggage. In retrospect, this was also a sound decision since the mounted Californians could have run-off Kearny's livestock and all his supplies were they not well-guarded. Just the same, one mule did bolt during the battle and took a howitzer with him into enemy lines.

To judge San Pascual an American victory and a Californian defeat is to ignore the realities of the situation. The casualties, 35 for the Americans and perhaps 11 for Pico, do not support the positive tone of Kearny's report. Although indecisive, the action at San Pascual can be termed a tactical victory for the Californians since their superior tactics, horses, and equipment succeeded in placing Kearny's entire force in jeopardy. As Dwight Clarke argues, however, General Kearny did succeed in accomplishing his mission of reaching California and setting up a civil government. In this sense, San Pascual was a strategic victory for the Americans, but only because the Californians failed to follow up on their advantage. The divisiveness that plagued California for years once again prevented decisive action. Pico lacked the resources to dislodge Kearny from Mule Hill, while his troops lacked the resolve for one more bloody encounter. As Andres Pico wrote after the war in Alta California had ended: "...the morale of the people had fallen, due to a lack of resources....together with my compatriots we made the last efforts, notwithstanding the extreme lack of powder, arms, men, and all kinds of supplies."¹⁸

With General Kearny and his Dragoons safely recuperating from their ordeal within American lines at San Diego, Commodore Stockton prepared for the final campaign aimed at capturing Los Angeles in order to bring the war in Alta California to a conclusion. Throughout November Stockton had busied his men with the task of stockpiling the materiel of war. Powder, shot, and shell existed in sufficient quantity to maintain the approximately 600 man-force at San Diego, but other items were in short supply. Shoes were manufactured for the sailors who were often referred to as "Jack Tars." The supply of food was enough to keep the men well fed while in garrison, but it was not until the end of December that enough livestock could be mustered for the long march to Los Angeles. Kearny's quartermaster, Major Thomas Swords, obtained some foodstuffs, medical supplies, and back pay for the Americans from the Hawaiian Islands. But Stockton was not able to improve upon the armaments of this polyglot American force. There were few muskets among the sailors and marines; most were armed with carbines, pistols, boarding pikes, and cutlasses. The Dragoons had their trusty sabres and by now dried-out Hall's Carbines, but no horses to ride. When the American force finally left San Diego on 29 December, 1846, only 84 of 607 men were mounted. These were mostly volunteers commanded by Captain Archibald Gillespie.¹⁹

The days in San Diego before the march on Los Angeles began were well spent for the sailors who were unused to soldiering. Commodore Stockton and General Kearny both saw to it that the "Jack Tars" were disciplined and well-versed in the basic field movements of the day.

One man who was there and has left behind a remarkably well-written account of the days before the march and the Los Angeles campaign itself was Joseph Downey, a common seaman on the sloop Fortsmouth.

Downy described the daily drill routine of the sailors in a work that was probably intended for publication, but remained unknown until about 25 years ago: "'Fighting Bob' [Stockton] was a gassy old Cove, and would have 'his bullies' as he termed them out every day, drilling, charging, forming hollow squares, and putting themselves in the best discipline."²⁰ The formation of a square was vital in a campaign to be fought against a mounted foe. The idea for this particular maneuver was apparently Stockton's, since the sailors and marines had been practicing it before Kearny's arrival. The inability of sailors to form a square was one reason that Captain Mervine had broken off his October march against Los Angeles. Stockton's naval infantry seemed to take to this new environment well, according to Dr. Griffin, who noted in his diary: "The Jack Tars seemed highly delighted playing soldier...and did not seem to be discontented with anything but the enemy, and with him they were decidedly in the humor for growling with because, he did not have the decency to give them a fight before reaching our camp."²¹

While Stockton and Kearny continued their preparations for the march on Los Angeles, the American garrisons in northern California fought off several small-scale raids on local herds of livestock and the boredom of garrison life--they were primarily concerned with the latter. "The war here is not on a great scale," wrote Rev. Walter Colton, the American alcalde at Monterey, "but it impinges, at certain points, with terrific energy."²² The war in the north took on a different character than the revolt in the south. There was some concern over the native Indians who had stolen horses from a rancho near San Jose. An American force of 50 mounted men recovered them after a brief skirmish. The effect of this action was a favorable one for the American occupiers of Alta California. Colton noted in his diary that this was

the first time in recent memory that a local government had rescued personal property and returned it to the rightful owners. Most Californians were supportive of the new provincial government. When Flores' revolt in September 1846 turned the southern portion of Alta California into hostile territory, only a few men in the north joined the rebel cause. The most noteworthy battle between Californians and Americans took place at Natividad in mid-November, when an American immigrant by the name of Burroughs and 34 men bumped into a group of about 130 Californians. The battle lasted less than an hour and resulted in a total of 11 casualties for the Americans and an unknown number of Californians. Since the Californians were short on supplies and not a few apparently had been impressed into service by a group of parole violators, the revolt in the north quickly fell apart. Those who chose to continue the fight made their way south in small groups--the others went home.²³

A more dangerous threat to the American occupation of the northern California ports was the method of procuring supplies conducted by Frémont and his California Battalion. Colton notes in his diary that the natives of northern California who took up arms against the Americans did so in order to protect their own property. The unsupervised collection of war materiel by Frémont's men and some American settlers, without giving the Californians receipts, was a greater threat to the peaceful rule of the north than the 130 or so rebels who operated there in October and November. To reinforce their complaint several Californians captured a few American settlers, including the recently elected alcalde of Yerba Buena. The problem was settled temporarily by promising receipts for allegedly procured goods in return for the release of the prisoners, but the issue of California claims was not settled until after the war

when it was taken up in Congress.²⁴

By the end of December 1846, two American forces were in motion toward Los Angeles. Fremont, now a lieutenant-colonel by order of the War Department, left Monterey on 17 November with about 475 men under arms. He set a rather leisurely pace on his southward trek, in part because of the shortage of livestock, but also due to some intermittent heavy rains. Commodore Stockton and General Kearny departed San Diego on 29 December and began the 145 mile march to ciudad Los Angeles. The command structure of the southern force at this time was a curious one. Kearny outranked Stockton and had been given specific orders from the War Department to set up a civil government in California upon his arrival. Yet since his arrival at San Diego on 12 December, Kearny deferred to Stockton allowing the latter to maintain command of the territory. When the Americans left San Diego on 29 December, Stockton was commander-in-chief, but Kearny went along as commander of the "Army." Dwight Clarke concludes that Kearny declined to take over from Stockton in early December because of the wounds he suffered at San Pascual. This, along with the predominantly naval composition of the San Diego force convinced Kearny not to assert himself until after the campaign. As titular commander of the American "Army" in southern California, Kearny actually exercised little authority on the march to Los Angeles. This confused approach to the command of the American force did not affect the conduct of the campaign greatly, but would return to plague the American occupation once the war in Alta California had ended.²⁵

The march from San Diego to the San Gabriel River was uneventful, though conducted with the slimmest resources possible. The entire force subsisted on half rations throughout the march, despite some additional food procured at several points along the way. A herd of sheep had the

misfortune of crossing the path of the Americans on the second day and became a fit meal for the hungry sailors and soldiers. Commodore Stockton later noted:

Our men were badly clothed, and their shoes generally made by themselves out of canvas. It was very cold and the roads heavy. Our animals were all poor and weak, some of them giving out daily, which gave much hard work to the men in dragging the heavy carts, loaded with ammunition and provisions, through deep sands and up steep ascents, and the prospect before us was far from being that which we might have desired....²⁶

Despite these conditions, the Yankees marched on.

One event which did cause some concern toward the end of the expedition occurred on 6 January 1847. A strong gale blew that night and gave the Americans a taste of California dust. No meal could be cooked because of the storm. Both Downey and Dr. Griffin mention the vulnerability of the camp in the face of this wind, for the muskets and carbines were perfectly useless under such conditions. One false alarm during the night sent the men scrambling for their arms and brought them into a formation of sorts with backs to the wind. Downey described the defenceless state of the American camp: "...when we were ordered to 'right about face' every musket was down and every hand up to the eyes, digging for dear life for day light or at least for starlight and there we were forced to stand."²⁷ Fortunately the Californians chose not to venture out into such harsh weather.

Stockton's scouts reported the location of the enemy camp on the evening of 7 January, prompting the Americans to prepare for a day of reckoning. That night the Americans enjoyed their last meal before the morrow, which would surely bring them to battle with an elusive foe. All seemed anxious for a chance to meet the Californians in combat and win back their honor from the ignominious reverses at Los Angeles, Dominguez Rancho, and San Pascual. Seaman Downey wrote about this

pervading spirit on the eve of battle: "...we were one and all animated by that indomitable spirit of courage and perseverance that has ever been and ever will be found in the Breast of Yankees, from the first movement of the War of 1776 down to the present."²⁸ Commodore Stockton spent the night at a fandango in the camp with several local California ladies in attendance. The next day, 8 January 1847, would test the skills of the soldiers and sailors alike in a pitched battle with the Californians.

When the Americans took up the march on the morning of 8 January, they found their way blocked by the San Gabriel River and General Flores' force on the far side. The Californios had taken up position atop a chain of hills about 600 yards west of the San Gabriel; the Americans approached from the southeast. The San Gabriel was about 50 yards wide at the point where Stockton chose to cross. But it was also under the guns of the Californians on the far side.

The Commodore ordered the Americans into the formation practiced so often in San Diego, a hollow square, and advanced on the San Gabriel from a distance of about two miles. Before reaching the San Bartolo ford, a group of about 150 Californians crossed to the east side of the river to harrass the Americans. They attempted to drive a herd of wild horses into the Yankee square, but to no avail. The mixed force of soldiers and sailors, with their livestock and and baggage within the square formed by companies of musketeers and carbineers, pushed on to the river. Here they broke ranks, crossed the river by companies in single file, and reformed on the western bank.

As the Americans proceeded to cross the San Gabriel River, Californian artillery opened fire on them in mid-stream. To cover the crossing, General Kearny began to unlimber two of the six artillery

pieces attached to the American "Army" but was overruled by Stockton. The Commodore insisted on getting the cannon across the stream before readying them for action; he jumped off his horse, waded into the water, and helped his men push one of the 9 pounder's onto the west embankment. Once across, the guns were quickly put to good use. The Californians did not seem to get the range necessary to inflict casualties on the Americans, however, although the latter were in an exposed position. Stockton helped the Yankee gunners target the enemy artillery with his naval gunnery skills; he sighted an enemy gun with his telescope, aimed the cannon, and scored a direct hit on the target. Californian artillery fire remained ineffective save for one shot that took off an American gunner's head.

Now safely across the San Gabriel, Stockton ordered the heights on the American right flank assaulted. The task fell to Lieutenant Hensley of the navy whose skirmishers scrambled up the hills scattering the Californians before them. A six-pounder was ordered to the right flank, and Hensley supported this move with a portion of his command. Seizing the initiative: "A portion of the Californians made a charge that seemed for a time to have broken the American lines, which gave me much alarm," wrote Benjamin David Wilson, an American who observed the battle from a nearby hill. "But as soon as the dust cleared I saw the Californians retreating, and from what I learned afterwards, had the charge been simultaneous of all Californian forces, the American lines would have been broken, and there is no telling what the end might have been."³⁰ The mounted Californios tried a second charge against the American left-wing which also failed. Stockton's training had paid off in the battle of the San Gabriel River for the Californian cavalry could not defeat the infantry squares and steady fire of the

Yankees.

With the defeat of the enemy assaults, Stockton was ready to make camp. The Californians still held the high ground to the front and center of the American position, however, and could make any bivouac in the valley below very uncomfortable. General Kearny seized the initiative and ordered the sailors and marines to attack the hills before them while the enemy remained off-balance: "Now Jacks, at them, charge and take the hill!" The American line went forward with the cry of "New Orleans," for 8 January was the anniversary of Jackson's victory in the War of 1812. When Kearny's "Jack Tars" reached the summit the enemy was nowhere to be found. In true California tradition, the vagueros and rancheros chose discretion over valor and fled the field.³¹

On January 9, the Americans once again took up the march to Los Angeles. They journeyed west across a wide plain known as the Mesa until the Californian position atop a hill on the American right came into view. Stockton ordered the formation of a compact square, livestock and baggage within its confines, and one cannon at each corner. A cannonade began between the Californian guns on the hill and American cannon, but little damage was done to either side. Commodore Stockton ordered the entire formation to lie flat on the ground whenever the Californians fired their guns in order to avoid casualties. This action brought some cheers from the enemy when the Americans fell down after the first artillery ball passed over the square, but these soon faded when the Americans got up again and marched on.

Flores' cavalry had been hanging on the fringes of the American force since they began their march that morning and were now readied for a charge against the Yankee square. The Californian lancers tried the front of the American square but were repulsed by "volley after volley"

of musket and carbine fire. A second charge was directed against the right and left flanks simultaneously and met with no more success than the first. Flores finally ordered his entire force of about 400 horsemen to attack all sides of the American formation. The results were the same; the Californios broke off the charge about 50 yards from the square. Throughout the engagement General Kearny's voice rose above the din of battle reassuring the sailors and marines, ordering them to stand fast. With the defeat of the last Californian effort Flores and his men gave the battlefield over to the Americans and withdrew.³²

The Americans went into camp outside Los Angeles that night.

The war for Alta California was nearly at an end when American forces took possession of Los Angeles on the morning of 10 January. The Californians did not challenge the occupation of the ciudad, but chose to observe the activities within the town from the surrounding hills.

There was now some concern among the Americans that Flores would try to attack Frémont's California Battalion before it reached Los Angeles. Frémont's whereabouts had become known to Stockton and Kearny on 9 January when a messenger brought a letter from the explorer placing him a few miles away at San Fernando. Kearny wrote two or three notes to Frémont warning him of the possibility of an attack. The only reply came on 13 January when Stockton received the shocking news that Frémont had granted the Californians an armistice and was negotiating a treaty of peace. The next day Frémont marched into Los Angeles at the head of his Battalion with a peace treaty in hand.

The Capitulation of Cahuenga, dated 13 January 1847, allowed the Californians to retain their personal arms, placed no restrictions on their movements either within or without the territory, and granted them all the rights of American citizens without having to take an oath

of allegiance. All paroles were cancelled, prisoners released, and the Californios promised not to take up arms for the duration of the war between their new masters and the Mexican Republic. Though the conciliatory provisions of this treaty at first enraged Stockton, he accepted the treaty as a whole. Andres Pico signed for the Californian forces since Flores and about 80 others had fled the country for Sonora on the 11th. The most remarkable thing to note about the Treaty of Cahuenga is the way in which it was negotiated. LTC Frémont was only a few hours march from Los Angeles and could easily have conferred with his superiors with regard to the enemy's willingness to negotiate. Instead, the explorer ignored Kearny's messages of 10 to 13 January and chose to conclude a peace treaty without the authority to do so. That he chose not to illustrates both Frémont's ambitious nature and wise discretion on the part of the Californian leaders.³³

The American conquest of Alta California in the Mexican-American War exemplified the abilities of both antagonists to improvise for offensive and defensive operations. After years of shortage and neglect, the Californians were able to mount a defense that was spirited at times, but of very uneven quality. The lack of financial resources and distance from Mexico also detracted from the effectiveness of the California mounted militia. Despite the superior mobility of the Californios, their attacks were not productive in part because of the spirited defense put up by the Americans, but also due to the lack of resolve within their own ranks. Years of civil war, factional strife, and uncertain leadership from would-be governors eroded the morale of the defenders. With so many limitations, one wonders how the Californians put up any kind of resistance at all.

The Americans, for their part, had serious obstacles to overcome before imposing their rule over Alta California. Naval superiority gave the Yankees a sealift capability that overcame the great distance between northern and southern California, ensuring their control of the most important coastal points. This also created a limitation--American control of Alta California was restricted to the Pacific ports. The naval and marine forces performed well as infantry, but without artillery or cavalry of their own, the Americans could not subdue the interior of the country. Such was the case with Captain Mervine's abortive campaign to retake Los Angeles in October 1846. Rev. Walter Colton, the American alcalde at Monterey, was well aware of this problem: "The war in California can never be decided from the deck. We want some five hundred horsemen, thoroughly accustomed to the saddle and the rifle, and a few pieces of flying artillery. Without these we shall have constant attempts at revolution."³⁴ Kearny's 100 worn-out Dragoons and their scrawny mounts hardly filled Colton's prescription for victory and the result was the costly battle at San Pascual. The Americans needed another answer to the problems of California warfare.

Logistics also played an important role in formulating plans and conducting campaigns. The Americans seemed to have had an advantage with their superior quality arms and ammunition; the Californians lacked good powder, which quite often made their artillery fire erratic, and the quantity of powder and small arms necessary for an effective defense. While the Americans had sufficient quantities of war materiel it was of no use unless it could be gotten to the battlefields. This is where the great distances in California and the shortage of horses and oxen took their toll. Commodore Stockton's final campaign in January 1847 did not begin until enough carts and wagons could be manufactured and oxen found

to pull them. Beef was the staple of the American "Army" on the march. This, too, had to be procured from local ranches. Logistical factors played a vital role in determining the timetable for the conquest of California. Only when sufficient food and other supplies were made available through active foraging could the Americans leave their coastal enclaves.

Command difficulties also affected the Americans during the course of the California campaign. Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft relayed the government's confidence in the ability of the army and navy to cooperate during the Summer of 1846: "The government relies on its land and naval forces to cooperate with each other in the most friendly and effective manner."³⁵ Interservice cooperation is easy enough to order, but it is another thing altogether to ensure in a theater so far removed from the nation's capital. Part of the problem was Kearny's initial refusal to accept command and Stockton's later intransigence when Kearny asserted his authority and demanded that command of American forces be given over to him. The two put aside their differences long enough to conquer Alta California, but the first few months of occupation would see a renewed rivalry for control of the civil and military forces. LTC Frémont, the center of controversy in 1846-47, came to the fore when he negotiated a peace treaty without authority and within a few miles of his superiors. Frémont's actions were politically motivated, according to Bancroft, since the Army explorer had visions of playing an active role in California's fledgling civilian government. The terms he set forth in the Treaty of Caheunga, although partially motivated by personal interest, were effective in pacifying the restless Californios.

The American campaign in Alta California was an ad hoc affair, the conduct of which depended on many variables. Problems such as

training seamen for land duty and coordinating their actions with a contingent of dismounted Dragoons were overcome in order to bring the war to a successful conclusion. The requisite skills of the sister services came in handy on the field of battle as well. Stockton's naval gunnery experience helped knock out an enemy gun at the San Gabriel River, and General Kearny's confidence in the infantry square composed mostly of "Jack Tars" at the Mesa contributed to the steadiness of the Americans in the face of a Californian cavalry charge. Seaman Joseph Downey's comments on the American sailors at drill provides a fitting last commentary on the conduct of the campaign in Alta California:

It was a splendid and heart warming sight to see these brave men, most of whom had in a manner unsexed themselves, and become what a sailor hates most, Soldiers upon Emergency, but it was a proof of what Yankees can do in a pinch.³⁶

ENDNOTES

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- ²⁴Colton, Three Years in California, p. 170.
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- ²⁶From Stockton, Military and Naval Operations, quoted in Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, p. 386.
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- ²⁸Ibid., p. 200.
- ²⁹John Douglas Tanner, Jr., "Campaign for Los Angeles, December 29, 1846, to January 10, 1847. California Historical Society Quarterly (September 1969): 219-242.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 231.
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CHAPTER V

WHO IS GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA?

The Military Occupation of Alta California, January 1847-August 1848

General Kearny is supreme--somewhere up the coast;
Colonel Fremont supreme at Pueblo de los Angeles;
Commodore Stockton is 'Commander in chief' at San Diego;--
Commodore Shubrick, the same at Monterey, and I, at San
Luis Rey;--and we all supremely poor; the government
having no money and no credit; and hold the territory
because Mexico is poorest of all.

LTC Philip St. George Cooke,
Commander of the Mormon
Battalion of Volunteers

With the capitulation of Californian military forces in
January 1847, the Americans focused their attention on the administration
of the newly won province. This task should not have been a difficult
one given the lenient terms of surrender granted the Californians by
Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont at Cahuenga. But a major problem
arose in the week following the end of hostilities when both General
Kearny and Commodore Stockton claimed supreme authority in California
and sought support from LTC Frémont for their respective positions.
Kearny had orders from Washington D.C. directing him to take command of
all land forces in Alta California, and to establish a temporary civil
government upon taking possession of the province. Commodore Stockton
claimed authority by virtue of conquest and the establishment of a civil
government by him in August, prior to Kearny's arrival in December 1846.
Frémont was the determining factor in this controversy since he commanded

the second largest contingent of troops in the province. In an unprecedented move Frémont cast his lot with Commodore Stockton, disobeying the orders of a superior Army officer in the process. This action only served to confuse the issue of who was the rightful ruler of California, and also brought an end to Frémont's military career. Not until Commodores Shubrick and Biddle brought new orders from Washington in January and March 1847 was the governorship of California clearly in the hands of any one man.

The difficulty in ascertaining who was to rule California in the name of the United States resulted from conflicting orders sent from the nation's capital and the personalities of those who were to execute those orders. The spectacle of American military and naval officers arguing over control of a province won by both illustrates the problem of co-ordinating the actions of the two services so far from home. That the population of California remained quiescent throughout the controversy between military officers, an all too familiar problem to the inhabitants can be attributed to the benevolent peace terms rendered them by Colonel Frémont and the general lack of enthusiasm for further military adventures. Mexico had not the resources necessary to retake the province, but did have sufficient bluster to produce occasional rumors of impending invasion. The struggle to install a single American governor for Alta California constitutes the topic of this chapter.

Commodore Stockton exercised undisputed control from August to December 1846, using American combat forces to back-up his declaration that Alta California was a territory of the United States. The Commodore took command of the Pacific Squadron in July 1846 and had

conquered Upper California by mid-August. In a proclamation dated 17 August, Stockton announced: "The territory of California now belongs to the United States, and will be governed as soon as circumstances may permit, by officers and laws similar to those by which other territories of the United States are regulated and protected."¹

Until such time as American territorial government could be installed, Stockton maintained the present system of government based on Spanish laws and officials. The key figure in this form of government was the alcalde, a town magistrate with broad executive and judicial powers. The Californian alcaldes were replaced by American naval officers and prominent settlers when Stockton took control of the province. This system of governing the native population continued to function throughout the American occupation including the several weeks from December 1846 to March 1847, when Stockton's governorship was in question.

Stockton's claim to supreme command was based on a faulty reading of his orders and perhaps of his position in the overall campaign. The orders under which he acted were issued by Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft, directing Stockton to sieze California in the event of war with Mexico. Nowhere in those orders did the Navy Secretary give the commander of the Pacific Squadron authority to establish civil government in any form after capturing California. Stockton admitted that he had exceeded his orders by establishing the temporary government at the court-martial of LTC Frémont in 1847:

"My right to establish the civil government, was incidental to conquest and I formed the government under the law of nations."² The Commodore's argument for authority in California was based solely on the right of conquest and not on direct instructions from Washington.

The arrival of a detachment of the First Dragoon Regiment commanded by General Stephen Watts Kearny in December 1846, precipitated a change in the nature of California's military government. In proclaiming California a territory of the United States and by setting up a civil government without the authority to do either, Stockton's zeal for his assigned mission got the better of him. When General Kearny reached San Diego following the mauling of his dragoons at the hands of the Californios, civil rule in Alta California received official sanction. Kearny's orders of June 1846 read, in part: "Should you conquer and take possession of New Mexico and Upper California or considerable places in either, you will establish temporary civil government therein."³ Since Kearny's orders were contingent upon his reaching California and Stockton had already subdued the province before the September revolt at Los Angeles, the Commodore refused to recognize the General's authority, thus confirming the dispute with Kearny.

Differences of opinion as to the legal rule of California by naval or military forces were set aside in December of 1846 in order to put down the revolt by southern Californians. After receiving three wounds at the battle of San Pascual, General Kearny was hardly fit to command either his own or Stockton's land forces. According to Dwight L. Clarke, this fact was probably the main reason Kearny refused the offer of supreme command by Commodore Stockton in early December 1846. The Commodore later testified at Frémont's court-martial that he was astonished when the General approached him at the end of December demanding control of the predominantly naval infantry force about to set out for Los Angeles. Both officers exchanged orders in an attempt to justify their claim for authority,

but this settled nothing. Stockton proposed to await a reply from Washington to several reports sent east in August. For the time being the Commodore appointed General Kearny commander of the American forces in San Diego, retaining the title of commander-in-chief for himself. Kearny accepted the subordinate position for the time being and concentrated on preparing the soldiers and sailors for the upcoming campaign.

During the march on Los Angeles there was some friction between the rival officers; nonetheless, the Americans completed the conquest of California by 10 January 1847. Only after the defeat of the Californians did the Stockton-Kearny controversy come to the fore and threaten to disturb the fragile peace then in existence.

The most important actor in the struggle for power between the senior naval and military officers in California was the impulsive army explorer, LTC John C. Frémont. Frémont commanded the California Battalion of Volunteers, which numbered over 400 mounted riflemen, from July 1846 to January 1847. Marching south from Santa Barbara in December, Frémont's force reached San Fernando in early January, just in time to receive representatives from the Californians seeking a favorable peace. The Californios chose to treat with Frémont because of Stockton's harsh policy toward parole violators, of which there were many. (One wonders, too, if the Californians knew something of Frémont's character and appealed to his ego by choosing him as the agent by which peace would return to California). Whatever their reason for choosing the young officer, the Californians successfully negotiated a treaty favorable to them. The Capitulation of Cahuenga, signed on 14 January 1847, placed few restrictions on the natives of California and proved to be quite an accomplishment for LTC Frémont--in spite of the fact that he had no authority to make such a treaty and the theater

commander was only a few miles away in Los Angeles! .

Commodore Stockton was much chagrined when Fremont marched into Los Angeles on 14 January at the head of his battalion, with a treaty of peace in hand. On the other hand, General Kearny applauded Frémont's discretion in drawing up reasonable conditions, partly for the common sense shown in dealing with the Californians and also because he needed Frémont's support if the General were to assume control of the province. Nonetheless, Stockton remained adamant in his refusal to turn over his command to Kearny. Both men fell back on their arguments of late December, the one claiming authority by right of conquest and the other by virtue of specific orders from the nation's capital. The Kearny-Stockton controversy, as it took shape in January 1847, was at once an intraservice rivalry and personal dispute between the assertive general and unmoving commodore. In this disagreement between a general and a commodore, a lieutenant-colonel became the deciding factor.

The active struggle for authority in California began on 16 January 1847 when General Kearny queried Commodore Stockton as to what orders the latter was following in his continued rule of the province. Kearny's orders were from the President, and the General knew of no higher authority or other orders under which soldiers or sailors could act. Kearny made one final attempt to force Stockton to recognize his authority when he wrote:

If you have such authority [from the President or Secretary of the Navy] and will show it to me, or will furnish me with certified copies of it, I will cheerfully acquiesce in what you are doing. If you have not such authority, I then demand that you cease all further proceedings relating to the formation of a civil govt. for this territory, as I cannot recognize in you any right in assuming to perform duties confided to me by the president.

Stockton's reply reiterated his previous position that he ruled California by right of conquest, that the civil government he installed in August 1846 was merely interrupted by an insurrection, and he could not recognize Kearny's demands. Stockton added insult to injury when he wrote to the General on the same day:

I will only add that I cannot do anything, nor desist from doing anything, or alter anything on your demand; which I will submit to the president and ask for your recall. In the mean time you will consider yourself suspended from the command of the U.S. forces in this place.⁴

These were very bold words from a man whose equivalent rank in the Army was a colonel to be directing toward a superior officer, but the exchange of fiery notes was not without precedence. Pre-war arguments over seniority based on date of rank and brevetting, (a wholly confusing system of honorary promotions in itself), were common occurrences. America's officer corps was more aristocratic and politically oriented than professional. Like the armed services themselves, the officers had not yet "grown-up." Stockton's insubordinate bit of correspondence was not surprising when placed in the context of the times; but it did make for a troublesome situation in an army preoccupied with the occupation of a recently hostile province.

With Stockton's refusal to recognize his authority, General Kearny turned to LTC Frémont for support. Frémont himself was in a quandary over the status of Commodore Stockton in the American command structure; so he sent his aide-de-camp, one Major Russell, to speak with both Kearny and Stockton on the evening of 13 January. The next day Frémont's California Battalion marched into Los Angeles, and the explorer reported first to Commodore Stockton. Information brought to him by Russell indicated that the Commodore was still recognized by all save

the dragoons as the commander-in-chief, which prompted Frémont to pay his respects to the naval officer. Frémont also owed Commodore Stockton a great deal for his initial promotion to major, as well as the military governorship which the explorer held during the summer of 1846. As it turned out, this appointment closely paralleled Frémont's political ambitions for the post-war years. (He was elected to the Senate of the United States in 1849 as California prepared for statehood). It would have been bad form, then, if Fremont deserted his benefactor at a time when both men had much to gain.

In order to test LTC Frémont's loyalty, General Kearny sent him an order instructing the young officer not to make any organizational changes in his battalion. This move was intended to sound out Frémont's position in the controversy over command of the American forces in California. Kearny sent the order to the explorer on 16 January. The 16th was also the day Kearny received Stockton's negative response to his demands that the Commodore step down from the governorship. LTC Frémont paid a visit to General Kearny the next morning at the latter's request. During the meeting Frémont's clerk brought in a handwritten response to Kearny's order forbidding changes in the California Battalion. Frémont signed the letter and handed it to the General. He had opted for Stockton; the letter to Kearny contained a politely worded refusal to comply. The General must have been taken aback somewhat by this reply from a junior officer of the same service. He suggested that Frémont reconsider his position and retract the letter. During the course of the conversation, Kearny apparently offered to make Frémont governor of the province upon his departure in four to six weeks time. This gesture was futile, however, since Commodore Stockton had already signed Frémont's appointment as governor on the 16th and would deliver

it after the meeting between the two Army officers.

With no chance of gaining Frémont's support, General Kearny told the commander of the California Battalion to leave and wrote a brief letter to Commodore Stockton. In it, Kearny noted the seriousness of the situation and blamed Stockton for the consequences:

I must for the purpose of preventing collision between us, and possibly a civil war in consequence of it, remain silent for the present, leaving you with the great responsibility of doing that for which you have no authority, and preventing me from complying with the president's orders.

With this parting shot, Kearny quit Los Angeles and marched to San Diego on 18 January.

In his biography of General Kearny, Dwight L. Clarke raises a vital question in assessing Frémont's behavior toward the General-- why did he disobey the orders of a superior? Frémont began the war in California as a captain of the topographical engineers, became a major under a naval commission from Commodore Stockton, and finally attained the rank of lieutenant colonel when a commission arrived from Washington in October 1846. By refusing to follow General Kearny's orders and recognizing the authority of Commodore Stockton, Frémont appeared to hold two commissions simultaneously. Captain Samuel du Pont of the warship Cyane thought this to be the case since Frémont obeyed Stockton yet signed all his official correspondence "LTC and U.S. Army and Military Commandant of the Territory of California." Frémont based his support of Stockton on the subordinate position General Kearny had accepted during the Los Angeles campaign. The explorer was merely following suit, so to speak, by obeying the orders of the man recognized by Kearny as commander-in-chief. Once Los Angeles was in American hands and the General exerted his authority, however, should not Frémont have obeyed the orders of his superior? What LTC Frémont should have done

and what he did do are, of course, two different things. As both Clarke and Bancroft suggest, Frémont may have been motivated by political aspirations reaching beyond the period of American occupation. His activities during February and March 1847 point to this since much of his time was spent currying favor with the inhabitants of Los Angeles. Nonetheless, the final result of Frémont's decision to support Stockton was charges of mutiny and insubordination and a court-martial.⁶

In order to assert his authority in California once Stockton and Frémont had gone their own way, General Kearny required additional troops to back up his claims. These troops had been provided for by President Polk who authorized the creation of a battalion of Mormon volunteers about the same time Kearny departed from Fort Leavenworth. This initially created an ethical problem for the Mormons: how could they take-up arms and fight on behalf of a country whose people persecuted the Latter-Day Saints, and whose government did little to protect them? Elder Jesse C. Little of New England advised a most practical course of action for the Mormons: "If our government should offer facilities for emigrating to the western coast, embrace those facilities if possible. As a wise and faithful man, take every honorable advantage of the times you can."⁷ Curiously enough, this message was written in January 1846, before the Army of the West had been conceived.

The Mormon Battalion received weapons and supplies at Fort Leavenworth in early July 1846, and were on the westward trails by mid-August. The Mormons followed the path of Kearny's force, which had left Leavenworth in June, and reached New Mexico by October where they were given a new commanding officer, LTC Philip St. George Cooke. The battalion of just over 300 men marched across the southwest deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, reaching Warner's Ranch on 21 January 1847. By

the 29th of the month, Cooke was in San Diego, following the orders of General Kearny. The Mormons served as garrison troops for San Diego and San Luis Rey until their enlistments expired in July. In the interim, Cooke's battalion strengthened Kearny's hand; but they were not the deciding factor in putting an end to the political turmoil of Alta California. The issue was decided by the timely arrival of Commodore Stockton's relief.⁸

February 1847 was the most difficult month for the American occupation forces, for California had no central authority. Kearny remained at San Diego claiming to be commander-in-chief, Stockton was preparing his naval forces for an offensive against Baja California and the west coast of Mexico, while Frémont camped near Los Angeles with the title of governor and over 400 mounted riflemen to back him up. The situation was all too familiar to the Californians, as Hubert H. Bancroft noted in his volume on California in the years 1846-1848: "So accustomed had become the inhabitants to controversies between their civil and military chiefs that they would perhaps have questioned the legitimacy of a harmonious administration."⁹

Relief for California's confused political conditions arrived on 12 February at San Francisco in the form of Commodore Shubrick, Stockton's replacement. Accompanying him was Colonel Richard B. Mason of the First Dragoons, bearing orders from General Winfield Scott to General Kearny. These orders, dated 3 November 1846, directed Kearny to enroll Frémont's Battalion as volunteer troops and to establish a temporary civil government in California. Shubrick too brought orders from the Secretary of the Navy which reaffirmed those just received by Kearny--the senior land officer was the rightful commander-in-chief. Kearny and Shubrick conferred at Monterey in the last week of February

and worked out an agreement in the spirit of their respective orders, defining the duties of naval and military officers. The statement was issued on 5 March after the arrival of Shubrick's successor, Commodore Biddle, giving the Navy control over the ports and customs duties. The civil government and land forces were under the leadership of General Kearny, who now took the title of Governor of California. Stockton was given the choice by the Navy Department of remaining in the Pacific theater as second in command to Biddle or returning to the United States on board a warship. In the same spirit of insolence which caused him to defy a senior officer, he chose neither alternative; instead, the Commodore tried out his land legs and set out for Washington across the great American deserts in May 1847. All parties concerned in the dispute were placated by the joint declaration of 5 March save one; Frémont remained at Los Angeles claiming the governorship for himself.

With a copy of Kearny's proclamation of 5 March in hand, CPT Turner of the First Dragoons rode south personally to deliver word of the General's assumption of command to Frémont. He arrived on 11 March 1847, delivered the orders to Frémont, received a promise of compliance, and rode on to San Luis Rey to apprise LTC Cooke of the latest developments.

Central to the instructions delivered by Turner was an order to enroll Frémont's battalion as volunteers so that they could be discharged at Yerba Buena; prior to this, the California Battalion enjoyed a rather nebulous status as an irregular force of mounted men temporarily serving as a naval infantry unit ashore. Such were the arrangements under Commodore Stockton. With the assertion of authority by General Kearny, Frémont's men could no longer serve in this state. The explorer halfheartedly submitted the order to have the unit mustered to his men, but all refused to be enrolled. Frémont was certain of the loyalty of his

men, one reason he left the decision up to them rather than order them to enroll as volunteers. As a result, the explorer maintained his independence and continued to claim the title of governor. When LTC Cooke inquired as to the status of Frémont's men on 14 March, "Secretary of State" Russell, on behalf of "Governor" Frémont, responded that "the governor considers it unsafe at this time, when rumor is rife with a threatened insurrection, to discharge the battalion, and will decline doing so...." Frémont's rationale for retaining the battalion in its present condition centered on rumors, later proved to be unfounded, of a potential revolt by the Californians over supposed violations of the Treaty of Cahuenga and the approach of the Mormon Battalion, which caused some consternation among the Catholic residents of Los Angeles and San Diego. The revolt it seemed was a product of Frémont's imagination, while the Mormons were actually earning the respect of the residents of San Diego through community work and construction projects. Nonetheless, Frémont refused to muster his battalion and continued to issue orders and draw bills of exchange in the name of the United States, perpetuating the illusion that he remained governor of California. In fact, his orders carried little weight beyond the limits of Los Angeles.¹⁰

Frémont started north on 22 March to consult with General Kearny at Monterey on current affairs in California. He was anxious not only for his own position, but also to discover whether Kearny would assume the debts of the previous government, which he now represented. Frémont made the trip in four days, arriving on the evening of 25 March. The next day, with the good offices of Consul Larkin, LTC Frémont and General Kearny met to consider their differences. The General asked Frémont if he intended to obey his orders of 5 March, but the junior officer

hesitated. He was given one hour or one day to reconsider; Frémont returned at the end of an hour and promised obedience. During the one hour of grace he had tendered his resignation from the Army, but this was refused, leaving Frémont no alternative but to comply with the General's orders. The explorer returned to Los Angeles, arriving there on 29 March. Kearny was satisfied by the results of the meeting, but sent Colonel Mason to Los Angeles in early April to ensure Frémont's co-operation.

The explorer proved more difficult to subdue, however, for on the day after his departure for Monterey, "Secretary of State" Russell left Los Angeles bound for Washington with messages said to include a petition from residents of California asking that Frémont be made governor! This along with Frémont's friendly disposition toward the Californians supports the thesis that he acted primarily out of personal political interests, even after receiving Kearny's early-March orders.¹¹

LTC Philip St. George Cooke marched from San Diego to San Luis Rey in mid-March to post troops for the occupation of the province and retrieve two pieces of artillery belonging to the dragoons, then on loan to Frémont's battalion. Cooke, who had been appointed commandant of the southern district of California, called on CPT Owens of the California Battalion to see about the cannon. Owens was polite enough, but he claimed ignorance of Kearny's assumption of command and continued to follow specific orders from Frémont prohibiting him from releasing any men or equipment without the Lieutenant-Colonel's permission. Cooke insisted his orders be followed, but to no avail. He decided not to force the issue for fear of initiating a civil war: "It would be a signal of revolt. The general's orders are not obeyed!"¹² Cooke returned to San Luis Rey without his cannon.

The next conflict between a representative of the military government and the renegade Frémont came on 12 April 1847 when Colonel Mason demanded to see Frémont's civil and military records. Mason had arrived in the south about 7 April and had spoken with the explorer on several occasions prior to the 12th. Frémont provided the available records, though with some misgivings, and explained that the balance had been sent on to Washington with Mr. Russell. Mason also asked for horses for his return trip to Monterey. Frémont did not answer this request for two days and on the 14th refused to see two messengers sent by the superior officer to Frémont's headquarters. Bancroft considered this a reaction to being ordered about by Mason, but another account written by Stephen C. Foster, the alcalde of Los Angeles, ascribes Frémont's delay to more personal considerations:

As soon as Pryor and myself were alone after the quarrel, Pryor remarked that he never saw so much fuss made about a whore; that early in the morning as he came up to town he saw an old woman bring her daughter to Frémont's door. Frémont received her at the door and ordered the sentry to give admittance to no one until further orders.

When Pryor returned by Frémont's house the mother was still sitting there, and Mason's orderly was just going back to Pryor's house, and that was the cause of the whole difficulty.¹³

Whatever the cause for Frémont's tardiness, Mason became impatient with the younger officer at his headquarters later that day; harsh words were exchanged, resulting in a challenge to a duel by Frémont, Mason's acceptance, and the choice of double-barreled shotguns as the weapons. The combat never took place, however, since General Kearny issued orders strictly forbidding it.¹⁴

Frémont now found himself a man without an office and grudgingly yielded to the authority of General Kearny. He took his time in discharging the California Battalion, however, and it seems

that the last contingent left the service on 19 April. Frémont then requested permission to rejoin his regular Army unit, the Mounted Rifles, serving with Taylor in Mexico. Kearny denied this request and ordered the hapless explorer to accompany him back to Fort Leavenworth. The General and his unwilling prisoner left California on 31 May 1847 and arrived at the Missouri River outpost on 22 August. That same day Kearny placed Frémont under arrest and ordered him to report to the Adjutant General in Washington within a month to face a court-martial on charges of mutiny and disobedience of orders.

Over the course of the two-and-a-half month trial, testimony from most of the major participants in the conquest of California led to the conviction of Frémont on all counts and specifications of the charges against him. The board of officers suggested, however, that the sentence be remitted due to the confused circumstances in California and Frémont's previous record of distinguished service in the exploration of the west. President Polk agreed and the punishment of dismissal from the service was dropped; but Frémont remained dissatisfied for the court-martial still found him guilty, something the young officer could not tolerate. He resigned his commission on 14 March 1848 and returned to the Pacific coast the following year to manage a large private rancho and make his mark in California politics.

During the month of April 1847 more reinforcements for the American occupation forces arrived in California--this time by sea. In July 1846, President Polk had authorized a special regiment of volunteers to be raised in New York for service in California. What made this unit unique was its term of enlistment for the duration of the war, and its point of discharge--California. The man chosen to command the regiment was John D. Stevenson, a veteran New York

politician with good commonsense, but no military experience. Recruiting for the 1st New York Volunteer Regiment began in July and ended in August when the men were taken to Governor's Island for basic military training. Public opposition to the project became widespread in July when the regiment's mission was made known; President Polk's claim that the war was defensive and intended to "conquer a peace" no longer held true, for the New York Volunteers were an obvious agent of American imperialism. This was probably one factor leading to the unpopularity of the war in New England and the raising of but one regiment in the state of New York, where seven were called for. The New Yorkers still served Polk's purposes as well as those of the promoters of "Manifest Destiny." One New York newspaper wrote of the regiment's mission on 6 September 1846:

...a fortnight more will probably find these pioneers in the cause of the advancement of human freedom, civilization and prosperity, on their way to the land of their hopes and future prospects. Arrived there, they will cause the 'wilderness to bud and blossom as the rose tree,' and plant the standard of the American government and enterprise upon the soil of California.¹⁵

Stevenson's regiment set sail from New York in September 1846 aboard four chartered ships, and arrived in California waters during March and April 1847. By 19 April the regiment, less a few deserters, was on garrison duty in Alta California. The timely arrival of the regiment's leading elements on 7 March strengthened Kearny's position in the argument between him and Fremont. Following the departure of General Kearny in May, Colonel Stevenson became deputy commander of the American forces under the new governor, Colonel Mason, and took charge of the southern department. The volunteers saw no action in Alta California although three companies were dispatched to Baja California to aid the navy in the reduction of several Mexican ports.¹⁶ The

companies that garrisoned Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Luis Rey took turns watching a pass in southern California against several rumored invasions by Mexican forces from Sonora. Mainly the New Yorkers engaged in a battle against the boredom of garrison life, and were successful in this endeavor until the discovery of gold in 1848.

The services of the 1st New York Volunteer Regiment were invaluable to the occupation of California as well as the growth of the new state during the 1850's and later. Most of the volunteers remained in California and contributed to the professions and politics.¹⁷

Once the controversy over the governorship of California had subsided the American armed forces reverted to more familiar duties. The days of boredom were alleviated by occasional forays into the countryside to chastise groups of Indians who began stealing from the ranchos in late March. The dragoons were best-suited for this task, but their numbers were insufficient to deal with the growing problem of Indian raids. Another small contingent of mounted men was raised from among the American settlers, as a volunteer unit in April, giving the Americans a better chance at protecting their new frontier. Still, General Kearny recommended to Washington a permanent garrison of 1,000 soldiers for California, most of whom should be mounted. Several forts were constructed by both volunteer and Regular Army troops to support the forces already in the province and provide accommodations for future garrisons. Fortifications were constructed at Los Angeles, San Diego, Monterey, and San Francisco during the year 1847. In a sense the occupation duties of the American forces in California after March 1847 were a return to "normalcy"; that is, a return to more routine frontier duties.

Colonel Mason's governorship was quiet compared to the difficulties of preceding months. Mason became the military governor following the departure of General Kearny in May 1847. As Governor, Mason was faced with several rumored invasions of Alta California during the summer of 1847, which he discounted almost immediately. This is not to say that the governor took this talk of renewed insurrection lightly. Mason firmly believed that the population of southern California would revolt at the slightest invasion from Sonora, requiring a third campaign to pacify the Californios. But no invasion materialized; and the rumors proved to be no more real than those Frémont used to justify his continued rule in Los Angeles.

This left Colonel Mason with little else to do in California save preside over the changing of the guard, so to speak, when the Mormon Battalion and Colonel Stevenson's Regiment were mustered out. The Mormons' term of service expired in July 1847. Although the governor, and General Kearny prior to his departure, encouraged the Mormons to re-enlist for another year, there were few takers. As a result, 240 men of LTC Cooke's Battalion were released from service on 16 July. A little less than 60 men signed up for another term of service, and were sent to San Diego where their public service in cleaning up the town prompted the citizens of that community to sign a petition asking the governor to retain the Mormons as San Diego's garrison. The men who were dismissed in July split into two groups; one party of Mormons departed for the newly found settlement at Salt Lake in the fall of 1847, the other remained in California to work for a while, make some money, and then go on to their new Canaan.¹⁷ The services rendered by the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican-American War were eulogized by the unit's commander, Captain Philip St. George Cooke, who compared their performance to a better-known feat: "Bonaparte crossed the Alps,

but these men [the Mormons] have crossed a continent." The role of the Mormons in garrisoning California before the arrival of Stevenson's Regiment was also vital to the occupation.¹⁸

The First New York Volunteer Regiment, which had been raised for the duration of the war, remained on active duty in California until fall 1848. During the approximately 18 month period that Stevenson's men served, most of the regiment engaged in garrison duty; from Sonoma in the north to Los Angeles in the south, the New Yorkers guarded against revolt and protected the property of the Californians. When word of gold discovered on Sutter's Ranch reached San Francisco in May 1848, men in the northern settlements set out to make their fortunes in the mines. The volunteers succumbed to the lure of great riches as well. CPT Brackett, commander of the garrison at Sonoma, reported 63 men available for duty on 30 April 1848, but found only 28 men answering the roll call three months later. Desertion became the greatest problem of the American occupation forces after May 1848. Not even the regulars of Company F, Third Artillery, which had arrived in March with part of the New York Regiment, were immune. Despite severe measures to deter desertion (including branding and loss of pay), soldiers continued to make their way up the Sacramento in search of gold. Fortunately, the population remained quiescent and no Mexican invasions appeared on the distant horizon of Sonora to disrupt the peaceful existence of America's new territory. Stevenson's Regiment was finally mustered out between 15 August and 26 October after news of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo reached Alta California. President Polk's gamble of sending an armed force around South America by sea had paid off and would continue to return great profits to the United States because many of the soldiers turned civilian became prominent

leaders in the fledging state of California.¹⁹

The Treaty ending the Mexican-American War was signed at Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848, and accepted by the United States Congress in a modified form in March. The war officially ended on 30 May when Mexico accepted the modified treaty. Word of the treaty reached Monterey on 6 August prompting Governor Mason to issue a decree the following day on the new status of California as an American territory. The Governor contrasted the province's past with the benefits to be gained from American rule:

From this new order of things there will result to California a new destiny. Instead of revolutions and insurrections, there will be internal tranquility; instead of a fickle and vacillating policy, there will be a firm and stable government, administering justice with impartiality and punishing crime with the strong arm of power. The arts and sciences will flourish, and the labor of the agriculturist, guided by the lamp of learning, will stimulate the earth to the most bountiful production. Commerce, freed from the absurd restrictions formerly imposed will be greatly extended; the choked-up channels of trade will be opened, and the poisoned fountains of domestic faction forever dried up.²⁰

Mason's decree sounded like an editorial preaching the gospel of "Manifest Destiny" to the American people. The notion of progress so much a part of America's sense of mission in the world is evident in the preceding passage.

And so it seemed to the inhabitants of California, both natives and Americans alike, that United States' rule was a change for the better. In the 13 months ending in October 1848, \$120,000 in duties on commercial shipping had been collected. From April 1847 to April 1848, 85 merchant vessels called at California ports, more than double the traffic before the war. Consul Thomas Larkin reported the great increase in trade and a change in the dominance of the Boston traders from earlier years:

...the commerce of California had trebled within a year. The regular traders of many years' standing from Boston appear to have retired from the trade, which is now carried on by transient vessels from the Sandwich Islands, South America, and the United States.²¹

Mason's prophecy of stable government also appeared to be borne out by the tranquility of American rule. Mexican laws and rule by *alcaldes*, although these men were now Americans, remained the form of government during the occupation. Prominent Californians were named to secondary posts in the civil government, while the influx of American immigrants gradually made the Californians a minority. These factors contributed to the ease of transition from a nominally Mexican province to a territory of the United States.²¹ In dealing with the Californians it seemed best to adopt a conciliatory policy, or at least one that respected their tradition of independence and their anti-authoritarian character. General Kearny thought this one of his better decisions, believing that the acceptance of "a mild and conciliatory course toward the Californians" as delineated by the Treaty of Cahuenga prevented the Californians from finding great fault with their American rulers. Rather than reject Kearny and his men, as had been done to the Mexican General Micheltorena in 1845, the Californians patiently awaited the changes promised by their new masters. If LTC Frémont contributed anything to the success of American aims in California, other than confusion, it was the Treaty of Cahuenga.

Part of the problem in determining who should control the military forces and government of California after 14 January 1847 emanated from a source over 2,000 miles away. The orders issued by the Department of the Navy and the War Department failed to make clear which branch of the service had priority in establishing a government.

Commodore Stockton acted under orders issued in 1845 which said, in essence, "take California." What they failed to say was what should be done once the province was in American hands; thus, Stockton formed a civil government, which he had no authority to create, and felt justified in claiming power by right of conquest. General Kearny acted on orders from the president and the War Department which superseded Stockton's orders by nearly a year. When the directives from Washington that clarified the situation arrived in March 1847, one outdated set of orders from the Navy Department instructed the senior naval officer to form a civil government: "This occupation of California will bring with it the necessity of a civil administration. Such government should be established under your protection."²² These commands were dated 12 July 1846, more than a month after Kearny's mission to march on to California was known. The Secretary of the Navy acted either out of ignorance of Kearny's orders from the president, or someone failed to tell him of the Army expedition's orders when he signed the letter of 12 July. Better co-ordination of the separate arms of the armed forces might have prevented the collision between Stockton and Kearny.

Another factor that played an important role in the Stockton-Kearny controversy was General Kearny's physical and mental condition at the time of his arrival in California. One should remember that Kearny arrived at San Diego in a weakened condition after suffering wounds at San Pascual. Kearny himself knew that he was in no condition to take command of American forces in California. The majority of American fighting men in the province at the time were sailors serving temporarily as infantry. These two facts taken together are probably the best explanations for the General's initial reluctance to assert

his authority in December 1846, as Dwight L. Clarke has suggested in his biography of Kearny.

Stockton's refusal to yield to the superior officer can be attributed to his argument that California was his by right of conquest, that he had set up a civil government (which was actually nothing more than military rule with another name), and his belief that by not taking command immediately, Kearny had relinquished command to the Commodore. Stockton was a very proud officer, patrician in both behavior and tastes, and probably would not have yielded to Kearny until relieved of his command--which is precisely what happened. Lack of clear orders from the nation's capital was one problem, the interaction of very different personalities in California another. Both played an important part in creating the conflict between two officers of different branches of service, with the same goal--the conquest of California.

John C. Frémont's role in the Stockton-Kearny conflict is more difficult to explain. Until Stockton's dismissal, Frémont's support of the Commodore was apparently based upon loyalty to the man who made him governor. Frémont's connection to the influential Senator Benton also appeared to be a cause of his defiance of Kearny's orders during January and February 1847. After the relief of Stockton in March 1847, Frémont continued to chart an independent course based upon the office the commodore had given him. Dr. John S. Griffin of the First Dragoons expressed the opinion that the explorer was seeking prominence and political leverage with the Californians: "Frémont's thirst for glory, and Stockton's--I wont [sic] say what--but I only wish I could marry a Senators [sic] daughter. I might then set at defiance the orders of my superiors and do as I pleased."²² Of course the issue in January remained

who was Frémont's legitimate superior, but after early March 1847, there should have been no question. Stockton was succeeded by Shubrick, then Biddle, yet Frémont continued to act as governor at Los Angeles. The explorer's political ambitions were probably the main reason for his continued disobedience of orders. Bancroft documented Frémont's behavior while at Los Angeles; Frémont had made many friends (and enemies as well), adopted local manners of dress, and sent a petition supposedly signed by all the residents of Los Angeles to Washington, asking that Frémont be made governor. Frémont was a victim both of circumstances (because he had to choose between two superior officers), and his own ambitions. In the end, his desire for prominence among the Californians caused his downfall in the court-martial that drove him from the service.

As for the American occupation of California until August 1848, the problems faced by Governor Mason were dealt with most expediently. Shortages of food and pay during the first few months of 1847 were alleviated by shipments from the Sandwich Islands and the increased shipping in California ports. Although the government was proclaimed to be a civil one, the alcaldes who ruled California's towns were either military men or elected from a few eligible American settlers. Theodore Grivas deals with this period of California history in his book Military Governments in California and rightly points out that no civil government operated in California until after the creation of a Territorial government in late 1849. By that time the great influx of American immigrants and fortune seekers had increased the population to the point that popular sentiment demanded the formation of a state. This was accomplished in 1850 after a great debate in the Congress resulting in one of the last compromises between free states and slave.

In the short span of four years, The United States had acquired a port on the Pacific due to the efforts of a small number of sailors, soldiers, and frontiersmen who carried the banner of "Manifest Destiny" across the continent, planting it firmly in the soil of California.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Theodore Grivas, Military Governments in California, 1846-1850, (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), p. 85.
- ²Ibid., p. 65.
- ³Dwight L. Clarke, Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 259.
- ⁴Hubert Howe Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886), pp. 424-425.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 427.
- ⁶Clarke, Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West, pp. 263-268.
- ⁷Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, p. 471.
- ⁸Ibid., pp. 471-495. See also Philip St. George Cooke, The Conquest of New Mexico and California, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1878). Reprint edition, (Chicago: The Rio Grande Press Inc., 1964).
- ⁹Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, p. 411.
- ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 436-445.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 445.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 446.
- ¹³Quoted in Theodore Grivas, Military Governments in California, 1846-1850, pp. 77-78, footnote.
- ¹⁴Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, pp. 446-447.
- ¹⁵Donald C. Biggs, Conquer and Colonize, (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1977), p. 50.
- ¹⁶For an account of the war in the Baja see K. Jack Bauer, Surfboats and Horsemarines, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1969), and Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., ed., The Mexican War in Baja California, The Diary of Henry W. Halleck, (Los Angeles, CA: Dawson's Book Shop, 1977).
- ¹⁷Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, pp. 495-498.
- ¹⁸Daniel Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846-1847, Reprint of 1881 edition, (Chicago: The Rio Grande Press Inc., 1964), pp. 279-290.

¹⁹See Biggs, Conquer and Colonize.

²⁰Bancroft, Bancroft's Works, vol. 22, p. 591.

²¹Grivas, Military Governments in California, p. 188.

²²Griffin, A Doctor Comes to California, in Carlos E. Cortes, ed., The United States Conquest of California, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 70.

CHAPTER VI

"A BRIGHT STAR IN OUR UNION"

Some Concluding Thoughts on the Campaign in Alta California

We come to scatter then abroad, rich seed, which sown,
shall be,
Productive of a happy race, a people wise and free.

W.M., a soldier of the
1st New York Volunteers

The Mexican-American War in California has not been overlooked by historians, but it has not been given its due either. Most tomes written on the war as a whole neglect the campaigns in California, New Mexico, and the western coast of the Mexican Republic, discounting these minor affairs as a "side-show." Justin H. Smith, whose 1919 work on the Mexican-American War was considered the definitive treatment of the subject for many years, devoted but two chapters to the war in California.¹ K. Jack Bauer has written two books on this period of American history, which, taken together, probably provide the best analyses of the war published to date. He included three chapters on the war in California in one book, and a very fine, detailed treatment of the naval war in California along with the attendant land campaigns in the other.² Yet the war for the west was a very important part of the Mexican-American War as well as the general westward movement of the American people, and it deserves a fuller treatment on both counts.

One contemporary who recognized the value of the American military efforts in the west was LTC Philip St. George Cooke, who published his memoirs of the conquest of New Mexico and California in 1878. As a participant in the war in the west, Cooke believed that the Army of the West and his Mormons were the "unsung heroes" of the Mexican-American War. The western theater, he argued, produced more permanent results than the campaigns of Generals Taylor and Scott. One passage taken from the preface of his book illustrates both the problems faced by the men who served in the western theater of operations, as well as the obscurity of their efforts:

The conquerors were, for a year, almost beyond communication with government or countrymen, and these were wholly interested in the battles in Mexico; and thus it happened that a few soldiers and sailors, without sympathy or applause, achieved the only permanent fruits of the war.⁵

There are certain elements of truth in Cooke's statement. While the soldiers and sailors who fought in California and other western departments were nearly out of touch with the federal government, one can be sure that members of the government, especially the president, took a keen interest in the results of the military and naval operations directed against California. President Polk was not only elected on an expansionist platform, but he personally authorized the formation of the Army of the West, the Mormon Battalion, and the 1st New York Volunteer Regiment. The military campaigns of Generals Taylor and Scott in the east were certainly more "glamorous" than the activities on the Pacific coast, and thus were important because they assured a de jure recognition of the de facto conquest of Alta California. The "permanent fruits of the war" may have been picked off the Mexican "tree" by the American forces in California and New

Mexico, but they could not be partaken of until the Mexicans agreed to give them up. This would not have been possible without Scott's campaign in the Mexican heartland.

With the American victory in 1848 came a tremendous influx of citizens and immigrants determined to make their fortunes in the gold mines of the Sacramento River Valley and elsewhere. The rise of the gringo brought on the decline of the ranchero; for it did not take long before land speculators and new laws replaced the less formal Spanish system of granting large tracts of land with little documentation to support the grants. As a result, many of the wealthy aristocratic families of ante-bellum days were displaced by Americans with little regard for local customs. From the Californian perspective the Americanos were grasping and covetous. Although their lands had been guaranteed under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the provisions of this part of the treaty were later dropped, thus the way was clear for the "yeoman farmers" to establish themselves by dismembering the great ranchos of California, particularly those in the north near San Francisco. Through a kind of "squatters rights" imperialism, Americans had made their way across the continent since the beginning of the century. It was the same kind of imperialism on a local level which brought to an end the "halcyon days" of the California rancheros.⁴

The great social and economic changes that occurred in Alta California as a result of the war were a vital part of the westward movement of American citizens and the soldiers who accompanied them. Even before the arrival of men in search of gold the non-Spanish, white population had increased dramatically. The number of these individuals rose from 680 to 4,200 in the three-year period 1845 to

1848. According to Hubert Howe Bancroft, of these 3,520 newcomers, 2,020 came as soldiers, both volunteers and regulars.⁵ Not all of them stayed in California, but a large portion, mainly Stevenson's Regiment, did make California their home. Many of these men became prominent in California government and society in the years following the Mexican-American War, as Donald C. Biggs demonstrates in his book on Stevenson's Regiment.⁵ American military and naval forces not only made possible the changes which took place after the war, but were a vital part of those changes as well.

The forces that brought about the migrations of American settlers during the 1830's and 40's were the stirrings of nationalism and confidence in the institutions of the United States. These, added to the earlier commercial interests which originally brought California to the attention of Americans, made the acquisition of the province an obsession. California became a focal point of American immigration largely as a result of internal factors, as well as the external threat posed to the expansion of the Republic by Great Britain. The settlers themselves viewed this westward movement as something that had been predistined; California became for many a land of milk and honey, a new promised land. Rev. Walter Colton mentioned this fact in his diary after talking to a newly arrived American settler. The immigrant felt that the current war to take possession of California was completely justified and compared the Americans to the Israelites in Palestine. Colton wrote:

But I find this kind of parallel running in the imagination of all the Imigrants [sic]. They seem to look upon this beautiful land as their own Canaan, and the motley race around them as Hittites, the Hivites, and Jubusites, whom they are to drive out. But they have gone at it with other weapons than ram's horns, except as powder-flasks.⁷

The belief that the United States was the most perfect of governments ever conceived not only instilled the population with a national feeling, called "Manifest Destiny" for lack of a better term, but it also served the interests of politicians determined to make the nation a force to be reckoned with in regional, if not world, affairs.

The spirit of "Manifest Destiny" accompanied the volunteer soldiers of the 1st New York Regiment as well. Edward Gilbert, a private in the Regiment, wrote of the popular perception of the expedition and the advantages to be gained from the conquest of California:

He [the volunteer] knows that his country looks upon him as the pioneer in an undertaking which is to make his beloved republic the greatest nation on earth-- which is to shower into her lap the profits of half the commerce of the world; and which is to extend the benefits and blessings of education and republicanism over three-fourths of the continent of North America.⁸

It would be more accurate to say that Gilbert's passage reflected the volunteers' perception of their own role in the war, rather than a popular one, because the expedition was controversial in a war which was intended to "conquer a peace," not territory. His comments on the commercial benefits to be reaped from the conquest of far-off California not only show the yard-stick by which greatness was measured in the 19th century, but also reflects the confidence and pride of a young nation.

The Mexican-American War in California was, to paraphrase Walter Colton, not on a large scale; but it impinged upon the province at certain points with terrific energy.⁹ Most of those points were in the south, for California north of Santa Barbara was secured at little cost in men and materiel. Following the bloodless conquest of the northern settlements in July 1846, the only resistance to American

rule came from disgruntled rancheros who were defending their property from the privateering volunteers. The freebooting procurement methods of LTC Fremont's California Battalion did not endear the Americans to the Californios, but most seemed willing to give the new masters of the province a chance to improve on the chaotic conditions of the previous 25 years.

The war in California south of Santa Barbara and north of the Baja was much more active, and in the long run proved decisive. Los Angeles had long been the seat of rebellion under the Spanish and Mexican administrations of California and proved equally troublesome to the Americans. Commodore Stockton's strict military laws were responsible for the revolt that drove CPT Gillespie from the ciudad. Once the rebellion became an accomplished fact, Stockton and Fremont were faced with an enemy well acquainted with the natural strength of their home province. Distances and supplies were the real enemies of the American naval and military forces in California, and the Californians used this knowledge to their advantage by adopting a "scorched earth" policy to deny their foe the mobility and sustenance needed to advance into the interior. But in true Californian style, even this attempt to keep valuable livestock from the Americans failed; by January 1847, the Americans at San Diego had scraped together enough cattle and war materiel to launch a successful campaign on Los Angeles. When the Californios failed to keep supplies from the Americans, largely because they could not overcome their own divisiveness, not even their best efforts could keep Stockton from taking Los Angeles.

The nature of the war fought between the Americans and the Californios was also determined by the long-term historical development of opposing military institutions. The mounted militia force which met the invasion of 1846 was the product of several decades of neglect by Spanish and Mexican governments, as well as the apathy of the native population toward war. More than two decades of factional strife between the northern and southern aristocratic families created this distaste for armed conflict on the part of the Californians. In the end, the lack of resources to create an effective fighting force and the divisiveness of the Californians led to their downfall.

American military forces that served in California were the product of English military traditions modified by little more than 50 years of frontier fighting west of the Appalachians. The naval elements of the California expedition had a tradition of guerre de course against Great Britain and France, and, more recently, several years of patrolling duties in waters of commercial interest to the United States around the world. The Americans were better equipped, better led, and instilled with the patriotic fervor of a crusading army about to enlighten a hitherto barbaric people with the ways of civilization. The naval and military forces of Commodore Stockton and General Kearny worked surprisingly well together in Alta California, personal differences aside. Not only did the two branches of the military services work well with each other, but in the final campaign against Los Angeles they were joined by a number of volunteers whose only previous experience with arms had been on the frontier, pushing the boundaries of the United States ever westward toward the

Pacific. These three "branches" coalesced into an effective fighting force for the duration of combat operations for a little more than a month from December 1846 to January 1847. The Americans were united in their purpose, unlike the Californians, and differed only in the leadership under which they would rule once the peace had been won. The most important element in American military development as far as the California campaign was concerned, especially for the relatively young dragoon force, was the frontier experience of the 19th century. The United States Army was engaged in operations along the western frontier of the nation as settlers moved across the continent. They fought alongside pioneers, who served as volunteers in California under Frémont. As a result, the frontier played an important role in forming the military forces which came to Alta California in 1846.

American arms were successful wherever they could be supported by artillery and bring their superior small-arms fire to bear against the enemy. Such was the case at the battles of the San Gabriel River and the Mesa. The steady fire from the American infantry square drove off several charges by the Californian cavalry forces. The two notable setbacks at the Dominguez Rancho and San Pascual occurred because artillery was lacking in the first instance and the dragoons had to rely on their sabres rather than their carbines in the second. The differences in the historical patterns of development of the two opposing armies was clear at San Pascual; the Californians relied on the lance and reata (lasoo), both reliable weapons from the Spanish frontier experience, while their American counterparts had to use their secondary weapons rather than the Hall's Carbine. The long-term historical development of both frontier institutions then, is an important factor in explaining the American

defeat at San Pascual.¹⁰

The dragoons had been in existence for about 13 years by the time the war with Mexico had broken out. Inexperience in combat might be one excuse for the poor showing at San Pascual, but it might also be argued that already a distinct American "way of war," to borrow a phrase from historian Russell Weigley, was in the early stages of development;¹¹ the dragoons relied on firepower as opposed to melee combat, although they were also trained as cavalry and certainly did not lack the courage to engage in hand-to-hand fighting. When their superior musketry was rendered useless by the dampness at San Pascual, the Californians took a heavy toll of the American soldiers. If the Californios had had more resources at their disposal and less dissension among the rank and file of their forces, the conquest of California might have been much more costly.

The Californians might have failed to negotiate a favorable settlement to the confused situation in Alta California during the summer of 1846, but the terms they received in the Capitulation of Cahuenga more than made up for the lost opportunity. This treaty was John C. Frémont's greatest contribution to the American war effort; his other accomplishments such as spending thousands of dollars during his tenure as governor and disobeying the orders of a superior, were not so great. The terms of the treaty were so lenient that several American participants observed a rather haughty air about the Californians, some claimed that the Californians boasted of dictating the terms of the instrument of their own surrender. That the terms were lenient cannot be argued, but the most unusual thing about the treaty was the way in which it was negotiated. Frémont had no authority to make a peace agreement with the enemy, and his superior was only a

few miles away when he did so. Kearny sent several notes to Frémont which were answered by the "Pathfinder's" triumphant entry into Los Angeles on 14 January with the Capitulation of Cahuenga in hand. Frémont had apparently received Kearny's letters, but chose to ignore them for some reason or other. Frémont was a very independent character, not prone to taking orders from anybody, much less an army general who had subordinated himself to a navy commodore. It may have seemed natural to Frémont that he should be the one to receive the credit for bringing the war to an end since he had been the target of Californian criticism, which led to the outbreak of hostilities in Alta California in the first place. The favorable terms of the treaty also advanced his political influence in the province in his reign as governor, and the explorer may have had his eye turned toward post-war politics as well. Frémont was, after all, one of the first senators from California during the 1850's, and won the Whig nomination for the presidency in 1856. Nonetheless, Frémont's wartime experience in California won him a court-martial instead of the glory which he had sought.

The American occupation of Alta California, although initially characterized by disagreements not unlike those that had plagued the Californians for years, seemed to bear out the proclamations made by Stockton, Kearny, and Mason. Both men declared that real peace would come to California under American rule and progress would be made in commerce and industry. This was the essence of the American dream that was being played out across the continent; from Texas to California, American settlers were bringing the ways of civilization to the virgin forests and deserts of North America. Some men in Congress became bold enough to suggest that the United States should absorb Canada and all of Mexico in an attempt to bring the superior

institutions of America to the entire continent. The proponents of "Manifest Destiny" were at the height of their power in the 1840's, and later succeeded in extending the American dream of progress overseas in the late 19th century. The realities of American progress were quite different than the dream as the Californians quickly found out in the years following the war.

And what of California's role in the rising "American Empire"? The United States had its port on the Pacific by 1848 and utilized it to improve trade relations with the Far East. San Francisco became a bustling port city with merchantmen and whaling ships coming and going throughout the year. Gold brought thousands of settlers to the territory, many of whom remained as farmers and workers when California became a state. California was becoming "a bright star in our Union," in the words of General Kearny. His impression of America's new gains were prophetic:

California with Oregon is destined to supplant the Sandwich Islands and will furnish our six hundred whaling vessels and our twenty thousand sailors in them, besides our Navy and our troops with the bread-stuffs and most of the other articles they are to consume....¹²

Unfortunately, the General did not live long enough to see the province he helped win for his country surpass the Pacific Islands in importance as he predicted. Kearny died in 1849, shortly after the court-martial of LTC Fremont.

The conquest of Alta California took the American frontier to the natural boundary of which the adherents of Manifest Destiny had so long spoken--the Pacific Ocean. The effort to subdue the province was no mean feat, as this paper has attempted to show. One of the most important achievements of the several expeditions sent across

the continent in 1846 was the building of the "wagon road," which was little better than a trail, by the Mormon Battalion. The consumation of this act fulfilled one of the earliest myths of the American frontier, the building of a road across the deserts, and made it reality. This was a popular notion given some substance by the Lewis and Clark expedition just after the turn of the century, and supported by later pioneer treks in the 1840's. SGT Daniel Tyler of the Mormon Battalion felt that "the crowning satisfaction of all to us was that we had succeeded in making the great national highway across the American desert," a reality.¹³

America had two frontiers as a result of the war for the west; the one pushed west from the Mississippi River and Kansas plains, the other moved eastward from California. Not too many years after the Mexican-American War, in 1869 to be precise, east and west met when the transcontinental railroad was completed. This fulfilled the dreams of a prominent American Senator, one Thomas Hart Benton, who envisioned a great continental trading power whose two "wharves," (the east and west coasts), would one-day be tied together by rail lines. The pioneers and soldiers who went west in the 1840's made this dream a reality as well.

ENDNOTES

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⁷Walter Colton, Three Years in California, (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1850). Reprint edition, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 118.

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WAR FOR THE WEST: ALTA CALIFORNIA IN
THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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The Mexican-American War brought the second largest increment of territory to the United States during the nineteenth century. Historians have written many books on the subject, yet few have concentrated on the course of the war west of the Mississippi River, especially the campaign in Alta California. This thesis is an attempt to draw together ~~some~~ of the material that has been published on the war in California, and examine the activities of the American military and naval forces which fought for control of that Pacific province.

California was settled by the Spanish in 1769 as a military outpost to protect New Spain from British and Russian advances in the northwest. Colonization proved difficult, however, because California lay so far from the Internal Provinces of Spain's New World empire. The Spanish military presence was effective in pacifying the native Indians, but did little to protect the province from sea-borne invasions. The disruption of communications with New Spain during the Mexican Revolution of 1810-1821 caused a further decline of the military forces in California, thus permitting the development of an independent government. California remained tied to Mexico culturally, but the Californians readily rejected any Mexican governor who displeased them.

American interest in California resulted from the search for a Pacific port to increase commercial relations with China. The first American settlers in the province were, in fact, New England merchants. The steady westward movement of Americans during the 1830's and 40's found a natural boundary for the United States on the shores of the Pacific. Stirred by mercantile interests and a sense of nationalism which was expressed in the rhetoric of "Manifest Destiny," the United States government made the acquisition of California a goal of its foreign policy.

The United States Pacific Squadron intervened in California during a civil war between American settlers and the Californians. This resulted in a seemingly easy conquest and the setting up of a military government in August

1846. The Californians revolted in September, however, and were not subdued until January 1847. The American forces which conducted the final campaign consisted of naval infantry under the command of Commodore Robert F. Stockton; dismounted dragoons who had traveled across the continent under General Stephen W. Kearny; and American frontiersmen and settlers under LTC John C. Fremont.

The occupation of Alta California became confused when Commodore Stockton and General Kearny both claimed to be the military governor. This controversy resulted from a series of unclear orders emanating from Washington, D.C., and the Commodore's refusal to yield to the authority of a superior officer. The difficulty ended in March 1847 with the arrival of Commodores Shubrick and Biddle, who relieved Stockton and agreed to divide the duties of occupation with General Kearny, according to more recent orders. LTC Fremont, who had sided with Stockton in the dispute, was later court-martialed for refusing to follow the orders of General Kearny.

The course of the Mexican-American War in California amply illustrates the difficulties involved in co-ordinating the activities of military and naval forces operating far from home. The war was also a clash between the frontier forces of California and the United States, each of which had developed from distinct military traditions, and responses to the unique nature of their own frontiers. The United States was successful because the Californians had not the resources to put up effective resistance, and the desire on their part to find an alternative to the years of factional strife which preceded the coming of the Americans in 1846.