

WAR FLAGS INTO PEACE FLAGS:  
THE RETURN OF CAPTURED MEXICAN BATTLE FLAGS DURING THE TRUMAN  
ADMINISTRATION

by

ETHAN M. ANDERSON

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Charles W. Sanders, Jr.

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## **Abstract**

On September 13, 1950, in a culmination of three years of efforts by organizations and individuals inside and outside the Harry S. Truman administration, 69 captured battle flags from the Mexican-American War were formally returned to the Mexican government at a ceremony in Mexico City. The events surrounding the return of flags to Mexico occurred in two distinct phases. The first was a small, secretive, and largely symbolic return of three flags conceived and carried out by high-ranking U.S. government officials in June 1947. The second large-scale, public return of the remaining flags in the custody of the War Department was initiated by the American Legion and enacted by the United States Congress. Despite their differences, both returns were heavily influenced by contemporary events, primarily the presidential election of 1948 and the escalation of the Cold War. Also, although the second return was much more extensive than the President originally intended, it was only through his full support that either return was accomplished.

In the decades since 1950, historians have either ignored the return of Mexican battle flags or focused instead on Truman's wreath laying at the monument to the niños héroes in Mexico City in March 1947. This study, for the first time, provides an in-depth description of the efforts to return captured Mexican battle flags and explains why these war trophies were returned while others have remained in the United States. The goal of this investigation is to present the efforts of the Truman administration for what they truly were: an unprecedented act of international friendship. Although the actions of the U.S. government and private organizations were partially influenced by self-interest and Cold War fears, their primary motivation was a sincere desire to erase the painful memories surrounding the Mexican-

American War of 1846-1848 in an effort to improve future relations between the two countries.

Many historians point to the Truman administration as the end of the Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America. This study, however, argues that the return of captured Mexican battle flags represents the true pinnacle of the United States' Good Neighbor Policy toward its southern neighbor.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents,  
Jeff and Maureen Anderson

## Introduction

On March 3, 1947, for the first time in history, a President of the United States set foot in Mexico City. Harry Truman's arrival in the capital was greeted by hundreds of thousands of cheering Mexicans who gave the president a welcome unlike anything he had ever previously experienced.<sup>1</sup> However, Mexican adoration of Truman increased immeasurably the next day when, in an unannounced stop at Chapultepec Castle, he laid a wreath at a monument dedicated to the niños héroes, six Mexican cadets who, 100 years earlier, had committed suicide rather than surrender to General Winfield Scott's invading U.S. Army.<sup>2</sup> The Mexican press and public went wild. Newspapers reported that the act "healed forever an old national wound," while one prominent Mexican engineer declared, "one hundred years of misunderstanding and bitterness wiped out by one man in one minute."<sup>3</sup> Later asked by American reporters why he had gone to the monument, Truman replied, "Brave men don't belong to any one country. I respect bravery wherever I see it."<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, when the President returned to the United States two days later, he continued to try to bind up the nations' wounds and erase Mexico's lingering feelings of humiliation and anguish over its loss during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. Although this task received far less publicity than Truman's simple wreath laying, it better

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<sup>1</sup> Harry S. Truman, Address in Mexico City (speech, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City, Mexico, March 3, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 542.

<sup>3</sup> Alfonso Taracena, *La Vida en México bajo Miguel Alemán* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1979), 105; Quoted in McCullough, *Truman*, 543.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in McCullough, *Truman*, 543.

represented the willingness and desire of his administration to improve relations with its southern neighbor.

Soon after the president's return to the United States, Truman and Major General Harry H. Vaughan, Truman's Military Aide, decided to return to Mexico the battle flags it lost during the Mexican-American War, the first time the United States had ever ventured to return symbols of defeat to a former foreign enemy.<sup>5</sup> The task would prove more difficult, delicate, lengthy, and ambitious than Truman had ever imagined. Although the President originally envisioned only giving a few flags to Mexican President Miguel Alemán Valdés during his visit to Washington, D.C., after three years, many intergovernmental debates, numerous consultations with Mexican authorities, and the passage of a Joint Resolution of Congress, Mexico was finally given back all of its captured battle flags in the custody of the U.S. government. However, not all war trophies were returned to Mexico. Nearly two dozen captured Mexican cannon continue to remain prominently displayed at the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY. Other war trophies, most notably General Antonio López de Santa Anna's cork legs, remain scattered in museums throughout the United States. These discrepancies raise an interesting question as to the roles and differing significances of war trophies, especially flags, in the identities of a nation and its military.

In the years since the Truman administration, attempts at exchanging battle flags from border conflicts between the United States and Mexico have not gone as smoothly as they did in 1947 and 1950. However, these cases reflect different underlying sentiments and do not represent a significant departure from the current generally amiable, though occasionally contentious, relations between the two countries partly begun by the actions of Presidents

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<sup>5</sup> "May Return Symbols of Defeat to Mexicans," *Seattle Daily Times*, October 30, 1949.

Truman and Alemán. There is no more tangible example of the desire for friendly relations between the two countries, not even Truman's laying of a wreath at the niños héroes monument, than the return of Mexican battle flags. The successful and respectful return of these flags would not have been possible without the Truman administration's patience and support. Therefore, despite his original vision of returning only a small number of flags as a symbolic gesture of friendship, Truman's willingness and cooperation to ensure the proper, dignified return of all Mexican battle flags in 1950 proved his desire for amicable relations between Mexico and the United States.

In the 60 years since the United States returned to Mexico its lost battle flags, historians on both sides of the border have failed to properly address the significance of this undertaking. While Mexican sources, including President Alemán's own writing, applaud Truman's wreath laying, the flag return is often overlooked.<sup>6</sup> American sources fare no better. From almost the minute the flags arrived on U.S. soil until their relinquishment a century later, American historians have told the flags' story with a variety of inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Few West Point histories even bother to mention the flags' 101 year residency at the U.S. Military Academy. Those that do often credit Gen. Scott or Secretary of War William Marcy with ordering the flags to be placed at West Point, rather than tracing the command back to its true author, President James K. Polk, and the 1814 Act of Congress which granted the president this authority.<sup>7</sup> Even those histories that exceptionally describe the flags' arrival at the U.S. Military

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<sup>6</sup> Taracena, *Vida en México*; Miguel Alemán Valdés, *Remembranzas y Testimonios* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> John Grant, James M. Lynch, and Ronald H. Bailey, *West Point: The First 200 Years: The Companion to the PBS Television Special* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2002), 18; Thomas J. Fleming, *West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1969), 126.

Academy, most notably George S. Pappas's *To the Point*, inaccurately date the flags' return to Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

Biographies of Harry Truman and works covering Mexican-American relations contain an even more abysmal reporting of the flag return. Most fail to mention the act at all, although coverage of Truman's wreath laying at the monument dedicated to the niños héroes receives only slightly better attention.<sup>9</sup> Countless errors are included in the foreign relations books which discuss the flag return, the most prevalent error stating that Truman returned some of the flags when he visited Mexico City in March 1947.<sup>10</sup> Other secondary works inaccurately date the return, credit Truman with proposing the idea, or falsely state that shortly after the ceremony in Mexico City, the Mexican government likewise relinquished its captured American flags from

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<sup>8</sup> George S. Pappas, *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 269; Pappas mistakenly lists 1948 as the year the United States gave back the captured battle flags.

<sup>9</sup> Biographies of Truman which fail to mention the return of battle flags to Mexico include McCullough, *Truman*; Robert Dalleck, *Harry S. Truman*, American Presidents Series (New York: Times Books, 2008); Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Caroline Evensen Lazo, *Harry S. Truman*, Presidential Leaders Series (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Company, 2003); Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Among the foreign relations studies, the following completely neglect the flag return: Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1995); Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Steven Schwartzberg, *Democracy and U.S. Policy in Latin America during the Truman Years* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Jorge I. Domínguez and Rafael Fernández de Castro, *The United States and Mexico: Between Partnership and Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Lester D. Langley, *Mexico and the United States: The Fragile Relationship* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994). Of all these works, only McCullough and Langley manage to include information on Truman's wreath laying.

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Pastor and Jorge G. Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship: The United States and Mexico* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 23; Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *The United States and Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 164; John Ross, *The Annexation of Mexico: From the Aztecs to the IMF: One Reporter's Journey through History* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998), 35, 113.

the Mexican-American War.<sup>11</sup> None of these statements are true. The purpose of this investigation, therefore, is to provide for the first time, an accurate, detailed account of the return of Mexican battle flags during the Truman administration. It also explains why the 1947 and 1950 returns occurred and situates both events within their historical context.

The first return of captured battle flags to Mexico was influenced by the upcoming presidential election of 1948. With early polls giving the president little chance of winning the election, Truman could not afford to risk alienating voters by pushing for a potentially controversial issue such as the return of war trophies to a former foreign enemy.<sup>12</sup> As the President only envisioned a limited exchange anyway, the return was kept small and largely a secret. Nevertheless, given the few Congressional debates on the issue and the support the return received from both Republicans and Democrats alike in 1950, a larger, public flag return would not have affected the President's reelection chances. As the Cold War escalated between 1947 and 1950, the influence of domestic issues on the flag return was quickly overshadowed by international issues.

In the eyes of American policymakers, it was imperative that Mexico not fall to communism for a number of different reasons. During World War II, Mexico had played a vital role in supplying both laborers and raw materials to American industries and these resources would again be needed if war erupted between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, Mexico's greatest significance did not lie in its abundance of labor and raw materials,

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<sup>11</sup> Jaime E. Rodríguez O. and Kathryn Vincent, *Myths, Misdeeds, and Misunderstandings: The Roots of Conflict in U.S.-Mexican Relations* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 192; Daniel James, *Mexico and the Americans* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 431; Despite its inaccuracies, James provides by far the best and most detailed account of the flag return of all secondary sources.

<sup>12</sup> Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 93.

but in its symbolic importance. Since U.S. policymakers viewed Latin America as the United States' sphere of influence, the fall of any country to communism, regardless of its strategic importance to the United States, would significantly decrease U.S. international prestige. Mexico's proximity to the United States meant that its fall would pose a particularly devastating and worrisome blow to U.S. security. Although the likelihood of a communist takeover in Mexico was remote, members of the Truman administration were fearful that such an outcome might occur. In 1946, amid worries of a potential food shortage in Mexico, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico George Messersmith warned President Truman that "there would be a revolution and the red flag in Mexico within three months if its wheat needs are not met."<sup>13</sup>

Mexico presented a unique dilemma for U.S. policymakers attempting to ensure Mexican political stability and continued support of U.S. foreign policy. Unlike other Latin American countries, with the exception of Costa Rica, by the 1940s, Mexico had succeeded in making its military subordinate to political authorities.<sup>14</sup> In order to maintain this subordination, the Mexican government refused to accept large amounts of U.S. military aid.<sup>15</sup> Thankfully, this non-cooperation did not damage U.S.-Mexican relations. Confident that Mexican officials were genuinely opposed to communism, the United States worked closely with Mexico on several endeavors, perhaps as a way to reward Mexico's anti-communist efforts as well as to maintain

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Langley, *Mexico and the United States*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Robert H. Holden, *Armies without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 225.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on Mexico's non-cooperation with U.S. military programs as well as an excellent coverage of U.S.-Mexican relations during the Truman administration, see Scott S. Mischka, "U.S.-Mexican Political and Economic Relations during the Truman Era: American Embassy Officials and the Continuation of the Good Neighbor Policy" (Ph.D. diss., Kansas State University, 2005).

steady economic advancement and thereby diminish communism's appeal south of the border.<sup>16</sup> Although the return of captured Mexican battle flags should be viewed as one of these efforts to keep communism out of Mexico, it was certainly not the only effort. During the Truman administration, U.S. officials sent technicians to help Mexico combat an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, helped build a new health center in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, helped guarantee that Mexico receive a \$150 million loan from the Export-Import Bank, and jointly developed the hydroelectric power plant at Falcon Dam on the Rio Grande.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. also supported further monetary loans for the development of Mexico's oil industry, a settlement of the Chamizal boundary dispute, an increase in air travel between the two countries, and numerous smaller issues.<sup>18</sup>

Many historians view the Truman administration's policy toward Latin America as marked by either indifference or the abandonment of the Good Neighbor Policy, the U.S. government's effort to improve relations with the region through nonintervention and friendship

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<sup>16</sup> Mischka, "U.S.-Mexican Political and Economic Relations," 138; During the Truman and Eisenhower presidencies, many U.S. policymakers began viewing poverty, not communism, as the true source of instability in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Schoultz, *National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Norris B. Dodd, cross reference sheet, October 19, 1949, Harry S. Truman Library (hereafter HST Library). OF 20, Box 139; Harry S. Truman, letter to President Miguel Alemán, March 24, 1952, HST Library. OF 146, Box 754; "De la Colina Thanks Truman in Person for Loan," *Novedades*, September 9, 1950; Cross reference sheet re: H.R. 5773, October 5, 1949, HST Library. OF 146, Box 754;

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Morse, cross reference sheet, March 6, 1950, HST Library. OF 20, Box 151; Walter Thurston, memorandum, March 5, 1947, HST Library. President's Secretary's Files, Trip File, 1945-1953, Box 88; Harry S. Truman, letter to President Miguel Alemán, July 15, 1947, HST Library. OF 146, Box 754; Assistance Given Mexico report, HST Library. PSF, General File, 1940-1953, Box 112. The Chamizal border dispute was a disagreement over which country held sovereignty over 600 acres of land between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua after the Rio Grande shifted its course southward in the mid-nineteenth century. The issue was finally settled in 1963.



that was developed during the Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt administrations.<sup>19</sup> However, this interpretation is incorrect, at least with regards to Mexico. Just as by traveling to Mexico City Truman physically went farther into Mexico than Roosevelt's 1943 trip to Monterrey, Truman politically went further than Roosevelt in bringing the Good Neighbor Policy to fruition. The most significant achievement of the Truman administration in advancing the Good Neighbor Policy, and therefore the pinnacle of this policy, was the return of Mexican battle flags. This unprecedented act of international friendship marked the greatest single attempt in either country's history to ameliorate the memories of the Mexican-American War and to prevent them from ever impeding U.S.-Mexican relations. Ultimately, it was the memories surrounding this conflict which shaped the return of captured Mexican battle flags and have prevented the exchange of other war trophies in the decades since 1950.

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Paul Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 1; The histories which argue this include: Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*; Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anti-Communism* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984). For more on the Good Neighbor Policy, see Irwin F. Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy: United States Policies in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Fredrick B. Pike, *FDR's Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995); Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

## **Chapter 1 – The Culture of Trophies of War: The Lasting Symbolism of Flags**

In order to understand why the Truman administration chose to return captured battle flags rather than other war trophies to Mexico in 1947 and 1950, one must first understand the role of battle flags in nineteenth-century warfare. The majority of the returned Mexican flags were not national colors, but regimental guidons. Thus, instead of serving as symbols of the Mexican nation, each flag was firmly steeped in the ethos of a particular regiment. It is only by analyzing the flags' significance in the lives of the soldiers who fought underneath them in the nineteenth century can the actions of the twentieth century, particularly the objections to the flags' return and amount of planning involved in their return, be fully explained and comprehended.

The return of battle flags during the Truman administration raises an important question about the role of war trophies, particularly flags, in the identities of nations and their militaries. Although the United States returned captured Mexican battle flags to its southern neighbor, physical reminders of the Mexican-American War continue to exist throughout the United States in museums and private hands. Perhaps the most notable of these war trophies are the two cork right legs of Mexican General Santa Anna, captured by the Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteers at the Battle of Cerro Gordo on April 18, 1847.<sup>20</sup> However, unlike the battle flags housed at West Point, Santa Anna's artificial legs are currently housed in the Illinois State

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<sup>20</sup> "Tazewell County Photo of the Month: The Tale of General Santa Anna's Leg," Tazewell County Genealogical & Historical Society, November 2000, <http://www.tcghs.org/photo1100.htm> (accessed April 16, 2009); Doug Kirby, Ken Smith, and Mike Wilkins, "Captured Leg of Santa Anna," <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/18808> (accessed April 16, 2009).

Military Museum in Springfield, Illinois and the Oglesvy Mansion in Decatur, Illinois, and are therefore under the immediate control of the state and not the federal government.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, the federal government could have conceivably passed a law in 1950 ordering all war trophies or confiscated goods from the Mexican-American War to be returned to Mexico. Unlike Maj. Gen. Vaughan's decision not to attempt to return privately-held war trophies in 1947, perhaps the Truman administration's 1950 decision not to pass such a law was due to a lack of desirability rather than feasibility. Congress had already acted above and beyond what Truman had originally envisioned by passing legislation to return all captured Mexican flags controlled by the Defense Department rather than simply three of the most significant flags. Although Truman had cooperated with this effort, he must have viewed any further efforts to return war trophies as exceeding his original intent and therefore, unnecessary.<sup>22</sup>

However, war trophies in museums and private hands are not the only physical reminders of the Mexican-American War which still remain in the United States as the Defense Department did not return all of its war trophies during the Truman administration. Nearly two dozen captured cannon from the war are prominently displayed at Trophy Point at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY. The reason why these impressive trophies have remained in the United States and not returned to Mexico may lie in their military roles. In the nineteenth

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<sup>21</sup> Kirby, Smith, and Wilkins, "Captured Leg of Santa Anna," <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/18808> (accessed April 16, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> A few attempts have been made by the Illinois state legislature to return the artificial legs to Mexico: the first in 1899 and the second in 1942. Although the Mexican government has requested that the legs be returned, despite Santa Anna's unpopularity in Mexico today, the legs continue to reside in Illinois; "General Santa Anna's Cork Leg," *New York Times*, March 28, 1899; Kirby, Smith, and Wilkins, "Captured Leg of Santa Anna," <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/18808> (accessed April 16, 2009); "Tazewell County Photo of the Month," Tazewell County Genealogical & Historical Society, November 2000, <http://www.tcghs.org/photo1100.htm> (accessed April 16, 2009).

century, like today, cannon were functional pieces of military equipment; they hurled projectiles in order to deal as much death and destruction upon the enemy as possible. Artillerymen became attached to their artillery pieces and even named some of them. During the Mexican-American War, Lieutenant William Churchill's two eighteen-pounders, for instance, were nicknamed the "Bull Battery," while the three cannon commanded by John Paul Jones O'Brien were called the "Bulldogs."<sup>23</sup> The bond between artillerymen and cannon is best illustrated by historian Peter Stevens. When O'Brien's Bulldogs were recaptured at the Battle of Contreras in August 1847 (Mexican forces had seized them six months earlier at Buena Vista), Stevens writes, "Officers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery wept as they hugged the muzzles and remembered the price their fellow officer and his gunners had paid at Buena Vista."<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the attachment artillerymen felt toward their particular cannon would not have been shared with soldiers in other companies or other regiments. These soldiers surely appreciated the damage a particular cannon or group of cannon inflicted upon the enemy, but the identity of their unit would not have centered on a certain artillery piece. Thus, the return of battle flags, rather than cannon or other functional military equipment, would have been seen as a much more significant gesture of friendship to the Mexican government and people.

Flags served both functional and symbolic roles in mid-nineteenth-century warfare. In fact, soldiers' lives practically revolved around their units' flags. Whether during training, marches, in encampments, or on the battlefield, flags signaled the location of regiments and

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<sup>23</sup> Peter F. Stevens, *The Rogue's March: John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-48* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 1999), 119, 191. This practice continued during the American Civil War. Perhaps the most famous instance of this practice was by Captain William Pendleton of the Stonewall Brigade, who named his four cannon "Matthew," "Mark," "Luke," and "John." Robert J. Miller, *Both Prayed to the Same God: Religion and Faith in the American Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 204-205.

<sup>24</sup> Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 236.

divisions. In short, wherever the flag went, the men were expected to follow. Flags also were extremely powerful and inspirational symbols. Touched by the sight of the American flag triumphantly raised over the Bishop's Palace at Monterrey, Captain William S. Henry described the Stars and Stripes as "that most beautiful of all flags, its colors dyed in the blood of our forefathers, and re-dyed in that of their sons."<sup>25</sup> In describing the same scene, another officer echoed Capt. Henry's sentiments, writing that upon seeing the American flag flying over Monterrey, "a glow of honest pride lit up my face, and I thanked God I was an American, and that he had endowed my own country with so much to love and venerate."<sup>26</sup> Flags had added symbolic significance for volunteer troops. Before leaving for Mexico, volunteers were ceremonially presented with regimental flags by members of their community.<sup>27</sup> Their flags thus became a symbol of community and state as well as country, making it doubly important that the men protect it from dishonor.

Flags played an especially important role in nineteenth-century combat. In fact, the Mexican-American War was the first war in which American troops carried the Stars and Stripes onto the battlefield.<sup>28</sup> Due to the thick clouds of smoke accrued from the firing of both cannon and muskets, flags were often the only visible unit markers during combat.<sup>29</sup> This was

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<sup>25</sup> William Seaton Henry, *Campaign Sketches of the War with Mexico* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 215.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Baylies, *A Narrative of Major General Wool's Campaign in Mexico, in the Years 1846, 1847 and 1848* (Albany, NY: Little and Company, 1851), 60.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 85.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 124; Richard Rollins, "The Damned Red Flags of the Rebellion": *The Confederate Battle Flag at Gettysburg* (Redondo Beach, CA: Rank and File Publications, 1997), 72.

advantageous for friendly troops. Flags not only provided an easily-identifiable rallying point on the battlefield, but allowed commanders to more effectively maneuver their men. Unfortunately for those tasked with carrying the colors, it also presented an obvious target for enemy forces to concentrate their fire.<sup>30</sup> As the flags became tattered, torn, and bullet-ridden from battle, they also became silent reminders of a unit's previous deeds, bravery, experience, and of lost comrades. With such a visible and important role, it is easy to understand how soldiers quickly began identifying their battle flags as symbols of their units and would fight desperately to defend their flags in combat.

To be the first to raise the Stars and Stripes over an enemy's position or to capture an enemy flag was seen as a great honor in nineteenth-century warfare and men were willing to risk their lives to achieve this honor.<sup>31</sup> Some paid dearly for their heroism, including Colonel J. J. Hardin of the First Illinois Volunteers at the Battle of Buena Vista. Dragoon Sam Chamberlain described the death:

He had cut down several of the enemy, and had just drove his sword to the hilt of the breast of the standard bearer of the Hidalgo Battalion of Zacatecas, and seized the colors, when a shot broke his thigh. Throwing the flag to his men, he cried out, 'Take this to my wife as a memorial of myself and Buena Vista!' and fell pierced by a dozen bayonets.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *A Fighter from Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4<sup>th</sup> Artillery, USA*, eds. Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr. and Timothy D. Johnson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 113.

<sup>31</sup> The capture of an enemy's flag continued to be seen as an especially brave and heroic act during the American Civil War. Of the 2,100 Medals of Honor awarded during the conflict, more than half were for the capture of enemy colors. John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 130-131. There is no flag in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia marked as belonging to the Hidalgo Battalion of Zacatecas. However, this fact does not discount Chamberlain's account. If Hardin's men followed their commanding officer's dying wishes, then the flag was sent to Hardin's family, not the U.S. Military Academy. Since the U.S. government only returned to Mexico the flags in the War Department's possession, it is not unusual that this flag was not included in the return. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

The soldiers who lost their flag on the battlefield suffered a great psychological blow. When the San Patricio Battalion lost their famous green banner to the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry after the Battle of Churubusco, the captured soldiers suffered even further humiliation by having to watch the American troops derisively wave their new trophy as they triumphantly marched past.<sup>33</sup>

Due to the great dishonor associated with the loss of a unit's flag, standard bearers went to great lengths to keep their flags out of enemy hands. One of the flags returned to Mexico by the United States government in 1950 belonged to the Tampico Battalion, which one American officer in 1846 called "the most gallant Regiment in their army."<sup>34</sup> A vivid description of the flag's capture during the Battle of Resaca de la Palma on May 9, 1846 is provided by Thomas B. Thorpe, correspondent and newspaper editor of the New Orleans *Tropic*:

The last Mexican flag that waved over the field had struck, the tricolor of the Tampico veterans, that had so gallantly shown itself on the Palo Alto, where it was torn by our artillery, and had been defended on the Resaca de la Palma, until the regiment to which it had belonged was literally destroyed, was torn from its staff by the gallant spirit that bore it; concealing it about his person, when all hope was lost, he attempted to flee to his countrymen on the east of the Rio Grande. The poor standard bearer, however, did not escape; rode down by our dragoons, he, with others, was a prisoner, and the flag of that Batallón Tampico, hangs a trophy in our national capitol.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 243.

<sup>34</sup> John Corey Henshaw, *Recollections of the War with Mexico*, ed. Gary F. Kurutz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 68.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Bangs Thorpe, *Our Army on the Rio Grande* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), 103. The flag of the Tampico Battalion is labeled as flag number 10-114848 in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia. Thorpe's book includes an illustration of the captured flag which matches the museum's picture of flag 10-114848. However, the museum incorrectly states that the flag was captured at Veracruz in March 1847.

As a testament to the Tampico Battalion's ferocious defense of both its position and its flag, only 26 of its 500 men were not killed, wounded, or missing in the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 1. Flag of the Tampico Battalion (Flag 10-114848)**

Source: Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Gobernación, 1990), 54.

The symbolic and practical roles of flags were not limited strictly to the soldiers of a particular unit or army. In fact, it spread to different levels of command in seemingly all countries around the world. After the Battle of Buena Vista, General Santa Anna displayed captured American flags and cannon to the Mexican people as proof of his supposed victory over U.S. forces.<sup>37</sup> General Helmuth von Moltke, a Prussian military intellectual and the chief of the Prussian General Staff between 1857 and 1888, listed the Prussian casualties and those of their French adversaries during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) as follows: “the Germans, who lost 6,247 officers, 123,453 men, one flag and four guns. The total loss to France...21,328

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<sup>36</sup> Henshaw, *Recollections of the War with Mexico*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 777.



officers and 701,948 men. The Germans captured 107 flags, 1,915 field guns, and 5,526 siege or fortress guns.”<sup>38</sup> The commander responsible for the capture of many Mexican flags during the Mexican-American War, General Winfield Scott, typically used a similar listing. In his after action reports, Scott often included flags after captured soldiers and officers, but before cannon, ammunition, and other war materiel.<sup>39</sup>

Scott’s counterpart in Mexico, General Zachary Taylor, was much less consistent in his official reports. Often Taylor only included troop casualties, failing to even mention flags, weapons, ammunition, and other supplies captured from enemy forces. In his report on the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, Gen. Taylor mentioned the capture of some battle flags almost as an afterthought, briefly stating before concluding his letter that “One regimental color (battalion of Tampico) and many standards and guidons of cavalry were taken at the affair of the 9<sup>th</sup>. I would be pleased to receive your instructions as to the disposition to be made of these trophies – whether they shall be sent to Washington, &c.”<sup>40</sup> However, Taylor’s inconsistencies probably reflect his lack of a formal military education rather than a disregard for the importance of flags.<sup>41</sup> The actions and writings of Santa Anna, Moltke, and Scott reveal much about the

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<sup>38</sup> Helmuth Graf von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War, Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 128.

<sup>39</sup> Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieutenant-General Scott, LL.D.*, vol. 2 (1864; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 482. *A Documentary History of the Mexican War*, ed. Steven R. Butler (Richardson, TX: Descendants of Mexican War Veterans, 1995), 219-225, 231-237.

<sup>40</sup> *A Documentary History of the Mexican War*, ed. Butler, 79-81.

<sup>41</sup> It may be argued that Winfield Scott also did not have a formal military education as the future general studied law at the College of William and Mary rather than attending the newly-founded U.S. Military Academy at West Point. However, as a young military officer, Scott, unlike Taylor, worked hard to rectify his limited military background by familiarizing himself with numerous contemporary European military manuals, memoirs, and campaign histories. For the rest of his career, Scott would continue to stay abreast of the latest European writings on warfare. Allan Peskin, *Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 14.

significance of flags in nineteenth-century warfare. The psychological value of flags gave them a higher significance, to commanding generals and military intellectuals as well as soldiers, than weapons directly capable of destroying the enemy.

This identification with flags is not restricted to the military, as citizens of countries throughout the world also identify strongly with their countries' flags. Historians and psychologists generally agree that the strong symbolism of national flags originated in the nineteenth century with the rise of nation-states.<sup>42</sup> In the United States, the importance of the Stars and Stripes in the national consciousness seems to have partly originated in the Mexican-American War. According to historian Marc Leepson, the Mexican-American War "marked a milestone in the public perception of the American flag. In countless newspaper articles and personal accounts in books describing the war, the flag was depicted as the symbol of the American cause: a symbol of valor, patriotism, and victory."<sup>43</sup>

The importance of flags in the national identity today is perhaps nowhere as clear as in Mexico. In the heart of Mexico City, the country's undisputed cultural, political, economic, and historic center, lies the Plaza de la Constitución, more commonly called the Zócalo. No monument, sculpture, or memorial adorns this center of both the Mexican capital and the Mexican nation. The second largest public square in the world is marked only by a solitary object, a flagpole, atop which flies an enormous Mexican flag. Floating over the remains of three distinct eras and cultures (Aztec, Spanish, and Mexican), the flag's centrality in the city is emblematic of its centrality in the foundation of the Mexican identity. Mexico, like much of Latin America, was founded not only upon the clash of two opposing civilizations, but the brutal

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Odermatt, "The Use of Symbols in the Drive for European Integration," *Yearbook of European Studies* 4 (1991), 226.

<sup>43</sup> Leepson, *Flag*, 86.

subjugation of one civilization by the other. As Mexican writer Octavio Paz so eloquently explained, Mexicans are “*hijos de la chingada*...the offspring of violation, abduction, or deceit.”<sup>44</sup> Throughout the country’s history, Mexico’s flag, as well as its national crest, have served as unifiers for its population, common symbols around which its people of disparate backgrounds could unite as one. Around the world, flags continue to play a monumental role in influencing citizens’ identification with their country. This influence should not be overlooked. In a 2007 study, psychologists at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, discovered that even subliminal exposure to images of one’s flag significantly influenced participants’ political thought and behavior.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the military role of flags in nineteenth-century warfare and the psychological impact flags have on citizens of nations to this day help explain why Mexican flags captured during the Mexican-American War were returned during the Truman administration but other war trophies continue to reside in the United States.

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<sup>44</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 74, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ran R. Hassin, et al., “Subliminal Exposure to National Flags Affects Political Thought and Behavior,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)* 104, no. 50 (2007).

## **Chapter 2 – With Malice toward None: Initial Efforts to Return Mexican Battle Flags**

The events of 1846-1848 were never far from the minds of President Truman and President Alemán during Truman's visit to Mexico City in 1947. In fact, both men referred to the tragic events of the Mexican-American War in their opening public remarks.<sup>46</sup> Despite the deep-seated emotions surrounding the Mexican people's memory of the war, their enormous show of support for Truman undoubtedly affected him and his future policies. Truman did not publicly or privately discuss an exchange of Mexican-American War battle flags with President Alemán during their conversations in Mexico City.<sup>47</sup> The president did, however, discuss the issue with Maj. Gen. Vaughan, who apparently was the first to bring up the issue.<sup>48</sup> Exactly how Vaughan knew of the flags' existence is uncertain. Nevertheless, Truman readily supported the notion of returning Mexican battle flags and, soon after his return to the United States, sent orders to investigate such a possibility.

On March 26, 1947, only three weeks after Truman's trip to Mexico, Maj. Gen. Vaughan received a memorandum from Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson providing detailed descriptions of each of the 66 flags in the War Department's possession at the U.S. Military Academy. However, this collection did not include all of the Mexican flags in the country. Patterson acknowledged that there were certainly many more flags throughout the U.S., especially in Texas. Nevertheless, these Mexican flags were to remain in public hands, as

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<sup>46</sup> Truman, Address in Mexico City.

<sup>47</sup> Thurston, memorandum, March 5, 1947, HST Library. PSF, Trip File, 1945-1953, Box 88.

<sup>48</sup> Harry H. Vaughan, letter to Leon Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. Official Files 282, Box 1053.

Patterson believed it would not be “feasible to return any flags not currently under War Department control.”<sup>49</sup> Maj. Gen. Vaughan later agreed with Patterson, acknowledging the presence of Mexican battle flags in Texas but saying, “I knew the feelings of the Texas people and thought [an effort to relinquish the flags to Mexico] would not be worthwhile.”<sup>50</sup> Political considerations undoubtedly influenced this decision. An attempt by the Truman administration to enforce the return of all Mexican flags in the United States would have been extremely unpopular in Texas, with damaging political repercussions for President Truman.

Before describing the captured Mexican battle flags under the War Department’s jurisdiction, a brief classification of the flags is necessary. As categorized by Mexico’s Museo Nacional de Historia, the organization currently responsible for the flags’ preservation, the flags which were returned by the United States fall into four separate categories: flags, guidons, standards, and “cornetas,” which has no English equivalent. According to the museum, a flag is typically a rectangular piece of canvas or cloth secured to a pole and often used by infantry units. Simply put, it is “the symbol of national identity.” A guidon is a small flag denoting a particular military unit and does not contain the national colors. A standard, meanwhile, is a small flag ending in two points, is made up of the national colors, and contains an embroidered or superimposed national emblem. Its design is similar to the swallow-tailed guidon often used by nineteenth-century U.S. cavalry units. Lastly, a corneta, literally translated as “bugle,” is very similar in shape and size to a standard, but is generally used by the navy and does not contain the national colors or emblem. Only one flag, captured from a group of guerrillas, is classified by the museum as a corneta. Of the 69 flags returned by the United States on September 13, 1950,

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<sup>49</sup> Robert P. Patterson, memorandum for H. H. Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>50</sup> Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

32 are categorized as flags, 34 as guidons, 2 as standards, and 1 as a corneta. For clarity and simplicity, the author refers to them collectively as flags.<sup>51</sup>

The descriptions of the 66 flags then housed at West Point are fascinating. Each flag was numbered and followed by a brief description. Although many were described as merely “Mexican Flag.—Captured during the War with Mexico, 1846-1847,” others contained a surprising amount of information, listing the unit to which it belonged, the engagement in which it was captured, or even the unit or individual credited with taking the flag. One such example was Flag 4141, which was described as “a regimental color of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Mexican Infantry. It was captured at the storming of Cerro Gordo by the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of U.S. Infantry on April 18, 1847.” It would also be incorrect to assume that all of these flags were the typical tricolor national flag of Mexico. Only thirteen of the captured flags were national colors; the rest consisted mostly of regimental guidons and markers. As one would expect from a conflict fought almost entirely on land, the majority of the flags belonged to either infantry or cavalry regiments. Nevertheless, all branches of the Mexican military were represented. West Point’s collection contained a small number of flags from grenadier, artillery, and guerrilla units, garrison flags, and flags of the Mexican navy and merchant marine.<sup>52</sup> Five of these flags merit particular attention for their unique appearance. One flag captured from a group of Mexican guerrillas consisted of a “skull and cross bones on the black stripe, with the motto: No doi Cuartel, meaning, I give no quarter.” Sewn onto another flag was a picture of the Virgin Mary,

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<sup>51</sup> Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Gobernación, 1990), 20, 54-91.

<sup>52</sup> Approximately 40 of the 72 total flags in the War Department’s possession belonged to infantry regiments, while 11 others were from cavalry regiments. Of the rest, 3 belonged to grenadier units, 1 to artillery, 1 to guerrillas, 4 to the navy, and 7 to the merchant marine, while the remaining flags, roughly 5 in number, were garrison flags. Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

while three others consisted of a white background with either two diagonal green stripes running from corner to corner or a gigantic red cross in the middle, dividing the flag into four equal sections. These last three flags belonged to the Mexican Merchant Marine, which explains their unusual designs.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 2. Mexican Guerrilla Flag (Flag 10-120005)**

Source: Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas* (México, D.F.: Secretaria de Gobernación, 1990), 88.

Questions also arise concerning the gaps in the record of flags. Twenty flags are missing from the official record with no explanation for their absence.<sup>54</sup> Patterson's memorandum probably reflected an official catalogue created when the flags first arrived at West Point in 1849 and were either displayed or placed into storage. Many possibilities could account for their absence. Theft, at least among West Point cadets or administrators, is unlikely, given the Cadet Honor Code: "A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." Perhaps other flags

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<sup>53</sup> Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; U.S. Congress, House, *Report No. 2515: Return of Mexican Flags*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., July 12, 1950, 1-2, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

<sup>54</sup> Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

were deemed too important to hand over to Mexico and were not included in the report in order to keep their existence hidden. One such missing flag is that of the San Patricio or Saint Patrick's Battalion. This unit was composed largely of Irish and other immigrant soldiers from the U.S. Army who abandoned their comrades to join the Mexican Army. The green silk banner of the San Patricios, which contained a harp on one side and a painting of St. Patrick on the other, was especially despised by U.S. soldiers, who knew that their traitorous former comrades fought underneath it. On August 20, 1847, the prized flag was captured by the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry at the Battle of Churubusco and was most likely sent back to West Point with the rest of the captured flags but has since disappeared.<sup>55</sup> Considering the War Department's refusal to even acknowledge the existence of this group and its denial to researchers of any information concerning the San Patricios until ordered by Congress to do so in 1917, such a cover up remains possible, but unlikely.<sup>56</sup> Despite such speculation, these flags were probably either misplaced in storage or loaned or transferred into the hands of museums or private individuals and their fates simply never recorded. Whatever the cause, the fate of the San Patricios' flag, as well as the fates of about twenty other Mexican flags, unfortunately remains unknown.

The information in the memorandum does reveal some interesting possible insights into combat during the Mexican-American War. For example, no single engagement produced a significantly greater number of captured Mexican flags than another. The battles of Cerro Gordo, Molino del Rey, Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec are all represented, as well as minor skirmishes in both Mexico and present-day California. The overrepresentation of flags from battles during General Winfield Scott's 1847 invasion of Mexico may indicate an increase

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<sup>55</sup> Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 243.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-301.



in the discipline and tenacity of the Mexican defenders, as more may have been willing to stand and fight to the death rather than retreat. It may also indicate the opposite: that by mid-1847 Mexican soldiers were so demoralized that they readily abandoned their positions and their regimental colors in the face of American assaults. However, with the number of flags of which little is known, it is impossible to determine which of these scenarios was the case or whether the soldiers of the U.S. Army were more prone to label their captured trophies as they neared the gates of Mexico City.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Flags' Arrival in the United States**

Since the end of the Mexican-American War, all of these flags had been located at West Point in accordance with an Executive Order issued by President James K. Polk on December 26, 1848, which decreed that “the flags, standards, and colors taken by the Army of the United States from their enemies in the recent war with Mexico [shall] be deposited...in the Military Academy at West Point.”<sup>58</sup> Polk issued a similar order on February 9, 1849, directing that all flags, standards, and colors taken by the Navy be deposited at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>59</sup> In issuing these declarations, President Polk was following the precedent set by the United States Congress in April 1814. This Act stated that “all the flags, standards, and colors” captured from enemy forces in the War of 1812 should be “delivered to the President of the United States, for the purpose of being under his direction preserved and

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<sup>57</sup> Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Executive Document No. 163: Captured Battle Flags: Letter from the Secretary of War, with Enclosures*, 50<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., February 16, 1888, 6.

<sup>59</sup> J. G. Mason, letter to George P. Upshur, February 9, 1849, U.S. Naval Academy, Nimitz Library (hereafter USNAN Library), Record Group 405, Box 3.

displayed in such public place as he shall deem proper.”<sup>60</sup> Polk’s selection of West Point for the primary repository of the flags may have also been influenced by this 1814 act. After the War of 1812, a few British flags were deposited at the U.S. Military Academy by order of President James Madison acting under this resolution.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the 1814 precedent and the appropriateness of keeping the flags at the U.S. Military and Naval Academies, another issue which may have contributed to Polk’s decision to place the bulk of the captured flags at West Point was the role of its graduates during the Mexican-American War. The institution had been under intense criticism prior to the war. Many politicians and generals, including Andrew Jackson and Edmund Gaines, contended that the academy promoted aristocracy, was unconstitutional (because cadets received a free education at the public’s expense), and was simply unnecessary as the militia was capable of defending the United States.<sup>62</sup> These criticisms, however, were effectively silenced by the wartime contributions of West Point graduates, such as Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, P.G.T. Beauregard, and George B. McClellan, who distinguished themselves numerous times throughout the Mexican-American War.<sup>63</sup> In explaining the administration’s decision to house the captured battle flags at West Point, Secretary of War William L. Marcy wrote, “Among the considerations which render the Military Academy at West Point an appropriate depository of the trophies...is the admitted fact that the graduates of the institution contributed in an eminent

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<sup>60</sup> Congress, House, *Executive Document No. 163*, 1888, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* The other captured British flags were presumably destroyed when the British burned the War Department Building in 1814.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 111.

<sup>63</sup> Scott, *Memoirs*, 450, 500-501.

degree to our unexampled career of success.”<sup>64</sup> Few people were more impressed with the performance of West Pointers than Gen. Winfield Scott. After the war, Scott declared, “I give it as my fixed opinion, that but for our graduated cadets the war between the United States and Mexico might, and probably would, have lasted some four or five years, with, in the first half, more defeats than victories falling to our share.”<sup>65</sup>

On January 1, 1849, the captured Mexican battle flags and other war trophies arrived at West Point in a procession led by none other than Gen. Scott.<sup>66</sup> Future botanist William Whitman Bailey, who grew up at West Point, recalled that “there was an illumination of the old North and South barracks, and I can see, even now, the word ‘Victory,’ as it was formed by the lights on the former building.”<sup>67</sup> Historian George Pappas brilliantly described the flags’ arrival:

The Corps and band marched to the dock and formed a hollow square. Forty cadets, each carrying a flag, marched into the center of the square. Cadet George S. Hartsuff described the flags: ‘They must have passed through some hard fighting’ because many of them were torn and covered with blood. The color bearers, escorted by the Corps and the band playing ‘Santa Ana’s March,’ marched up the hill to the Library as the cadet battery fired a salute. A message from [President-elect] Zachary Taylor was read to the assemblage and Scott again repeated his statement that but for the ‘science of the Military Academy...the army, multiplied by four, could not have entered the capital of Mexico.’”<sup>68</sup>

The arrival of the flags and war trophies only added to the already high morale at the U.S. Military Academy. Bailey recalled, “At that time and for some years after, there was much talk about the Mexican war.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Congress, House, *Executive Document No. 163*, 1888, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in William W. Bailey, *My Boyhood at West Point* (Providence, RI: The Society, 1891), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Pappas, *To the Point*, 268.

<sup>67</sup> Bailey, *My Boyhood*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Pappas, *To the Point*, 268-269.

<sup>69</sup> Bailey, *My Boyhood*, 9.

Following their ceremonial arrival, the flags were placed in the West Point library. Here they served as constant reminders of the abilities and achievements of West Pointers. According to Cadet George L. Hartsuff, the flags “break down the arguments and remove the prejudices against the Military Academy by proving that its graduates were not mere mushroom soldiers afraid of the smell of powder.” Some, and perhaps all, of the captured Mexican battle flags did not remain in the library for very long. Within a few years, at least 25 of the flags were transferred to the cadet chapel, where they remained for the next century. This change in location failed to diminish from the awe and admiration the flags elicited in succeeding classes of cadets. In 1859, Virginia cadet Thomas Rowland wrote home, describing the chapel as “a very pretty building, tastefully decorated on the inside and receiving a military aspect from the flags and cannon ranged along the walls, trophies taken in 1812 and in Mexico.” In the ensuing decades, some of the captured flags were again relocated to the U.S. Military Academy’s Ordnance Museum. An 1898 catalogue revealed that at least 21 Mexican flags were in the museum’s possession, many of which were prominently displayed. The approximately 20 remaining flags at West Point were probably too fragile to be publicly displayed and were instead kept in storage.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Pappas, *To the Point*, 269; Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053. In 1910, the cadet chapel, now known as the Old Cadet Chapel, was dismantled stone by stone and reconstructed in the West Point Cemetery to make way for a new chapel at the U.S. Military Academy. However, this did not permanently change the location of the Mexican flags, which continued to be displayed in the Old Cadet Chapel. For consistency and clarity, the author has only referred to the Old Cadet Chapel as the cadet chapel. Grant, Lynch, and Bailey, *West Point: The First 200 Years*, 123; Thomas Rowland, “Letters of a Virginia Cadet at West Point, 1859-1861,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (July 1915), 207; *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Ordnance Museum: Department of Ordnance and Gunnery, U.S. Military Academy*, eds. Capt. L. L. Bruff and Capt. John T. Thompson (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Press, 1898), 81-91.

On February 10, 1849, a little more than a month after the majority of captured Mexican flags arrived at West Point, three other flags arrived at the U.S. Naval Academy. Unlike the catalogue of the flag collection at the U.S. Military Academy, a significant amount of information is known about all three of the flags which were deposited at Annapolis. The first flag, for instance, was described as “Mexican ensign. Captured at Monterey, California, by a landing force of 250 seamen and marines, commanded by Captain William Mervine, from the SAVANNAH, the WARREN, the CYANE and the LEVANT, Commodore John Drake Sloat, July 7, 1846.” Adding to this flag’s significance was the fact that it was the first flag taken in California. The remaining two flags were both captured by the Pacific Squadron under Commodore Brandfor Schurbrick on November 7, 1847 at Mazatlán, Mexico. Unlike at West Point, no ceremony appears to have marked the arrival of these flags at the U.S. Naval Academy. Secretary of the Navy John Young Mason simply turned them over to Rev. George Jones, chaplain of the U.S. Naval Academy, who placed the flags in the Academy's Lyceum in Preble Hall.<sup>71</sup>

On June 28, 1850, the Lyceum’s collection more than doubled as Secretary of the Navy William Ballard Preston sent an additional four Mexican flags to Annapolis. The first flag had been captured at Tuxpan on April 18, 1847 by a landing party commanded by Captain Samuel Livingston Breese. The three others were captured either during the siege of Veracruz or upon the city’s surrender by naval forces commanded by Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry in

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<sup>71</sup> n.a., list of Mexican flags on display in Mahan Hall, 1949, USNAN Library. Record Group 405, Box 2; The Naval Academy Lyceum was later renamed the Naval Academy Museum. It should not be considered unusual that Rev. Jones received the flags. Jones was also a professor of history and English at the Naval Academy and traveled to Washington, D.C. around this same time to collect natural history specimens brought back by the U.S. Exploring Expedition. Jennifer A. Bryan [Head of Special Collections & Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy], e-mail interview by author, October 19, 2010.

March 1847. Two of these flags belonged to cavalry regiments while the third was unknown, but probably came from an infantry unit garrisoning the offshore fortress of San Juan de Ulua, which protected the city's port. Until shortly before the return of flags to Mexico in 1950, these seven flags in possession of the U.S. Naval Academy were completely overlooked. Secretary of War Robert Patterson fails to mention them in a 1947 memorandum to Gen. Vaughan, in which he incorrectly states that all of the captured Mexican flags under the control of the War Department were located at West Point.<sup>72</sup>

### **The First Return, June 1947**

As the War Department prepared to ship the 66 Mexican flags from West Point to Washington, D.C., the question of how many flags should be returned to Mexico soon came to the forefront. In early June 1947, Major General Maxwell Taylor, Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, received word from Maj. Gen. Vaughan that only three of the most historically significant flags were to be sent to the White House.<sup>73</sup> Various reasons were given for this sudden change. In explaining his decision, General Vaughan stated that he and Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Dwight D. Eisenhower had discussed the issue and that Eisenhower believed that two or three flags would be "considered as a gesture in much better taste."<sup>74</sup> Maj. Gen. Vaughan concurred, later admitting that he felt that returning all 66 flags would appear to

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<sup>72</sup> Bryan, e-mail interview by author, October 6, 2010; n.a., list of Mexican flags on display in Mahan Hall, 1949, USNAN Library. RG 405, Box 2; Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053. Due to the amount of information known on these flags, all seven can be identified in the catalog of the Museo Nacional de Historia. They are listed as flags 10-147908, 10-147916, 10-129006, 10-129135, 10-147909, 10-147929, and 10-128981 (renumbered 10-583160).

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell D. Taylor, letter to Harry H. Vaughan, June 2, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>74</sup> Harry H. Vaughan, letter to Maxwell D. Taylor, June 3, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

be “rubbing it in a bit” and “a little embarrassing” (presumably for President Alemán).<sup>75</sup> The views of Vaughan and Eisenhower are congruent with the Truman administration’s position in the spring of 1947 that the exchange of battle flags should be limited. The President meant to simply present a few Mexican flags to President Alemán during his April 29-May 7 visit to the United States as a token of the U.S.’s desire to improve relations between the two countries.<sup>76</sup>

In describing the meeting between Vaughan and Eisenhower, a War Department cross-reference sheet also stated that the two generals decided that the return of all flags to Mexico would be “too hard to explain.”<sup>77</sup> To whom this return would be difficult to explain is unclear. President Alemán must have realized that during the Mexican-American War, like all wars before and after, a number of war trophies and other items were captured or confiscated by the victorious armies and returned home. Given the poor performance of the Mexican Army during the war, it should have been obvious to President Alemán and anyone else that the United States would have numerous war trophies in its possession after 1848.

Perhaps the comment also referred to the War Department or the American public. Both groups generally value and cherish captured enemy war trophies. These emblems are seen as material recognitions of a country’s power and instill in some citizens, especially those with prior military experience, a sense of national pride and often national superiority. The voluntary surrender of these cherished emblems of military greatness may have been difficult to explain to a nation which had just seemingly reaffirmed its might and superiority in World War II.

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<sup>75</sup> Harry H. Vaughan, memorandum to John R. Beishline, August 28, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>76</sup> Charles G. Ross, press release, “Program for the Visit of His Excellency Miguel Alemán, President of Mexico, 1947,” April 9, 1947, HST Library. OF 146, Box 754.

<sup>77</sup> Robert P. Patterson, Cross Reference Sheet, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 146, Box 755.

Undoubtedly, many veterans would have vehemently opposed the return of captured battle flags for such an action could imply the future return of all spoils of war, including the ones many soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines had recently brought home from the battlefields of Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific.

Following Maj. Gen. Vaughan's orders, three flags were chosen by Maj. Gen. Taylor to be returned to Mexico. A fair amount of information is known about the first, Flag 4168, which bore the inscription, "Taken at the storming of the Heights of Cerro Gordo by the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry April 18, 1847." Flag 4169 also was of special significance, as it was marked as "Taken by 2<sup>nd</sup> Division of Regulars – August 20<sup>th</sup> 1847."<sup>78</sup> The third flag, however, did not seem to meet Maj. Gen. Vaughan's standard of "flags of special significance." There was no information as to when, where, or by whom the flag was captured. The only two unusual characteristics of Flag 4172 were the absence of the Mexican crest at its center and its large size. All three of the chosen flags ranged from eight to twelve feet hoist by twelve to nineteen feet fly, whereas the majority of flags in the War Department's possession were much smaller, measuring roughly three feet by three feet.<sup>79</sup> Flag 4172, like the other two chosen flags, was also a Mexican national flag, whereas most of the others were regimental guidons. Still, why this flag was chosen instead of another with a more detailed background is unclear. In March, Truman had witnessed firsthand the emotional connection of Mexican citizens with the niños héroes and so a national flag

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<sup>78</sup> The date indicates that Flag 4169 was captured at either the Battle of Contreras or Churubusco, which both occurred on August 20, 1847.

<sup>79</sup> Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91. "Hoist" is defined as the height of a flag when it is flying, while the "fly" indicates the length of an extended flag from the staff to its outer end.



captured during the Battle of Chapultepec (such as Flag 4174) would have seemed much more appropriate.<sup>80</sup>

Although accounts differ, none of these flags were handed over to President Alemán during his stay in the U.S. In a memorandum to White House Liaison Officer Colonel John R. Beishline in August 1950, Vaughan stated that the three flags were presented to President Alemán and “were returned to Mexico with the President.”<sup>81</sup> However, this does not fit with the chronology of correspondence between Maj. Gen. Vaughan and Maj. Gen. Taylor. Taylor did not receive orders to limit the shipment of flags to three until June 2 and the flags were not sent until June 6. President Alemán’s visit to the United States ended nearly a month earlier on May 7. In fact, no ceremony or formal relinquishment occurred with these three flags. On approximately June 27, 1947, the flags were simply sent to the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., where presumably one of Vaughan’s aides turned them, as well as a short explanatory note by Vaughan, over to the Ambassador of Mexico, Dr. Don Antonio Espinosa de los Monteros.<sup>82</sup> The discrepancies within Maj. Gen. Vaughan’s statements, as well as the delay between the investigation into the number of Mexican flags and their delivery to the Mexican government, may reflect the deeper debate within the Truman administration over whether any relinquishment should occur at all or whether the president even had the authority to make such a relinquishment.

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, letter to Vaughan, June 6, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Vaughan, letter to Taylor, June 3, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>81</sup> Vaughan, memorandum to Beishline, August 28, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>82</sup> Harry H. Vaughan, letter to Señor Dr. Don Antonio Espinosa de los Monteros, June 27, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

Almost from the beginning it became apparent that returning captured battle flags to Mexico would not be as easy as President Truman originally envisioned. Three days before the three Mexican flags were turned over to the Mexican Ambassador, Secretary of State Dean Acheson sent a memorandum to Bill Hassett, correspondence secretary for both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman, explaining both his personal views and the views of his department. According to Acheson, “The Department of State has no objection to the return of these flags to Mexico. However it is my understanding that trophies of war have traditionally been considered as the property of the Nation and that under Article IV, Section 3, Clause 2, of the Constitution, an Act of Congress will be necessary before the flags can be disposed of in this manner.”<sup>83</sup>

It is clear that both Truman and Maj. Gen. Vaughan were aware of Acheson’s memorandum and the need for congressional approval in order to return the three flags to Mexico. In fact, Vaughan’s account that the flags were presented to President Alemán during his trip to the U.S. further indicates that Vaughan was fully aware that the President did not have the authority to make such a relinquishment. Since Beishline or other White House officials likely knew that an Act of Congress was required in order to return the flags to Mexico, Vaughan may have believed that a more legitimate-sounding account of the return, rather than a description of the actual events of 1947, was less likely to prompt an investigation into the constitutionality of his actions and those of President Truman. Vaughan’s actions further illustrate his apparent disregard for congressional approval. When the flags were presented to the Mexican Ambassador, Vaughan attached a letter to Espinosa which acknowledged that sending the three flags as an official gift to President Alemán “would require an Act of Congress. Consequently,

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<sup>83</sup> This provision of the Constitution reads “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory and other Property belonging to the United States...”

I'm turning them over to you for disposition without any official communication. I suggest that you return them to Mexico at your own pleasure in any way that you think best.”<sup>84</sup> The tone in Vaughan's letter suggests that neither he nor Truman received Congress's blessing before the relinquishment occurred. Since the 80<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress remained in session throughout the summer of 1947, it seems possible that the return of Mexican battle flags could have received congressional approval relatively quickly and easily. It is also doubtful that Truman or Vaughan received unofficial approval from congressional leaders prior to the informal return. In the two weeks prior to June 27, Truman met with the leaders of Congress only once, on June 16. In their 30 minute meeting, it is unlikely that the men concerned themselves with as trivial a matter as the relinquishment of three Mexican flags. Most likely the group discussed budgetary issues, as Truman vetoed a bill to reduce income taxes on the same day.<sup>85</sup>

If Truman did in fact seek and receive approval from congressional leaders, he may have desired to keep the issue as unknown as possible for political reasons. The upcoming presidential election of 1948 was less than a year and a half away and things already looked grim for the President. Even though Truman's approval ratings were temporarily rising in mid-1947, people were nonetheless beginning to view him as a weak and incompetent leader. Many leaders of Truman's own Democratic Party considered him a fatal liability.<sup>86</sup> Truman may have feared

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<sup>84</sup> Vaughan, letter to Espinosa, June 27, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>85</sup> Daily Presidential Appointments, June 16, 1947, HST Library. <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/main.php?currYear=1947&currMonth=6&currDay=16> (accessed October 19, 2010). Leaders of Congress at the time included President pro tempore of the Senate Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI), Senate Majority Leader Wallace White (R-ME), Senate Minority Leader Alben Barkley (D-KY), Speaker of the House Joseph Martin (R-MA), House Majority Leader Charles Halleck (R-IN), and House Minority Leader Sam Rayburn (D-TX). Sen. Barkley, however, was not in Washington, D.C., on June 16 and therefore did not attend the meeting with President Truman.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Karabell, *The Last Campaign*, 40-41.

that publicizing the return of Mexican battle flags would further diminish his public support, especially in key Southwestern states such as Texas and California. Although Truman could probably count on the Hispanic vote in the region due to his continued support for the equal rights of minorities, most notably in the desegregation of the military and in his establishment of the Committee on Civil Rights, any loss of support could prove disastrous in the election. As it turns out, Truman won the states of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona fairly easily in 1948. However, the election in California was extremely close. Out of a total of 3.8 million votes cast for either Truman or Republican candidate Thomas Dewey, Truman won by a mere 17,865 votes, a margin of victory of 0.44 percent.<sup>87</sup>

If Truman kept this initial flag return secret for fear of alienating voters, in retrospect his fears were largely unfounded. Even had he lost California, Truman still would have won the 1948 election by 64 votes in the Electoral College. Also, there was little likelihood of a backlash from the relinquishment of Mexican battle flags. Congressional bills in 1949 and 1950 to return the flags were submitted and supported by both Republicans and Democrats and passed with little opposition or debate. Texas Congressmen in particular played instrumental roles in ensuring the passage of the necessary legislation. The flags' ceremonial return to Mexico in September 1950 likewise generated little opposition and was largely viewed with favor or apathy by most Americans. Nevertheless, it was impossible for Truman at the time to know how Congress or the public would react to the flag return. Therefore, instead of receiving official congressional approval, Vaughan followed the President's wishes by secretly and informally turning over the three Mexican battle flags to the Mexican Ambassador.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 293-294.

## The American Legion Expands the Return

By the end of June 1947, the return of battle flags to Mexico appeared to be complete. Three flags of historical significance had been handed over to the Mexican government and Maj. Gen. Vaughan acknowledged that “the President felt that this took care of the friendly gesture.” The return had also achieved the level of secrecy the Truman administration had desired. Neither the American nor the Mexican press ever got word of the flag return. Most telling of this fact is the *Reseña Gráfica Presidencial del C. Lic. Miguel Alemán Valdés, 1946-1952*, an illustrated presidential review published around 1952 and containing extensive coverage of many issues relating to U.S.-Mexican relations during President Alemán’s time in office.<sup>88</sup> Although this book documented stories as seemingly insignificant as the meeting between President Alemán and a group of Boy Scouts from San Antonio, Texas in August 1947, no mention was made of the return of Mexican battle flags two months before, suggesting the return never became known outside of the Alemán administration. The only source on either side of the border which mentioned the return was West Point’s *Annual Report of the Superintendent*, which briefly stated that in May three flags were sent to Maj. Gen. Vaughan for ultimate return to Mexico. The flag return also largely remained a secret within the Truman administration. Even the U.S. Army’s Chief of Military History had no idea what had happened to the three flags and had to send a memorandum to the White House in August 1950 inquiring about their whereabouts!<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The “C.” in the book’s title is an abbreviation of the word “Ciudadano” or “Citizen.” The English equivalent of “Lic.,” short for “Licenciado,” is “Bachelor of Arts” or “Bachelor of Science.”

<sup>89</sup> Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; *Reseña Gráfica Presidencial del C. Lic. Miguel Alemán Valdés, 1946-1952*, ed. Esteban Marín Chaparro (Mexico: n.p., 1952 [?]), 87; Maxwell D. Taylor, *Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1947* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy

Despite the level of confidentiality surrounding the initial flag return, two years later the issue once again came to the government's attention. On October 10, 1949, the Chairman of the American Legion's Foreign Relations Commission, Leon Happell, sent a letter to Thomas Connally asking that the Texas Senator propose a bill for the return of Mexican battle flags captured during the Mexican-American War. Happell stated that in the preceding months, the American Legion's Foreign Relations Commission had studied and discussed the issue in great detail. Unlike the first, relatively unknown transfer of flags, Happell proposed that a full military escort be provided, with a ceremony being held on February 22, 1950, two days before Flag Day in Mexico. Although Truman approved of the program proposed by the American Legion, his sentiments certainly were echoed by Maj. Gen. Vaughan in the closing remarks of his reply to Happell: "I think this is a very excellent idea but I think it has been taken care of."<sup>90</sup>

A number of competing stories exist to explain how Happell and the rest of the American Legion's top leaders first learned about this issue. According to New Jersey Congressman Charles R. Howell, the idea originated with the American Legion Post No. 11 of Mount Holly, New Jersey.<sup>91</sup> On the night of July 12, 1928, Mexican aviator Captain Emilio Carranza Rodriguez was killed when he crashed his plane in the woods near Mount Holly while attempting to return to Mexico City after a month-long goodwill trip to the United States.<sup>92</sup> In

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Printing Office, 1948), 35; E. M. Harris, memorandum for John Beishline, August 24, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>90</sup> Leon Happell, letter to Senator Thomas Connolly, October 10, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags: Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., June 29, 1950, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Perhaps adding to the popularity of Captain Emilio Carranza and the need to properly honor him after his death was the fact that the aviator was the grand nephew of Venustiano Carranza de la Garza, a leader during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the President of Mexico from 1917-1920. Ismael Carranza, "The Story of Captain

the days following the loss of the “Lindbergh of Mexico,” Post No. 11 was involved with the recovery of Carranza’s body and served as the body’s honor guard until it could be sent back to Mexico.<sup>93</sup> In the years following Carranza’s death, Mount Holly’s American Legion Post had continued to spearhead efforts to honor the fallen aviator by conducting annual memorial services on the anniversary of his crash. Congressman Howell, who happened to also be a member of Post 11, believed these efforts “[have] contributed a good bit toward restoring and maintaining good relations between Mexico and our country” and that the memorial service “has been of some significance even throughout Latin America.”<sup>94</sup> Although it is unclear how Post No. 11 even knew of the Mexican flags’ existence, according to Congressman Howell, it was from the memorializing of Capt. Carranza and the international implications of these actions that the American Legion Post conceived of the idea of returning captured battle flags to Mexico.

It is difficult to judge the impact of the actions of the Mount Holly Legion Post No. 11. Aside from the statement by Congressman Howell before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, little documentation exists to corroborate their story. Happell makes no mention of the New Jersey Post in his correspondence with Maj. Gen. Vaughan or with Sen. Connally. There is also no mention of Post 11 in the proceedings or minutes of the American Legion’s National Executive Committee when the issue was discussed in 1949, despite Congressman Howell’s testimony that Post 11 had forwarded their resolution to the committee.<sup>95</sup> The only other

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Emilio Carranza Rodriguez: ‘The Martyr Aviator of Mexico’,” American Legion Post 11, Mount Holly, NJ, 2001, <http://www.post11.org/carranza/carranza1e.html> (accessed September 13, 2010).

<sup>93</sup> Ismael Carranza, “The Story of Captain Emilio Carranza Rodriguez: ‘The Rest of the Story’,” American Legion Post 11, Mount Holly, NJ, 2001, <http://www.post11.org/carranza/carranza2e.html> (accessed September 13, 2010).

<sup>94</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 2.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

mentions of the Mount Holly Legion Post No. 11 appear a mere week prior to the 1950 flag return and revolve around the request by Edwin L. Davis, Mayor of Wrightstown, NJ and a member of the Carranza Memorial Committee, that he be included in the proposed ceremony along with Congressman Howell and A. F. Bright, Chairman of the Carranza Memorial Committee.<sup>96</sup>

Congressman Howell's testimony may indicate a second possible source of the American Legion's idea to return Mexican flags: a leak from within the Truman administration. It is highly coincidental that the Mount Holly Legion Post No. 11 never thought of returning battle flags until early 1949, despite carrying out an annual memorial service for Capt. Carranza for over twenty years.<sup>97</sup> Although it is conceivable that the timing of the issue may have been in response to President Truman's trip to Mexico City, President Alemán's trip to the United States, and the incredible welcoming each head of state received, this also seems unlikely. Neither Howell nor any member of Post No. 11 was in President Truman's entourage in Mexico City.<sup>98</sup> Although Congressman Howell may have been present when President Alemán spoke before Congress during his stay in the United States, it is doubtful that he ever personally spoke to the President and Alemán never visited New Jersey.

Leaks were not uncommon during Truman's presidency and were a particular problem within the State Department. In May 1950, Donald S. Dawson, Administrative Assistant to President Truman, complained that leaks "characterize the State Department these days...I think

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<sup>96</sup> William M. Boyle, Jr., letter to Donald Dawson, September 5, 1950; Donald Dawson, letter to William M. Boyle, Jr., September 7, 1950; Donald Dawson, letter to Louis A. Johnson, September 7, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>97</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 2.

<sup>98</sup> "Comitiva del Señor Harri [*sic*] S. Truman," AGN. MAV 577.1/9.



all of the State Department's difficulties as far as the public press is concerned can be traced to leaks."<sup>99</sup> Press Secretary Charles G. Ross put it more tersely: "[the State Department] leaks like a sieve."<sup>100</sup> It is impossible to know for certain who may have leaked the 1947 flag return to the American Legion, if any leak even occurred. Although both President Truman and Maj. Gen. Vaughan were members of the American Legion, their initial reluctance to return all of the Mexican battle flags suggests that neither one of them leaked information regarding the return.<sup>101</sup> In fact, a leak seems unlikely. It would have been difficult for anyone to leak the story to a few select individuals in the American Legion while keeping the American and Mexican presses completely oblivious. Plus, other potential explanations exist which, despite their varying levels of probability, better reveal the true origin of the flag return.

Two competing accounts of where the notion to return Mexico's lost battle flags surprisingly come from the American and Mexican railroad industries. The first concerns a group of 25 members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Division 836, from Seattle, Washington, who toured Mexico as guests of the Mexican Railroad Employees in April 1936.<sup>102</sup> According to the group's leader, Byron P. Walker, while in Mexico, the engineers visited the Galería de Arte del Museo Nacional de México, where they saw a painting of General Winfield Scott riding a white horse. The encounter must have had a great impact on the men, for Walker

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<sup>99</sup> Donald S. Dawson, memorandum to Charles G. Ross, May 16, 1950, HST Library. OF 20, Box 143.

<sup>100</sup> Charles G. Ross, memorandum to Donald Dawson, May 19, 1950, HST Library. OF 20, Box 143.

<sup>101</sup> Truman belonged to the Tiry J. Ford Post No. 21 in Kansas City, MO, and was the first Legionnaire to become President of the United States. Dan Gross, Cross Reference Sheet, April 14, 1945, HST Library. OF 64, Box 375; Dr. Joseph D. Fox, Cross Reference Sheet, April 17, 1945, HST Library. OF 64, Box 375;

<sup>102</sup> Byron P. Walker, letter to President Manuel Alleman [*sic*], November 1, 1949, AGN. MAV 549.11/4.

writes that “we decided then to get our government to return the battle flags captured by our army.”<sup>103</sup>

The great disconnect between seeing a painting and championing for the return of Mexican flags makes Walker’s story highly questionable. It is unclear how the Seattle railroad engineers even knew that Mexican battle flags were in the possession of the United States, although it is possible they could have received this information while touring through Mexico. Aside from Guillermo Fernández, an engineer on the Mexican Railroad, Walker also gives no indication of which individuals or groups the engineers discussed the plan with in either Mexico or the United States. Apart from the letter the group sent to President Alemán in November 1949, claiming credit for the idea to return the flags after the proper legislation had already passed the U.S. Senate, no documentation exists to support Walker’s account. Even an article from the *Seattle Daily Times* which the group included in their letter to Alemán makes no mention of the railroad engineers’ involvement in the return.<sup>104</sup> It is unclear why the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers would seek credit for the return of Mexican battle flags. Nevertheless, it is clear their involvement was either insignificant or nonexistent.

Similar to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers’ claim of initiating the flag return is a November 23, 1950 letter to President Alemán from J. G. Estrada, General Superintendent of the Express Department of the Mexican National Railroad. In the letter, Estrada claims to be the author of the initiative and is concerned that his name is not mentioned in an *El Universal* article regarding the flag return.<sup>105</sup> According to Estrada, he discussed the idea with officials at the American Embassy in Mexico City, who then consulted the American Legion who in turn

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> “May Return Symbols of Defeat to Mexicans,” *Seattle Daily Times*, October 30, 1949.

<sup>105</sup> J. G. Estrada, letter to President Miguel Alemán, November 23, 1950, AGN. MAV 231/5743.

recommended the idea to the United States Congress.<sup>106</sup> Although Estrada's letter fails to mention any specific names of Embassy or American Legion personnel, there may be some truth to the railroad superintendent's claims. On May 19, 1947, a month and a half before Maj. Gen. Vaughan turned over the three flags to Mexican Ambassador Espinosa, Estrada sent a letter to U.S. Ambassador Walter Thurston proposing that the United States return to Mexico its lost battle flags from the Mexican-American War.<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, no further communication between Estrada and American or Mexican officials exists. If his 1947 letter did indeed reach Ambassador Thurston, it appears it was either disregarded or filed away and forgotten.

The most likely and well-documented source of the idea to return Mexican battle flags comes from the American Legion's Alan Seeger Post No. 2 in Mexico City. According to Post No. 2's Roscoe B. Gaither, the idea originated in response to an act by the Corps of Defenders of Mexico and their Descendants, a semi-official organization composed of Mexican Army officers, veterans, and the descendants of veterans from conflicts including the Mexican-American War, the French Intervention of 1861-1867, and the numerous U.S. expeditions into Mexico in the 1910s.<sup>108</sup> In recognition of the services Gaither performed as chief of the Mexican section of the War Department during World War II, the Corps of Defenders presented him with the Cross and Medallion of Ignacio Comonfort, the first time the award had ever been bestowed upon an American.<sup>109</sup> The significance of this act was not lost on either side. As one of the members of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> J. G. Estrada, letter to Walter Thurston, May 19, 1947, AGN. MAV 231/5743.

<sup>108</sup> Roscoe B. Gaither, letter to Henry H. Dudley, March 4, 1949, American Legion National Headquarters Library (hereafter ALNH Library). NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Comonfort was a Mexican politician who served as President of Mexico from 1855 to 1858. He also served as a military officer before and after his presidency, fighting in the Mexican-American War and against the French in 1862. He was killed by bandits a year later.

the Corps of Defenders told Gaither, “if we who have been fired at and in some cases wounded by American Armed Forces decided to show the American and Mexican people that we, the ones that actually suffered, feel no rancor against the American people, the public must as a natural consequence follow our lead and eliminate any feeling they must have against the American people.”<sup>110</sup>

In response to the Corps’ noble act, Gaither met with Ambassador Thurston and General Peabody, Post No. 2’s Military Attaché, to discuss the possibility of returning Mexico’s lost battle flags. After receiving the whole-heartedly approved of both Thurston and Peabody, Gaither presented a resolution to return the flags to Alan Seeger Post No. 2 at its meeting on February 17, 1949.<sup>111</sup> Gaither’s resolution is significant in a number of respects. First, it points to the need of the United States to maintain amiable relations with other countries of the Western Hemisphere and with Mexico in particular, due to the two countries’ close proximity to one another.<sup>112</sup> It also reveals another event besides Gaither’s commendation by the Corps of Defenders which inspired the return of Mexican battle flags: Truman’s laying of a wreath at the niños héroes monument. Living in Mexico City, it would have been easy for Gaither and other members of Post No. 2 to witness the Mexican public’s reaction to Truman’s visit and the wreath laying in particular, which Gaither stated caused a “maximum of good will.”<sup>113</sup> Surprisingly, the description of Truman’s actions in Mexico City and the response they elicited was the only point

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

in the Gaither resolution which was not included in the final resolution passed by the American Legion's National Executive Committee in May 1949.<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps the most controversial part of Gaither's resolution pertained to the lasting importance of the Mexican battle flags to residents of the United States and Mexico. It stated,

WHEREAS the flags captured from Mexico in 1847 and retained in the United States as battle trophies have now no significance or value to the American people but on the other hand constitute an impediment to good relations between the people of the two countries.<sup>115</sup>

The validity of this statement is questionable. Had all Americans viewed the captured battle flags as truly worthless, then the reluctance of the War Department, and the Department of the Army in particular, to return the flags was either illogical or simply self-seeking. However, the insignificance of the flags to many Americans may help explain why the resolution so quickly and easily received approval in both the American Legion and in the U.S. Congress. Also, the resolution fails to explain how the flags formed an impediment to U.S.-Mexican relations. No demands for the flags' return were made by Mexican officials prior to Truman's trip to Mexico City nor was the issue discussed publicly or privately between the two presidents during Truman's visit.<sup>116</sup> In a January 1950 conversation with Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Truman acknowledged mentioning the flags' return to Alemán during the Mexican President's

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<sup>114</sup> Digest of Minutes of National Executive Committee of The American Legion, May 4-6, 1949, 222-23.

<sup>115</sup> Gaither, letter to Dudley, March 4, 1949, ALNH Library. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

<sup>116</sup> Walter Thurston, memorandum, March 5, 1947, HST Library. President's Secretary's Files, Trip File, 1945-1953, Box 88.

trip to the United States in 1947, but made no indication that the issue was in any way hindering U.S.-Mexican relations.<sup>117</sup>

Roscoe Gaither's letter to American Legion Adjutant Henry H. Dudley mentions two other motivations for the flag return: protecting Americans in Mexico and decreasing the threat of communism. To summarize his plan to return Mexican flags, Gaither stated that "Our idea, therefore, is to eliminate all feeling against the United States thereby removing any desire to punish Americans by mistreatment of their persons or property."<sup>118</sup> This sentence seems to contradict earlier passages in Gaither's letter which suggested that U.S.-Mexican relations had never been better. As Gaither failed to enumerate on this mistreatment of Americans in Mexico, it is difficult to state the extent of these mistreatments and whether or not this issue was a long-lasting or relatively new problem.

The concern with communism in Mexico is very telling of the Cold War context in which the resolution was written. In the two years since the 1947 flag return, Czechoslovakia had fallen to communism and, as of March 1949, the Soviet Union was still blockading Allied-controlled West Berlin.<sup>119</sup> As the Cold War continued to escalate, it became more and more important for the United States to cement friendly relations with countries around the world, and especially in the Western Hemisphere, for both strategic and psychological reasons. By the time of the ceremonial flag return in September 1950, subversion at home and the seemingly endless expansion of communism abroad would raise Americans' fears and paranoia to new heights,

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<sup>117</sup> Dean Acheson, memorandum of meeting with the President, January 9, 1950, HST Library. Dean Acheson Papers, Box 66.

<sup>118</sup> Gaither, letter to Dudley, March 4, 1949, ALNH Library. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

<sup>119</sup> The Soviet blockade of Berlin ended two month later, on May 12, 1949.

increasing the importance of furthering the Good Neighbor Policy and returning Mexican battle flags in the hopes of decreasing the potential of a communist takeover south of the border.

Lastly, there may have been a more personal motivation for Gaither to propose the resolution to return Mexican flags. In the October 1949 *Seattle Daily Times* article sent by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers to President Alemán, the newspaper reported that the proposal to return the battle flags “originated with an American businessman in Mexico City – William Gaither – whose grandfather was at Chapultepec [*sic*] when Gen. Santa Ana surrendered to Gen. Zachary Taylor.”<sup>120</sup> Unfortunately, the errors in this sentence bring its accuracy into question. Although Santa Anna commanded the Mexican Army, he was not at Chapultepec when the stronghold was captured by the U.S. Army. Furthermore, Gen. Zachary Taylor was nowhere near the Valley of Mexico on September 13, 1847. Taylor, who commanded the U.S. Army in the northern theater, never got closer to Mexico City than Agua Nueva, approximately 400 miles to the north, and was encamped in Monterrey when the Battle of Chapultepec occurred.<sup>121</sup> Gen. Winfield Scott, not Taylor, commanded the U.S. Army during the Mexico City campaign.

Like the Mount Holly Post No. 11 account, Gaither’s letter could indicate a leak within the Truman administration. For instance, Gaither already knew the Mexican battle flags were housed at West Point and that shortly after Truman’s trip to Mexico City the President had

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<sup>120</sup> “May Return Symbols of Defeat to Mexicans,” *Seattle Daily Times*, October 30, 1949.

<sup>121</sup> John S. D. Eisenhower, *Zachary Taylor* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 67, 78. Gen. Santa Anna and Gen. Taylor both commanded armies at the Battle of Buena Vista on February 22-23, 1847, so it is possible that the *Seattle Daily Times* simply misnamed the battle they were referring to. Nevertheless, although the U.S. Army was victorious in the battle, Santa Anna never surrendered to Gen. Taylor at Buena Vista, but simply withdrew his exhausted army from the field.

attempted to return the flags but discovered that doing so required an Act of Congress.<sup>122</sup>

However, this information almost certainly verifies Gaither's statement that he had discussed the issue with Ambassador Thurston prior to introducing the resolution. The fact that Gaither referred to Truman's attempt to return flags rather than to an actual return in 1947 further confirms that the return was accomplished without the leaking of any information to either the public or the American Legion.

It is safe to accept the validity of Gaither's story that he was the one responsible for initiating the return of Mexican flags. Unlike the other claims from New Jersey, Seattle, and Mexico City, many sources exist which support Gaither's account. In his testimony before the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs, Texas Congressman Ken Regan, author of one of the four bills submitted to the House of Representatives to return the battle flags to Mexico, stated that "the American Legion Post in Mexico suggested that these flags be exchanged," although Regan later stated that the issue was first suggested "by Mexican boys."<sup>123</sup> Also, the *Seattle Daily Times* clearly credited Gaither with first proposing the idea. Lastly, and most importantly, in a letter to President Truman, Leon Happell stated, "My source of information was in Mexico from several Legion acquaintances."<sup>124</sup>

Once Gaither's resolution was passed unanimously by Alan Seeger Post No. 2 on February 17, 1949, it was forwarded and approved by the American Legion Department of Mexico's Executive Committee. They in turn forwarded it to the American Legion's Foreign

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<sup>122</sup> Gaither, letter to Dudley, March 4, 1949, ALNHL. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

<sup>123</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 7, 10.

<sup>124</sup> Leon Happell, letter to Harry S. Truman, October 10, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.



Relations Commission in March.<sup>125</sup> At the National Executive Committee's meeting in early May, Gaither's resolution, now referred to as resolution No. 72, was approved almost word for word, the only major omission being the mention of Truman's wreath laying at the monument to the niños héroes.<sup>126</sup> In its conclusion, the resolution not only pledged the American Legion's desire to return the flags to Mexico, but called for "an Act of Congress during the present session be sponsored by The American Legion permitting such return."<sup>127</sup>

It seems unusual that a veterans' group such as the American Legion would so wholeheartedly support the return of Mexican flags when 62 years earlier, another veterans' group, the Grand Army of the Republic, so vehemently protested the return of Confederate battle flags from the American Civil War. In 1887, U.S. Army Adjutant General R. C. Drum, feeling that enough time had elapsed since the end of the war in 1865, proposed that the approximately 550 Confederate flags held by the War Department be returned to the Southern states.<sup>128</sup> Although President Grover Cleveland initially supported the proposal, the Grand Army of the Republic, the Association of the Army of the Potomac, and other veterans groups quickly and heatedly denounced the "propositions to surrender these sacred trophies of the valor of the nation's defenders."<sup>129</sup> Only in 1905, after southerners had regained their power in Congress, "proved" their loyalty by participating in the Spanish-American War (1898), and after

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<sup>125</sup> Gaither, letter to Dudley, March 4, 1949, ALNHL. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder; Henry H. Dudley, memorandum to Leon Happell, March 24, 1949, ALNHL. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

<sup>126</sup> Digest of Minutes of National Executive Committee of The American Legion, May 4-6, 1949, 222-23.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 67.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 68.

northerners had largely lost interest in the treatment of African-Americans in southern states, did the issue finally pass through Congress.<sup>130</sup>

A number of factors help explain why veterans so fervently protested the return of captured Confederate flags in 1897 but fully supported the return of captured Mexican flags in 1950. In 1897, tens of thousands of Union and Confederate veterans were still alive. For many, the Civil War had been the defining experience of their lives and their passions and memories of the war had faded little in the succeeding decades.<sup>131</sup> The generations separating the Mexican-American War from 1950, on the other hand, had practically erased the war from the national consciousness. Veterans of the war, who may have protested the return of flags in 1950 as vehemently as their compatriots did in 1897, were long dead and most other Americans cared little about the actions of a century ago. Therefore, with passions surrounding the Mexican-American War gone, there was little reason for most Americans to feel passionately about physical reminders of the war. Roscoe Gaither certainly echoed the sentiments of millions of Americans when he stated, “the flags captured from Mexico in 1847...have now no significance or value to the American people.”<sup>132</sup> The very vivid memories of World War II may have also increased support among millions of American veterans for the return of Mexican flags. Having recently returned home from bloody battlefields overseas, most veterans were certainly more than willing to surrender a few insignificant flags if the act had any chance of lessening the probabilities of another world war.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>131</sup> For more information on America’s collective memory of the Civil War and this memory’s impact on American society, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>132</sup> Gaither, letter to Dudley, March 4, 1949, ALNHL. NEC Reports, May 1949, Register and Digest folder.

## Turning an Idea into Law

In the months following the passage of resolution No. 72, members of the American Legion contacted members of Congress to ensure that the issue would be addressed by the nation's legislature. By the end of the first session of the 81<sup>st</sup> Congress on October 19, 1949, three bills had been introduced in the Senate and the House of Representatives: H. R. 6241, sponsored by Legionnaire and New Jersey Rep. Charles Howell, H. R. 6328, sponsored by Texas Rep. Lloyd Bentsen, and S. J. Res. 133, sponsored by Texas Sen. Tom Connally.<sup>133</sup> Connally's bill unanimously passed the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, of which Connally was chairman, on October 18 and passed the Senate the next day, the last day of the session.<sup>134</sup> Things did not go as smoothly in the House. Either due to the timing of the bills, the need to reconcile the differences of the two bills, or the House's focus on other matters, such as the Fair Labor Standards Amendment and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1949, Bentsen's bill failed to pass before the legislative session ended.<sup>135</sup>

Before Congress could reconvene, the American Legion's National Executive Committee met in November to once more discuss the issue of returning battle flags to Mexico. Even though Connally's bill had passed the Senate, Chairman Happell nevertheless portrayed a bleak picture in his briefing to the committee. A week earlier, Maj. Gen. Vaughan had sent a letter to Happell informing him of the return in 1947 and stating that the White House considered that the

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<sup>133</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 1-2.

<sup>134</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Session Nominations: S. J. Res. 133, S. 2342*, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., October 18, 1949, 1, 7, HST Library. RG 46, Box 7.

<sup>135</sup> Maury Maverick, letter to President Miguel Alemán, November 1, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; *Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964: A Review of Government and Politics in the Postwar Years* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1965), 638-639, 691.

idea had been taken care of.<sup>136</sup> Happell concluded, “it looks like the deal will not materialize.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, even as late as November 1949, despite the American Legion’s full support, it was never certain that the battle flags would reach Mexican hands. The bills advocating for the flags’ return could easily have been filibustered or shelved in Congress or vetoed by the President. In fact, Happell’s statement reveals the absolute necessity of President Truman’s support for the return of Mexican flags. More than any other individual, it was Truman who ultimately held the fate of the flags in his hands. Had he not fully supported the return, despite the fact that it was much more ambitious than his original intentions, Mexico never would have received the battle flags it lost a century earlier.

After Congress reconvened in January 1950, a third bill calling for the return of Mexican battle flags was presented in the House by another Texan, Rep. Ken Regan. Surprisingly, of the four bills introduced to Congress, three were sponsored by Texans. This widespread Texan support for the flag return is all the more remarkable when considering the troubled, brutal relations between Texas and Mexico in the nineteenth-century.<sup>138</sup> Unlike the previous legislation, which differed only in the authorization of appropriate funding to carry out the flag return, Regan’s H. J. Res. 387 included an important new stipulation: “That at the same time the Government of the Republic of Mexico return to the United States such flags, standards, colors, and emblems as were captured by Mexico in the Mexican War.”<sup>139</sup> In order to rectify the

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<sup>136</sup> Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053. As in his letter to Col. Beishline, Vaughan again falsely stated that the flags “were returned in President Truman’s name to President Alemán on the occasion of Alemán’s visit to Washington.”

<sup>137</sup> *Proceedings of the National Executive Committee of the American Legion*, November 4-6, 1949, 465.

<sup>138</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>139</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 1-2.

differences between the three bills, a hearing was held before a special subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on June 29, 1950.

The authors of the three House bills, as well as two State Department officials, all met before the Congressional Committee to state their views on the flag return and answer any questions. Howell, Bentsen, and Regan all discussed a number of topics, from the origins of their bills to who should attend the ceremony and where it should be held. However, one issue dominated the Congressional hearing: whether or not to require the Mexican government to return the less than one dozen captured U.S. flags in its possession.<sup>140</sup> Howell and Bentsen both argued against including such a condition, despite their support for a statement in the final report expressing their hope that the Mexican government would agree to an exchange of flags.<sup>141</sup> Regan disagreed. Despite having full faith in the assurances from Mexican Ambassador Rafael de la Colina that the Mexican Congress would discuss the issue when it reconvened in September, Regan believed that firmer language was necessary to ensure the exchange. The Texas Congressman prophetically testified, “I do not think we can get very much on hope. I think it should be presumed that Mexico will take similar action.”<sup>142</sup> The factor which ultimately decided the issue was the testimony of R. R. Rubottom, the Department of State’s Officer in Charge of Mexican Affairs. Speaking on behalf of the State Department, Rubottom expressed his opposition to any requirement compelling the Mexican government to pass similar legislation prior to the return of Mexican battle flags. Rubottom stated that any such proviso “would destroy the spontaneity and spirit of good will implicit in the original proposal.”<sup>143</sup> As the State

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 4, 7.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 11.

Department acknowledged that the Mexico City press was in full agreement with their position, the House Subcommittee elected not to require the Mexican government to return captured U.S. flags in the final legislation. Nevertheless, the centrality of this issue during the hearing reveals that the support of some individuals for the return of Mexican flags was largely motivated by self-interest. In fact, self-interest may partly explain why Regan and so many other Texans were involved in the return of Mexican flags. Apart from wanting the proposed return to take place in their districts, perhaps some Texas Congressmen supported the issue in the hopes that Mexico would agree to return not only American flags from the Mexican-American War but Texas flags captured during the Texas Revolution.

Testimony before the subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs raises one intriguing issue: whether the return of Mexican flags in 1947 and 1950 truly were the first instances of the United States government ever returning symbols of defeat to a former enemy. In questioning the representatives, Texas Congressman and Chairman of the Committee Omar Burleson twice referred to the United States handing back to Mexico a battle flag from Chapultepec in 1942, possibly the very flag cadet Juan Escutia supposedly wrapped himself in before leaping from the parapets of Chapultepec to his death.<sup>144</sup> When questioned about this

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<sup>144</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 4, 10. Burleson most likely first heard of this possible exchange while serving as secretary for Texas Congressman Sam Russell in 1941 and 1942. "Burleson, Omar Truman (1906-1991)," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001111> (accessed September 19, 2010). Like most legends, it may be impossible to know for certain which flag Juan Escutia wrapped himself in before jumping to his death at Chapultepec. If the display dedicated to the niños héroes at the National History Museum at Chapultepec Castle is any indication, it would most likely be the flag of the San Blas Battalion. The description of the San Blas flag in the Museum's official *Catalogue of the Flag Collection* indicates that the flag was flown by the Battalion during its defense of Chapultepec. The catalogue, however, makes no mention of either Juan Escutia or the niños

return, Rubottom was given permission make his statement off the record. Rubottom's assistant, Ruth Mason Hughes, testified as follows:

The Department has no knowledge of any flag being returned to Mexico. I have checked carefully. I have spoken with Ambassador Thurston, who has had the records in the Embassy at Mexico City checked. There is no such record there. I have been in the State Department for many years. I know that if any such thing were done—that is, if it were a public matter, we would have known about it. I have also checked the files of the Department. There is no record there. I spoke with former Ambassador [George] Messersmith who was down there at the time. He has a very vivid memory and that is not in his memory. He says he is practically certain that no such thing happened. (Discussion off the record.)<sup>145</sup>

The wording of Hughes' testimony seems to indicate that a return did in fact occur. Rather than clearly and definitively stating that the United States never returned a flag to Mexico, she dodged the issue, instead stating that no records or memories of a return existed.

It is highly unlikely that Truman's and Vaughan's decision to return three flags to Mexico in 1947 was influenced by this 1942 return, if it did occur. Neither man ever made any mention of a previous return of a single Mexican flag in any of their correspondence. It is also doubtful that Vaughan or Truman would have learned of the act during their respective careers. In 1942, Vaughan was Senator Truman's secretary before being recalled to active duty.<sup>146</sup> He later served as Truman's Military Aide during the latter's time as both Vice President and President and probably rarely concerned himself with issues relating to U.S.-Mexican relations prior to accompanying the President to Mexico in March 1947. Meanwhile, Truman in 1942 was busy investigating wartime military spending as chairman of the Senate Special Committee to

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héros. "Sala de los Niños Héroes/Batalla de Chapultepec," exhibit, Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City, July 13, 2010; Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 49.

<sup>145</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 13.

<sup>146</sup> General Harry H. Vaughan, interview by Charles T. Morrissey, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri, January 14 & 16, 1963, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/vaughan1.htm> (accessed September 20, 2010).

Investigate the National Defense Program, better known as the Truman Committee.<sup>147</sup> It would have been illogical for him to concern himself with a matter as irrelevant and insignificant as the return of a single Mexican flag. It is equally unlikely that Roosevelt or one of his aides told Truman of the flag return after Truman became Vice President. Truman and Roosevelt rarely interacted, either in person or otherwise, and had far more pressing issues to discuss, namely World War II. If Truman knew little about an undertaking as significant as the Manhattan Project, it can logically be assumed that he would have known nothing of an act as inconsequential as the return of a single Mexican flag in 1942.<sup>148</sup>

After debating the different versions of the bill, the House finally decided to support Connally's resolution, which had passed the Senate the previous October. On August 4, 1950, Senate Joint Resolution 133 received full approval from both houses of the U.S. Congress. It read:

*Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President is authorized to cause to be delivered to the Government of the Republic of Mexico, with such escort and such appropriate ceremony as he shall deem proper, the flags, standards, colors, and emblems of that country which were captured by the military forces of the United States in the Mexican War of 1846-1848 and are now in the custody of the National Military Establishment.*

SEC. 2. Such sums as are necessary to carry out the purposes of this joint resolution are hereby authorized to be appropriated.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 259. The author of one of the bills to return Mexican battle flags, Senator Tom Connally of Texas, also served on the Truman Committee.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>149</sup> U.S. Congress, Authorizing the return to Mexico of the flags, standards, colors, and emblems that were captured by the United States in the Mexican War, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., August 4, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053. Senate Joint Resolution 133's mention of the National Military Establishment instead of the Department of Defense is due to the timing of the bill. The bill was first introduced in Congress on September 29, 1949. The War Department was renamed the Department of Defense a month and a half earlier, on August 10, 1949. Although this should have been enough time for Connally to change the language of the bill prior to its introduction, this



While the issue was receiving final approval in Congress, an equally important debate was raging in the Truman administration between the State Department and the Department of the Army.

The State Department fully supported the return of battle flags to Mexico, believing that the action would “be a great stimulation to the spirit of good will and friendship between the two countries.”<sup>150</sup> Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr., on the other hand, acting on behalf of the Department of Defense, opposed relinquishing the trophies since the “retention of captured colors is a traditional practice of all sovereign states.”<sup>151</sup> Although this may seem like a selfish position to advocate, it was a legitimate one. Never before had the United States returned captured war trophies to a former foreign enemy.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, World War II had only ended five years prior to this debate. If Mexico were given back all of its lost battle flags, similar propositions may arise to return war trophies or spoils of war to Germany, Japan, or to any other country the U.S. had faced in battle throughout its history. Officials within the Department of the Army must have shuddered at the headache involved in the possibility of such an enormous undertaking.

Both sides also disagreed on whether the return of Mexico’s battle flags should be “conditioned upon the reciprocal delivery to the United States of American emblems.” Like

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misnaming was not uncommon. In a September 8, 1950 memorandum to Truman containing a draft of the President’s message to be read at the ceremony at Chapultepec five days later, the State Department incorrectly referred to the Department of Defense as the National Military Establishment. The error was fortunately corrected in the final draft. Dean Acheson, memorandum to President Harry Truman, September 8, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>150</sup> Roger W. Jones, letter to William J. Hopkins, August 4, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> “May Return Symbols of Defeat to Mexicans,” *Seattle Daily Times*, October 30, 1949.

Congressman Ken Regan, the Department of the Army believed that the return of the flags to Mexico should include a reciprocal return of captured American flags. The State Department, on the other hand, as it had done in its testimony before the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs, continued to oppose this proposal. Nevertheless, despite the Department of the Army's objections to the act, it did not recommend a veto of the bill. Although Secretary Pace advocated that "the traditional practice with reference to the retention of captured flags, standards, colors and emblems, should be adhered to," he acknowledged that "[the Department of the Army] regards this measure as an exception to said practice which has been approved for reasons of international import beyond the purview of this Department, and on that basis does not oppose its approval."<sup>153</sup>

The Department of the Army's reluctant approval of S. J. Res. 133 reflected the fact that by August 1950, their position was no longer tenable. In November 1949, former Texas Congressman Maury Maverick had written a letter to Mexican President Miguel Alemán notifying him of the bills in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to return Mexican battle flags.<sup>154</sup> It is unknown whether President Alemán knew of the proposed action before Maverick's letter or whether the Texas Congressman was intentionally trying to put added pressure on Congress to pass the bills and ensure the flags' return to Mexico. Maverick's correspondence was also not the only piece of mail concerning the return of Mexican flags to reach Alemán's office. In the following months, the Mexican President received numerous communiqués from the mayor of Brownsville, TX, the Lower Rio Grande Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Nuevo Laredo Chamber of Commerce, and from other citizens and

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<sup>153</sup> Roger W. Jones, letter to William J. Hopkins, August 4, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; Frank Pace, Jr., letter to Frederick J. Lawton, August 2, 1950, HST Library. White House Records Office Files, Box 70.

<sup>154</sup> Maverick, letter to Alemán, November 1, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

organizations, both Mexican and American, discussing the proposed legislation in the U.S. Congress and requesting that the flag ceremony take place in their respective communities.<sup>155</sup> The Mexican government's knowledge of the U.S. effort to return the Mexican flags meant that the retention of the flags now posed a new problem. The Defense Department recognized the unfavorable reaction, and perhaps public outcry, which would now emerge if the U.S. government failed to return the flags.<sup>156</sup> Thus, the Defense Department grudgingly accepted the necessity of relinquishing the captured flags into Mexican custody. On August 4, 1950, the bill overcame its final hurdle. Having already received the full support of Congress, S. J. Res. 133 arrived on President Truman's desk where it was quickly endorsed and signed into law as Public Law 660.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> H. L. Stockely, telegram to President Alemán, March 24, 1950; Jack H. Drake, letter to President Alemán, November 25, 1949; Cámara Nacional de Comercio, telegram to President Alemán, April 3, 1950; Tomás de León Chavira, telegram to President Alemán, February 2, 1950; Esteban J. Pérez, et al., letter to President Alemán, December 6, 1949; Sociedad Mutualista 'Santiago M. Belden,' telegram to President Alemán, April 17, 1950, AGN. MAV 549.11/4.

<sup>156</sup> Jones, letter to Hopkins, August 4, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>157</sup> Harris, memorandum for Beishline, August 24, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

## **Chapter 3 – Binding up the Nations’ Wounds: The Final Return, September 13, 1950**

Even before the bill to return Mexican flags was signed into law, questions arose over what kind of ceremony should accompany the return, where it should be held, and who should be involved. Although only the Senate had passed the necessary legislation, throughout November and December 1949, Truman was bombarded with letters from Congressmen and local officials suggesting numerous locations for a proposed flag ceremony. In his letter to President Alemán, former Congressman Maverick suggested numerous cities along or near the border of Mexico and the United States, including Monterrey, San Antonio, Laredo, Nuevo Laredo, El Paso, and Juarez.<sup>158</sup> Meanwhile, Texas Congressman Lloyd Bentsen, who had introduced H. R. 6328, proposed to have the ceremony within his congressional district, preferably at the border crossing in the town of McAllen.<sup>159</sup> The President of the Chamber of Commerce of Alpine, Texas also wrote to President Truman, proposing that the flag return occur during the October 1950 dedication ceremonies for Big Bend National Park.<sup>160</sup> Perhaps the most questionable recommendation came from the 15<sup>th</sup> District of the Texas American Legion. This group recommended that the area of Resaca de la Palma (near Brownsville, Texas) be declared neutral territory for the exchange of flags.<sup>161</sup> Since this area was also the site of the Mexican defeat at the Battle of Resaca de la Palma in 1846, one of the Mexican-American War’s earliest

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<sup>158</sup> Maverick, letter to Alemán, November 1, 1949, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>159</sup> Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., letter to President Truman, November 18, 1949, HST Library. OF 200, Box 852.

<sup>160</sup> Don Adams, cross reference sheet, December 7, 1949, HST Library. OF 146, Box 755.

<sup>161</sup> Matthew J. Connelly, note to President Truman, January 24, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

engagements, the Mexican government undoubtedly would have refused to participate in a ceremony there.

Most petitions, however, advocated that the proposed flag ceremony take place at Brownsville, Texas in mid-February 1950. This date was to coincide with Charro Days, an annual Brownsville event celebrating international friendship, life on the border, and the shared culture and history of the American and Mexican people.<sup>162</sup> Brownsville seemed a logical choice for a number of reasons. Physically, Brownsville was located along the Rio Grande opposite the city of Matamoros, Mexico, ensuring that large numbers of both Americans and Mexicans would be able to attend the ceremony. Brownsville's location along the border also closely tied the city economically to Mexico. These important economic links meant that Brownsville could potentially benefit the most from having the ceremony. As Jack Drake, General Manager of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Chamber of Commerce, told President Truman, "no region has a greater need for close cooperation with Mexico."<sup>163</sup>

Petitions from the Lower Rio Grande Valley also listed secondary reasons for Truman to attend the flag ceremony in their region. Paul Vickers, Manager of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce, described to the President the wonderful fishing opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley and also listed a political motive: "there is a rising tide of Republicans in the Valley that a visit from you might stem."<sup>164</sup> Psychologically, Brownsville also seemed a logical choice for the flag ceremony as some of the first shots of the Mexican-American War were fired at Fort Brown.

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<sup>162</sup> "The History of Charro Days," Charro Days Fiesta, Inc., 2007, <http://www.charrodaysfiesta.com/history.htm> (accessed October 8, 2010).

<sup>163</sup> Jack. H. Drake, letter to President Truman, November 25, 1949, HST Library. OF 200, Box 857.

<sup>164</sup> Paul T. Vickers, letter to President Truman, November 26, 1949, HST Library. OF 200, Box 860; Paul T. Vickers, letter to President Truman, December 9, 1949, HST Library. OF 200, Box 857.

According to Jack Drake, a ceremony near the historic fort would therefore “be fitting to commemorate the spirit of friendship that has developed between Mexico and the United States since those dark days.”<sup>165</sup>

The main problem with selecting Brownsville for the flag ceremony was the date. By the time the petitions began reaching the White House in November and December 1949, the necessary legislation had not yet passed through both houses of Congress. Although the Senate had already approved Connally’s S. J. Res. 133, the House had failed to vote on either Howell’s or Bentsen’s bills before the first session of the 81<sup>st</sup> Congress ended on October 19, 1949. With Congress not scheduled to reconvene until January 3, 1950, there would be little time for the House to discuss and vote on the issue prior to the start of Charro Days on February 16.

Perhaps swayed by the arguments of the Texas petitions, Truman initially agreed that the flag ceremony should be held along the U.S.-Mexican border. On January 9, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson met with President Truman to discuss the flag return. In a memorandum of the meeting, Acheson described how the flag exchange would take place:

on some stand which will be placed in the river [President Truman will] hand one Mexican flag to President Alemán and receive one American flag from him, the remainder of the flags to be returned in a less formal way. Plans are being made for a large gathering of Mexican people to listen to the ceremony from the Mexican bank and a similar group to listen from the US bank. Neither President would leave his own country. President Truman would like to do this.<sup>166</sup>

Acheson concurred with Truman on these proposed plans. Although the Secretary of State never mentions in which community the exchange would take place, a cross reference sheet of the

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<sup>165</sup> Jack. H. Drake, letter to President Truman, November 25, 1949, HST Library. OF 200, Box 857.

<sup>166</sup> Dean Acheson, memorandum of meeting with the President, January 9, 1950, HST Library. Dean Acheson Papers, Box 66.

meeting revealed that the flag return would be held at Brownsville, Texas.<sup>167</sup> These early conceptions for the flag return show both the importance of Mexican cooperation in ensuring that a ceremony take place and the equal roles Mexican and American officials were to play in the flag ceremony. By meeting at the border of their respective countries and publicly exchanging a single flag, Truman and Alemán would be acting on equal footing, ensuring that neither side felt any humiliation or disrespect. From their conversation, it is clear that Acheson and Truman also envisioned not merely a return of Mexican flags but a reciprocal exchange of flags. Both men acknowledged that the Mexican Congress would not meet again until September 1950, making the probable date of the exchange February 1951 during Brownsville's next Charro Days.<sup>168</sup>

Although he had already discussed the issue with Truman and earned the President's approval, Acheson recognized that the return of captured Mexican flags was a delicate political issue and therefore discussed the matter with the Mexican Ambassador later that day. Ambassador de la Colina opposed the U.S. government's proposal for a flag exchange along the border. Acheson reported that the Mexican government instead preferred a "dignified small ceremony limited primarily to military officials...a large public fiesta at one of the border towns would be inappropriate and lacking in dignity."<sup>169</sup> In order to avoid holding the ceremony along the border, the Mexican Ambassador suggested it be held in either Washington, D.C. or Mexico City. The State Department quickly abandoned its former plans and agreed to comply with the Mexican government's suggestions. De la Colina's hostility toward a flag exchange along the border must have been vehement as George M. Elsey, Administrative Assistant to the President,

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<sup>167</sup> Dean Acheson, Cross Reference Sheet, January 23, 1950, HST Library. Confidential File, Box 41.

<sup>168</sup> Dean Acheson, memorandum of meeting with the President, January 9, 1950, HST Library. Dean Acheson Papers, Box 66.

<sup>169</sup> Dean Acheson, memorandum for President Truman, January 23, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

later revealed that the State Department felt “[embarrassed] by comments from various congressmen and patriotic organizations in this country who would like to make a junket to Mexico at the time the flags are returned.”<sup>170</sup>

The State Department had other reasons for supporting a small, dignified ceremony. An excessive celebration could be detrimental to relations between the United States and Mexico, erasing the friendship and cooperation Truman had helped establish during his first term in office. In a telegram to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Walter Thurston indicated that a large, public ceremony would create a substantial amount of adverse criticism, particularly by Mexican communists, who would mark the gesture as an effort to buy Mexican support.<sup>171</sup> This was a legitimate concern. In July 1949, Mexican officials worried that if a memorandum regarding a Mexican oil loan to the United States was made public, strong anti-U.S. demonstrations would break out across Mexico, seriously straining U.S.-Mexican relations.<sup>172</sup> Luckily, the memorandum was never publicized, preventing relations between the two countries from seriously suffering as a consequence.

Thurston also helped narrow down the proposed list of sites for the ceremony. The Ambassador suggested that it would be inappropriate to ask Mexico to “come and get [the] flags in Washington.” Other cities in Mexico, such as Veracruz or Puebla, were also deemed unsuitable locations due to their position along General Winfield Scott’s 1847 invasion of

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<sup>170</sup>George M. Elsey, memorandum for Matthew J. Connelly, August 9, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>171</sup>Walter Thurston, telegram to Dean Acheson, August 8, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>172</sup>Fred T. Bridges, letter to Dr. John Steelman, July 14, 1949, HST Library. OF 146, Box 755.



Mexico.<sup>173</sup> With all other contending sites rejected by either the U.S. or Mexican governments, the proposed ceremony would be held in the only suitable location remaining: Mexico City. The Mexican Ambassador specifically recommended two sites within the capital: Chapultepec Castle and the Colegio Militar. Chapultepec Castle would eventually be chosen because of its significance in Mexican history.<sup>174</sup>

### **Cold War Concerns and Final Preparations**

Ambassador Thurston's telegram reveals just how extensive the Cold War had permeated all facets of U.S. foreign relations by August 1950. In the three years since the initial return of three flags to Mexico, the Cold War had escalated significantly. Internationally, the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic bomb, China's government had fallen to communist forces led by Mao Tse-tung, the French were losing control of Indochina to Ho Chi Minh's communists, and communist North Korea had invaded South Korea.<sup>175</sup> Domestically, things looked little better. Alger Hiss, a State Department official, had been accused of being a Soviet spy and convicted of perjury, while Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy had publicly accused the State Department of widespread communist infiltration.<sup>176</sup> With communists seemingly everywhere, fear gripped the country.

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<sup>173</sup> A few city names have changed spelling since the Mexican-American War. For example, "Vera Cruz" is now spelled "Veracruz" and "Monterey" has become "Monterrey." The present-day spellings have been used in this study except when in quotations.

<sup>174</sup> Dean Acheson and Louis Johnson, memorandum for President Truman, August 31, 1950, HST Library, OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>175</sup> "The Cold War Turns Hot," exhibit, Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum, Independence, MO, August 27, 2010.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

U.S. policymakers were concerned not only with containing the spread of communism in Asia and in Europe, but with preventing it from ever taking hold in the Western Hemisphere. It was imperative that Mexico not fall to communism for a number of different reasons. During World War II, Mexico had played a vital role in supplying laborers to American industries, with over 150,000 Mexican workers assisting the U.S. railroad system alone.<sup>177</sup> Mexico was also an important source of raw materials during the war and the country's supplies of zinc, aluminum, lead, steel, oil, and natural gas would again be needed if war erupted between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, Mexico's greatest significance did not lie in its abundance of labor and raw materials, but in its symbolic importance. U.S. policymakers throughout the Cold War viewed all of Latin America as the United States' sphere of influence, due to the long history of U.S. involvement in the area beginning with the issuance of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.<sup>178</sup> This psychological importance of Latin America led Dwight D. Eisenhower to intervene in Guatemala in 1954 and John F. Kennedy to intervene in Cuba following Fidel Castro's successful overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's regime in 1959. Mexico's location meant that its fall to communism would decrease U.S. prestige more than any other Latin American country. Communism in Mexico also posed a particularly dangerous threat to U.S. security, due to the nearly 2,000-mile-long border the country shared with the United States.

The U.S. intelligence community believed there was a very real communist threat to Mexico. Echoing the dire situation predicted by former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Messersmith if Mexico's grain needs were not met, a 1948 Federal Bureau of Investigation report painted an equally dismal picture of the political situation in the U.S.'s southern

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<sup>177</sup> James F. Byrnes, memorandum to President Truman, July 19, 1946, HST Library. OF 146, Box 754.

<sup>178</sup> Lars Schoultz, *National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 275.

neighbor.<sup>179</sup> According to the report, communists already controlled the federal government. The group not only comprised 60 percent of government officials, but held numerous positions of leadership within the government and showed no loyalty to the Alemán administration. To make matters worse, Alemán's administration was plagued with fraudulent monetary transactions and was fast losing popularity and sympathy among the Mexican public. The FBI report described the situation outside of the government as equally alarming. Communists constituted 70 percent of the professors at the National University and the country was fast becoming a center of communist propaganda transmitted directly from Moscow. The report concluded with a bleak prediction, "Mexico is going rapidly to chaos and confusion, and very soon will be a real menace for peace in America."<sup>180</sup>

Perhaps heeding the advice of grossly exaggerated reports like this, the Truman administration worked tirelessly to further the Good Neighbor Policy. To ensure the political and economic stability of Mexico, the U.S. government supported loans for the development of Mexican infrastructure and undertook numerous joint ventures with the Mexican government. Even without these numerous efforts though, the odds of Mexico falling to communism remained slim throughout the Cold War. Many Mexicans did sympathize with communists. Throughout 1949 and 1950, Mexican citizens sent numerous letters and telegrams to the Alemán administration requesting the political recognition of the Communist Party and denouncing the

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<sup>179</sup> The FBI had been monitoring leftist subversives in Mexico since the 1920s. In 1948, the Central Intelligence Agency likewise established an office in Mexico City and worked with the Alemán administration primarily in eliminating communists from labor unions. Mischka, "U.S.-Mexican Political and Economic Relations during the Truman Era," 137.

<sup>180</sup> C. M., FBI report on communist situation in Mexico, January 2, 1948, AGN. MAV 544.61/5.

Mexican government's anti-communist raids and jailings.<sup>181</sup> Nevertheless, communist support in Mexico remained small. Out of a country of nearly 30 million people, less than 37,000 were registered Communists.<sup>182</sup> As with the widespread communist paranoia in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the fears of a communist uprising in Mexico were largely unfounded. With Alemán cracking down on domestic communism and the Mexican economy in the midst of a period of sustained growth known as the "Mexican Miracle," communists stood little chance of overthrowing the Mexican government.<sup>183</sup>

Worries over the pervasiveness of communism in Mexico did little to impede planning for the return of Mexican battle flags. Once Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City had been decided upon as the location of the ceremony, the U.S. and Mexican governments next had to choose an appropriate date. Although Leon Happell and the American Legion had originally

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<sup>181</sup> Jose Veloz, letter to Miguel Alemán, March 2, 1950; Alberto Morales, telegram to Miguel Alemán, February 23, 1950; Jose Celada, telegram to Miguel Alemán, February 21, 1950; María G. viuda de Morales, telegram to Miguel Alemán, January 25, 1949; Unión de Voceadores y Distribuidores de Periódicos, telegram to Miguel Alemán, February 4, 1949; Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Hoteles, Restaurantes, Cantinas y Similares de la República Mexicana, telegram to Miguel Alemán, February 8, 1949; Sindicato de Trabajadores de Expendios de Gasolina, Conexos y Similares del Estado de Hidalgo, telegram to Miguel Alemán, January 22, 1949, AGN. MAV 544.61/5.

<sup>182</sup> Consejo Nacional de Población, México, "Figure 2. Total Population and Natural and Total Growth Rates, Mexico, 1900-2050," 2002, [http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/EGMPopAge/Partida\\_Figures.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/EGMPopAge/Partida_Figures.pdf) (accessed October 20, 2010); Marcos Serna de Méndez, telegram to Miguel Alemán, September 18, 1948, AGN. MAV 544.61/5.

<sup>183</sup> Although analysts at the time viewed the "Mexican Miracle" as an actual economic miracle, in retrospect, the period was a false miracle. Between 1935 and 1970, the Mexican economy was marked by declining personal incomes, widening disparities between rich and poor, and an all-time low for the Mexican minimum wage. David Barkin, "Mexico: Towards a New Understanding," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 1 (January 4-10, 2003): 29; Susan M. Gauss, *Made in Mexico: Regions, Nation, and the State in the Rise of Mexican Industrialism, 1920s-1940s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 246. For more on the "Mexican Miracle," see also Clark W. Reynolds, *The Mexican Economy: Twentieth-Century Structure and Growth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

proposed that the ceremony be held two days before Flag Day in Mexico on February 22, 1950, the necessary legislation had failed to pass until August, thus making an exchange on that date impossible. Brownsville, Texas's Charro Days was likewise not a possibility, having already taken place in mid-February as well. The next date which was advocated by U.S. officials and which corresponded to an important Mexican historical event or holiday was September 13, 1950. It is unknown when this date was first advocated, or specifically by whom. However, it appeared in correspondence less than three weeks after the signing of Senate Joint Resolution 133 and by August 31, it was the tentative date set for the ceremony. September 13, 1950 was regarded as an appropriate and significant date for the flag ceremony because it marked the 103<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Chapultepec. On that day in 1847, the U.S. Army under General Scott had assaulted the Mexican-held position at Chapultepec Castle, also the site of the Mexican Military Academy. It was during this assault that the six niños héroes committed suicide rather than surrender to the U.S. forces, giving rise to their legendary status in Mexico.

Since September 13 coincided with a decisive Mexican defeat during the Mexican-American War, it was a potentially controversial choice. However, the U.S. government believed it appropriate due to its association with the niños héroes. In fact, the choice of September 13, as well as many other decisions surrounding the return of Mexican battle flags, revealed the important role of the niños héroes in the Mexican national identity. In a telegram to Dean Acheson, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Walter Thurston revealed that because of the "distasteful recollection" of the Mexican-American War, "Mexicans have centered national tradition around Cadet heroes who sacrificed themselves in defense of Chapultepec Castle."<sup>184</sup> The war was a humiliating and humbling experience for both the Mexican Army and the

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<sup>184</sup> Thurston, telegram to Acheson, August 8, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

Mexican nation, one in which their armies suffered defeat on every battlefield and their capital was occupied by an invading army. The personal sacrifices of the niños héroes therefore marked the only significant event during the war which the Mexican people could truly remember with admiration and pride.<sup>185</sup>

Interestingly enough, according to Mexican historian Alejandro Rosas, the niños héroes did not attain their legendary status in Mexico until the Miguel Alemán administration. Rosas states that the elevation to hero status of the six youths stemmed largely from two twentieth-century events which brought new attention to their tragic story: Truman's 1947 wreath laying at the monument dedicated to their memory and, shortly thereafter, the discovery of six skeletons at the base of Chapultepec Hill, which the Alemán government immediately declared belonged undoubtedly to the niños héroes.<sup>186</sup> In the waning months of Alemán's presidency, work also began on a new, larger monument to the six youths at the base of Chapultepec Hill.<sup>187</sup> Known as "the Altar to the Homeland," the marble monument consists of six eagle-adorned pillars surrounding a sculpture of a woman alongside two youths, one standing defiantly at her side and a recently-expired one in her left arm. All three figures are enwrapped in the Mexican flag,

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<sup>185</sup> The story of the San Patricio Battalion also features prominently in most museum exhibits and other public recollections of the Mexican-American War. It is an interesting, ironic, and perhaps hypocritical, fact that the Mexican memory of the Mexican-American War has become so closely tied to the niños héroes. Mexico was in the 1840s, and remains to this day, a predominantly Catholic country. Since the Catholic Church believes that suicide is a sin, the deaths of the niños héroes seem to contradict the moral teachings of Catholicism. Apparently, the willingness of the niños héroes to die for their country instead of submit to a foreign authority has, in this instance, superseded their country's cultural and religious norms. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (n.p.: Doubleday, 2003), 609.

<sup>186</sup> Alejandro Rosas, "Una Historia Mal Contada: Los Niños Héroes," *Relatos e Historias en México*, September 2009, 49.

<sup>187</sup> *Reseña Gráfica Presidencial*, ed. Marín, 100-101.

below which are emblazoned the words “A los Defensores de la Patria, 1846-1847.”<sup>188</sup> Today the imposing monument dominates the main entrance to Chapultepec Park along Paseo de la Reforma. The six cadets are also immortalized throughout Mexico City in the name of a Metro station as well as in the names of numerous streets and public places.<sup>189</sup>

The recollection of the niños héroes featured prominently in the considerations over the size of the September 1950 ceremony and who should be involved. Both sides had made it clear that the return of Mexican flags should be a small affair limited primarily to military personnel. In keeping with the memory of the niños héroes, the U.S. Guard of Honor would be composed of cadets and midshipmen from all branches of the service: ten senior cadets from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, seven midshipmen from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD, and seven cadets from the Air Force Training Base at Randolph Field, TX.<sup>190</sup> These cadets

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<sup>188</sup> “To the Defenders of the Homeland, 1846-1847” is the English translation of this phrase.

<sup>189</sup> For more on Mexican modernity, as well as the symbolism and significance of monuments, statues, memorials, and other landmarks in Latin America, see Claudia Agostoni, *Monuments of Progress: Modernization and Public Health in Mexico City, 1876-1910* (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2003); Michael K. Steinberg and Matthew J. Taylor, “Public Memory and Political Power in Guatemala’s Postconflict Landscape,” *Geographical Review* 93, no. 4 (October 2003): 449-468.

<sup>190</sup> “1847 Flags Return to Mexican Hands,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1950, 27 (L); “Mexican Flags Returned,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1950, 20 (L); The Air Force did not become a separate branch of the armed forces until September 18, 1947. The U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO, was not established until 1954. Air Force cadets received instruction at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, CO until 1958, when they were finally moved to the current site at Colorado Springs; the first class graduated the following spring. Unfortunately, neither the U.S. Air Force Academy nor Randolph Field has any record of the cadets which participated in the 1950 ceremony. The seven midshipmen which formed the honor guard from the U.S. Naval Academy were William B. Haff, Robert E. Innes, Boyd W. Johnson, William P. Lawrence, Douglas F. Mow, John G. Tillson, and James A. Winnefeld. Officials at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point could not be reached. Bryan, e-mail interview by author, October 6, 2010.

and midshipmen were seen as the group least likely to offend Mexican pride.<sup>191</sup> Mexican cadets would likewise be included in the ceremony to receive the flags.

The U.S. cadets and midshipmen would be joined by roughly 85 other officers and military personnel from all branches of the armed forces. Interested members of Congress and representatives of the American Legion and other organizations were also invited to join the military delegation and participate in the ceremony.<sup>192</sup> Although President Alemán would be attending the ceremony, President Truman would remain in Washington, D.C. This decision was likely based on the tenuous U.S. situation in Korea rather than a sign of Truman's disapproval of the return of Mexican flags. Instead, Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, Lieutenant General Wade H. Haislip, would lead the delegation as the Special Representative of the President of the United States.<sup>193</sup> Brigadier General Bryant Moore, Taylor's successor as Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, and U.S. Navy Commander John R. Blackburn would also attend the ceremony. Although the U.S. delegation may seem too large for the small ceremony desired by both the Mexican government and the U.S. State Department, the U.S. government believed the delegation's size conformed to the original wishes. In fact, the Bureau of the Budget considered the cost of the entire undertaking too small to even warrant the submission of a budget estimate.<sup>194</sup> Mexican officials apparently agreed, as the correspondence between both governments contained no letter disapproving of the delegation's size.

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<sup>191</sup> Thurston, telegram to Acheson, August 8, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>192</sup> Frederick J. Lawton, memorandum for William J. Hopkins, September 5, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>193</sup> Acheson and Johnson, memorandum for Truman, August 31, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>194</sup> Lawton, memorandum for Hopkins, September 5, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.



## Noble Sons Returned

On Tuesday, September 12, 1950, over 100 years since they last touched Mexican soil, the captured Mexican battle flags and the U.S. delegation accompanying them arrived at Mexico City's Central Airport. The Mexican people greeted their long lost flags with a level of enthusiasm and excitement perhaps more befitting the arrival of a national hero or a foreign head of state than a group of tattered war trophies captured more than a century ago. As the flags emerged from their three transport planes, a 21-gun salute was fired and the Mexican Military Academy band played the Mexican national hymn. The bulk of the flags were then placed in a flag-draped weapons carrier while those which were still in relatively good condition were unfurled and carried by U.S. cadets and midshipmen from the airport to the National Palace. The entire eight-mile route was lined with an honor guard of 10,000 armed Mexican troops and thousands of Mexican onlookers. When the procession finally arrived at the National Palace, the flags were greeted with much applause by the assembled government and army officials. The bells of the nearby Metropolitan Cathedral were rung and the cadets of the Mexican Military Academy fired a salute. The flags were then placed in the trophy room of the National Palace before their formal surrender the following morning.<sup>195</sup>

The next day, September 13, the U.S. delegation met with Mexican officials at the base of Chapultepec Castle near the monument to the niños héroes, the same monument at which President Truman had famously laid a wreath three years earlier. During the ceremony, a single, faded red and gold guidon was handed to President Alemán from Gen. Wade Haislip. Twelve

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<sup>195</sup> "La Patria Recobra las Banderas Perdidas en el 47," *Novedades*, September 13, 1950; "Captured Flags Now Returned to Mexico," *El Universal*, September 13, 1950; "U.S. Officially to Return Mexican Battle Flags at 10 a.m. Today," *Novedades*, September 13, 1950.

other flags were unfurled and presented to black-uniformed Mexican cadets by their American counterparts.<sup>196</sup> Due to the fragility of the other 57 flags, they were not included in the ceremony, but remained on display in the National Palace.<sup>197</sup>



**Figure 3. Guidon Presented to President Alemán (Flag 10-114851)**

Source: Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas* (México, D.F.: Secretaria de Gobernación, 1990), 77.

During the short ceremony, Ambassador Thurston read a speech on President Truman's behalf, authorizing the return of the battle flags. The speech acknowledged the past, troubled relations of the two countries and the bloody sacrifices both sides endured during the Mexican-American War. However, its main emphasis was not on the past, but on the present and future relations between the two countries. To this end, the U.S. government considered the return of Mexico's battle flags as "a fitting tribute to the spirit of friendship and peace which marks the present-day relations between our two countries" and the desire that "friendship, understanding,

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<sup>196</sup> "Battle Flags Returned to Pres. Alemán," *El Universal*, September 14, 1950. Judging from newspaper photographs of the event, the flag which was presented to President Alemán was labeled by the Museo Nacional de Historia as flag number 10-114851. In the flag's center is an embroidered gold eagle perched atop a cactus. Although the flag belonged to an infantry unit, details on when or where the flag was captured are not listed in the Museum's description of the flag. Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 77.

<sup>197</sup> "Battle Flags Returned to Pres. Alemán," *El Universal*, September 14, 1950.

respect and peace...shall constitute the permanent foundations of [the American people's] relations with the people of Mexico.”<sup>198</sup>

Thurston's remarks were followed by speeches from other notable dignitaries in attendance. Brigadier General Haislip paid tribute to the niños héroes, stating that their sacrifices “will never be forgotten; but happily we have forgotten long since the passions and suspicions which gave rise to the struggle in which they perished.” Mexican officials expressed their deep and sincere appreciation for the return of their battle flags. Mexico's Defense Minister General Gilberto Limón stated that the American gesture and tribute to the niños héroes was “unparalleled in the history of nations.” Nowhere was the pervasiveness of the memory of the niños héroes in the day's events more apparent than in Gen. Limón's remarks. Speaking to the six deceased cadets in his speech, Limón proclaimed,

Juan de la Barrera, Agustín Melgar, Fernando Montes de Oca, Francisco Márquez, Juan Escutia, Vicente Suárez: honor and glory are yours. The greatness of your sacrifice has made possible, on this day dedicated to your memory, a ceremony symbolic of mutual loyalty and respect which will remain forever deeply engraved in the hearts of the Mexican people. If your spirits are present here, let them behold how in this historic moment two people salute you with veneration and how, on the spot where your generous blood was shed, they unite themselves, for their own good and greatness, in a close embrace of cordial friendship.<sup>199</sup>

Gen. Limón also echoed the sentiments in Thurston's speech for lasting, amicable relations between Mexico and the United States, adding, “the war flags returned today have been converted into peace flags which are true symbols of friendship.” The flags were then placed in Chapultepec Castle, where, according to President Alemán, they reposed “surrounded by the august spirits of the boy heroes of 1847.” After the ceremony, the U.S. delegation remained in

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<sup>198</sup> Walter Thurston, speaking on behalf of Harry S. Truman, Speech at Mexican Flag Ceremony (speech, Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City, Mexico, September 13, 1950). HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>199</sup> “U.S. Presents Flags to Mexico, Promises Perpetual Friendship,” *Novedades*, September 14, 1950.

Mexico for three more days to join in celebrating Independence Day in Mexico (September 16) as the guests of the Mexican Defense Ministry before returning to the United States.<sup>200</sup>

According to all newspaper accounts, a total of 69 Mexican battle flags were returned during the ceremony on September 13. This number differs slightly from the original 66 flags housed by the U.S. Defense Department at West Point and the 7 held at the U.S. Naval Academy. Taking into account the three flags which were given to the Mexican Ambassador by Maj. Gen. Vaughan in 1947, a total of 70 flags should have been available for the 1950 ceremony. The missing flag undoubtedly was kept at West Point, as the seven flags returned by the U.S. Naval Academy are all accounted for today in the flag collection of Mexico's Museo Nacional de Historia.<sup>201</sup> Unfortunately, due to the brief descriptions of many of the flags in the U.S. Military Academy's possession, it is impossible to know precisely which flag was not relinquished.

The fate of this one flag and whether or not it was returned to Mexico with the others remains unknown. Correspondence between American officials fails to mention if a single flag was retained for any particular reason. As most of the flags were already in very poor condition, it is unlikely that West Point officials would have held onto a flag for preservation purposes. The descriptions of the U.S. Military Academy's flags reveal that some of them, such as Flag 4125 and 4173, were not complete flags, but merely pieces of Mexican flags.<sup>202</sup> Nevertheless, it is also unreasonable to think that U.S. and Mexican newspapers would have universally refused

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<sup>200</sup> "1847 Flags Return to Mexican Hands," *New York Times*, September 14, 1950; Miguel Alemán, letter to Harry S. Truman, September 13, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053; "1847 Flags Return to Mexican Hands," *New York Times*, September 14, 1950.

<sup>201</sup> See footnote 50; Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

<sup>202</sup> Patterson, memorandum for Vaughan, March 26, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

to acknowledge one such tattered flag in their totals when West Point clearly included the flag in its own catalogue. The openness of West Point officials throughout the process of returning the flags also rules out a possibility that anyone at the U.S. Military Academy knowingly withheld a single flag for self-serving reasons. Perhaps this single flag was not retained by the United States but in fact returned to Mexico in 1942 as Texas Congressman Omar Burleson referred to in his statements as Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in June 1950. If this return was carried out as secretly as the 1947 flag return, officials at West Point may not have discovered that their collection contained 65 (not 66) flags until shortly before the flags were sent to Mexico in 1950. Sadly, the fate of this flag remains unknown.

It is also worth noting that no American flags were returned to the U.S. delegation while in Mexico City. Although Congressman Ken Regan and Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr. had both argued that any proposed ceremony should include a reciprocal exchange of American flags, State Department officials and others in the Truman administration had successfully opposed the enactment of such a measure.<sup>203</sup> The return of U.S. flags on September 13, 1950, would have been impossible anyway, since the Mexican Congress had reconvened less than two weeks earlier on September 1. By waiting for the Mexican Congress to pass similar legislation granting the return of U.S. flags, an exchange would have been pushed back until at least the fall of 1951.<sup>204</sup>

### **Mexican and American Reactions to the Return**

The September 13 ceremony at Chapultepec Castle was very well received in Mexico. In a letter to President Truman, President Alemán referred to “the patriotic emotion with which the

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<sup>203</sup> Jones, letter to Hopkins, August 4, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>204</sup> Acheson, memorandum for Truman, January 23, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

Mexican people received their flags” and “the high significance which we attribute to the noble gesture of the people of the United States.”<sup>205</sup> This same “high significance” was felt within the Mexican press. In the two weeks prior to the flags’ return, the story received almost constant coverage in the newspapers *El Universal*, *El Universal Gráfico*, *Novedades*, and *El Nacional*. Like most of the papers, in *El Universal* the flag return made front page news as early as September 1, 1950, and for the next two weeks, hardly a day went by without a front page story detailing the latest developments on the flag return. Overall, the flag return not only made front page headlines in these four newspapers a total of 27 times between September 1 and September 15, but received further coverage in editorials, political cartoons, full page photo spreads and descriptions of the ceremony, and graced the English-language pages of *El Universal* and *Novedades* eleven times.

The editorials which appeared in *El Universal*, *Novedades*, and *El Nacional* universally praised the United States for returning to Mexico its lost battle flags. One *Novedades* writer viewed the flags “as noble sons that have returned,” which Mexico would not only lovingly receive but would preserve “as sacred cloths in the national shrine.”<sup>206</sup> Although these sentiments were representative of the majority of the general public, not all Mexicans approved of the flags’ return. Alluding to the charges of some critics, *Novedades* columnist Eduardo Enrique Rios defended the return, stating that the action “is not humiliating, as some pretend.”<sup>207</sup> A writer in *El Universal* agreed with Rios, claiming that “only communists are capable of

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<sup>205</sup> Alemán, letter to Truman, September 13, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>206</sup> “Banderas Mexicanas,” editorial, *Novedades*, September 11, 1950.

<sup>207</sup> Eduardo Enrique Rios, “El 13 de Septiembre y Nuestras Banderas,” editorial, *Novedades*, September 13, 1950.

looking unfavorably at the return of our heroic flags of '47.’”<sup>208</sup> Despite the overwhelming support for the United States’ recent display of friendship, the return of Mexican flags did not alter the views of the conflict in which they were captured. Nearly all of the editorials which supported the return still denounced the Mexican-American War as “one of the most unjust wars of aggression recorded in history.”<sup>209</sup>

Perhaps the editorial which best exemplified the feelings of average Mexicans appeared in *Novedades* on September 15. Although the writer acknowledged that the flag return was “only a sentimental reparation” for the losses Mexico suffered in the Mexican-American War, he/she nevertheless concluded that “this act of the Americans should be interpreted for what it is...a symbol of the close relationship of the two countries.”<sup>210</sup> However, even in applauding this gesture of friendship and peace, the writer, like many Mexicans, was fully aware of the painful memories of the events of 103 years prior. Alluding to the Mexican-American War, the author wrote, “the flags have returned to Mexico...in the hands of friends, of descendents of those aggressors who wronged us and now, in the youth of the U.S. Military, Naval, and Air Force Academies, offer to Mexico a friendly hand.” Despite the references to previous hostilities, the article centered on the writer’s optimism that relations between the two neighboring countries would continue to improve. In concluding the editorial, the author possibly alluded to support for handing back captured U.S. flags, stating, “as we [Mexicans] learned to respond to a violent aggression, we should know how to respond when we are talked to with a friendly voice.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> “Comentarios,” editorial, *El Universal*, September 13, 1950.

<sup>209</sup> “Una Reparación Histórica,” editorial, *El Nacional*, September 13, 1950.

<sup>210</sup> “Banderas que Vuelven,” editorial, *Novedades*, September 15, 1950.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

Unlike the remarkable support the ceremony received in Mexico, in the United States, the return of Mexican battle flags was greeted not with favor or hostility but with a nearly universal apathy. Newspapers across the country largely ignored the ceremony altogether. The *Spokane Daily Chronicle* and the *Milwaukee Journal* included a single brief article on the flag return, merely summarizing the ceremony in Mexico City and the remarks given on President Truman's behalf.<sup>212</sup> Perhaps showing the significance both papers deemed the ceremony, the articles appeared on pages 28 and 52, respectively. States with higher Hispanic populations failed to pay much more attention to the events in Mexico City. Although the *Victoria Advocate* of Victoria, Texas, included a relatively lengthy and informative article on the return, the ceremony barely received any mention in Florida's *Palm Beach Post*.<sup>213</sup> Unlike the coverage in Mexico, in all four of these U.S. newspapers, the flag return failed to garner a single front page story, in-depth article, photograph, political cartoon, or editorial.

The best U.S. newspaper coverage of the September 13 ceremony appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Both papers printed two articles on the flag return, the first consisting of a very brief story prior to the ceremony and a second, lengthier summary of the events of September 13.<sup>214</sup> However, when compared to the extensive reporting on the ceremony in Mexican sources, the coverage in both papers was minimal. In neither the *New*

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<sup>212</sup> "Mexican Flags Are Given Back," *Spokane Daily Chronicle* (Spokane, WA), September 13, 1950; "Mexico Gets Flags It Lost in 1847 War," *Milwaukee Journal*, September 13, 1950. The *Hartford Courant*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Washington Post* all contained similar coverage of the ceremony.

<sup>213</sup> "Captured Battle Flags Go Back to Mexico Today," *Victoria Advocate* (Victoria, TX), September 12, 1950; "Foreign News Briefly Told..." *Palm Beach Post* (West Palm Beach, FL), September 14, 1950.

<sup>214</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* also printed a very brief article on the flag return on August 6, 1950, two days after President Truman signed Senate Joint Resolution 133 into law. However, since Mexican newspapers were only examined from September 1 to September 15, this article was not included in the study in an effort to maintain an accurate comparison.



*York Times* nor the *Los Angeles Times* did reports on the ceremony even approach front-page news. Both *New York Times* articles were relegated to pages 20 and 27, the second article (September 14, 1950) being no bigger than an advertisement for the Alexander Carpet Co., Inc. located immediately below it.<sup>215</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* articles were also deemed insignificant, finally appearing on pages 13 and 11.<sup>216</sup>

Of all these U.S. newspapers, only the *Los Angeles Times* contained an editorial relating to the flag return. This editorial was highly supportive of the return, calling it “not only an admirable gesture, but an act of justice” and stating that the resolution’s only flaw lay in its tardiness. Unlike the Department of the Army, which partly opposed relinquishing the flags due to the universal practice of retaining captured enemy flags, the author exhibited no concern for this tradition, describing it as an “archaic custom more fitting to ancient barbarian eras.” Lastly, the writer viewed the flags’ return as more beneficial than their retention. Undoubtedly echoing the sentiments of many Americans towards the Mexican flags, including the American Legion’s Roscoe Gaither, the author concluded, “the emblems of [Mexican] valor have a spiritual value to our neighbors to the south. To us they are meaningless. We have a fixed policy of friendship for Mexico and we should have cemented it years ago by giving back the flags.”<sup>217</sup>

Part of the lack of attention the ceremony received in the United States probably stemmed from an emphasis on other important world events at the time, particularly the Korean War. The war had started in late June 1950 and by early September, American and South Korean troops

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<sup>215</sup> “Mexican Flags Returned,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1950; “1847 Flags Return to Mexican Hands,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1950.

<sup>216</sup> “U.S. to Return Mexican Flags,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1950; “U.S. Returns Captured Flags to Mexico After 103 Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1950.

<sup>217</sup> “Justice to Mexico,” editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1950.

had been pushed back to the Pusan perimeter, a small toehold on the Korean peninsula. On September 15, only two days after the flag ceremony in Mexico City, the American situation in Korea significantly improved with General Douglas MacArthur's successful amphibious landing at Inchon. This important event, in a war that had already captured the attention of the American public, thus caused the events at Chapultepec Castle to quickly be forgotten. Thus, whereas in Mexico, according to President Alemán, the mission would "live long in our memories and in our hearts," the significant gesture of peace and goodwill was unfortunately given little attention and enjoyed little remembrance in the United States.<sup>218</sup>

In the decades following the September 13, 1950 ceremony, not all of the returned Mexican flags remained at Chapultepec Castle. Around 1981, twelve of the flags were relocated to the newly-opened National Museum of the Interventions in the former convent of Churubusco, the site of the Battle of Churubusco on August 20, 1847, one of the bloodiest engagements of the Mexican-American War. Appropriately, three of the twelve flags given to the museum were captured by U.S. soldiers during the Battle of Churubusco. The remaining nine were an assortment of regimental flags from both infantry and cavalry units, captured at Veracruz and in other unspecified engagements.<sup>219</sup>

Perhaps the biggest mystery surrounding the returned battle flags is what happened to the three flags which Maj. Gen. Vaughan handed over to Ambassador Espinosa in June 1947. The 1990 flag catalogue of Mexico's National Museum of History lists 69 flags as being returned by the United States, conspicuously three shy of the total number of flags given to Mexico in 1947

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<sup>218</sup> Alemán, letter to Truman, September 13, 1950, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>219</sup> Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

and 1950.<sup>220</sup> Of these 69 flags, none match the physical dimensions or descriptions of Flags 4168, 4169, or 4172 provided by Maj. Gen. Taylor when the three flags were initially transferred from West Point to Maj. Gen. Vaughan's office.<sup>221</sup> After the flags were handed over to the Mexican Embassy, their paper trail abruptly ends. Espinosa appears to have delivered the flags to President Alemán, as Maj. Gen. Vaughan stated that the Mexican President later expressed his appreciation for the flags to both Vaughan and President Truman.<sup>222</sup> However, no records exist within Mexico's General Archives of the Nation to support this claim that the flags were sent back to President Alemán in Mexico City. The three flags simply vanish from the pages of history.

Surprisingly, not a single one of the 69 flags returned to Mexico in 1950 are today publicly displayed at either Chapultepec Castle or the National Interventions Museum. Keeping the flags in storage is undoubtedly due in part to their condition. Even in 1950, many of the flags were in such poor condition that the Department of the Army objected to their return based partly on the possibility of further damaging the flags in transporting them to Mexico.<sup>223</sup> The U.S. Naval Academy reported that its seven flags were likewise in poor condition.<sup>224</sup> However, this cannot be the case for all of the flags. In the September 1950 ceremony, thirteen Mexican flags were unfurled, placed on flagstuffs, and formally handed from American cadets and midshipmen

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Taylor, letter to Vaughan, June 6, 1947, HST Library. OF 282, Box 1053.

<sup>222</sup> Vaughan, letter to Happell, October 28, 1949, HST Library. Official Files 282, Box 1053. The reliability of Vaughan's account is questionable. In the preceding sentence, he incorrectly states that the flags were returned to Alemán when the Mexican President visited Washington, D.C.

<sup>223</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 3.

<sup>224</sup> Bryan, e-mail interview by author, October 6, 2010.

to their Mexican counterparts.<sup>225</sup> If these flags were resilient enough to be publicly handled and exposed to the elements during their formal presentation to Mexican authorities, there should be little reason to believe that publicly displaying them would worsen their condition. Most likely, the reason these flags are not publicly displayed today lies in the memories surrounding the flags. Not only were these flags lost on the battlefield, a great dishonor in nineteenth-century warfare, but they were lost during the Mexican-American War, a war that brought a great amount of shame and dishonor upon the Mexican people. Furthermore, the flags were not won back honorably, such as on the field of battle, but voluntarily relinquished by a victor who had no further use for them. Thus, instead of publicly displaying its reclaimed war trophies, Mexico would rather hide the flags from public view lest they evince unpleasant memories of a painful and shameful chapter in their nation's history.

According to *Mexico and the Americans* by Daniel James, shortly after the return of Mexican battle flags in September 1950, "the Mexican Congress then turned around and returned captured American flags to the United States."<sup>226</sup> However, this appears to be incorrect. On October 10, 1950, Mexican President Miguel Alemán sent a decree to the Mexican Chamber of Deputies ordering that American flags captured during the Mexican-American War be returned to the United States. This decree was to go into effect on the day of its publication in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación*.<sup>227</sup> However, by the end of November 1950, Alemán's decree had failed to appear in the *Diario Oficial*. The Chamber had also failed to discuss the return of U.S.

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<sup>225</sup> "La Patria Recibió las Reliquias de un Episodio Doloroso de su Historia que a los 113 años son Prenda de Amistad," *Novedades*, September 14, 1950.

<sup>226</sup> Daniel James, *Mexico and the Americans* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 431.

<sup>227</sup> Miguel Alemán, letter to la Cámara de Diputados, October 10, 1950, Archivo General de la Nación México. MAV 231, Folder 5743.

flags by the end of November 1950 as the *Diario Oficial* made no mention of the topic in its daily coverage of Chamber discussions.

The most convincing evidence that captured American flags were never returned to the United States lies in the Museo Nacional de Historia's *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*. The Museum's catalogue provides photos and descriptions of three United States flags captured during the Mexican-American War as well as two Texas flags captured during the Battle of Buena Vista on February 23, 1847.<sup>228</sup> It is conceivable that Mexico would have refused to relinquish the Texas flags given their unpleasant memories of the Texas Revolution and their unwillingness to loan flags to Texas in 1986.<sup>229</sup> Nevertheless, had any return of captured American battle flags occurred, it is inconceivable that the three American national flags would have remained in Mexico, especially since both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Victoria Advocate* reported that Mexico had only eleven American flags in its possession to begin with.<sup>230</sup> It is also

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<sup>228</sup> The catalog also contains one United States flag, three Texas flags, and one Texas pennant captured during the Texas Revolution as well as two American flags captured during filibustering expeditions after the war. However, as these flags were not captured during the Mexican-American War, they have not been included in this study. Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

<sup>229</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>230</sup> "U.S. Returns Captured Flags to Mexico After 103 Years," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1950; "Captured Battle Flags Go Back to Mexico Today," *Victoria Advocate* (Victoria, TX), September 12, 1950. These estimates correspond to the testimony of Mrs. Ruth Mason Hughes, the State Department's assistant officer in charge of Mexican affairs, who reported to the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs that Mexico had "not more than about a dozen" American flags. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, these eleven flags were "captured from the forces of Gen. Winfield Scott in the 1847 campaign." However, this is incorrect (see footnote 198). It is also unclear why the papers reported only eleven flags in Mexico's possession when the catalog of the Museo Nacional de Historia includes a total of twelve American flags. If for some reason one of these flags did not classify as a "U.S. flag," it was probably either the flag of the New Orleans Grays (captured at the Alamo) or the Texas pennant captured in 1837. Most likely, both papers' sources were simply mistaken, a forgivable error considering that even the U.S. Congress did not know the exact number of flags in Mexico's possession. Congress, House, Committee on

possible that, like in the United States, more captured enemy flags exist in private hands in Mexico. In *La Intervención Norteamericana en México*, Leopoldo Martínez Caraza includes a photo of an American national flag with the caption “American flag captured during the War of 1846-1848.”<sup>231</sup> This flag does not match the photographs of the American flags in the possession of Mexico’s Museo Nacional de Historia. Unfortunately, as the author fails to provide a citation further describing the flag or listing its whereabouts, one can only speculate that it belongs to a private collector or museum. One thing is clear though: the Mexican government never returned its captured American flags to the United States.



**Figure 4. American Flag Still in Mexican Custody (Flag 10-128962)**

Source: Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas* (México, D.F.: Secretaria de Gobernación, 1990), 68.

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Foreign Affairs, *Return of Mexican Flags*, 1950, 12; Museo Nacional de Historia, *Catálogo de la Colección de Banderas*, 54-91.

<sup>231</sup> Leopoldo Martínez Caraza, *La Intervención Norteamericana en México* (Mexico City: Panorama Editorial, 1991), 101. Unlike most of the 28-star American flags in the possession of the Museo Nacional de Historia, this flag contained only 26 stars, suggesting that it was captured early on in the war. The 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> stars represented Florida and Texas, which joined the Union on March 3 and December 29, 1845, respectively.

The fact that this reciprocal return never occurred is extremely unfortunate and not only for the way it portrays Mexico as an ungrateful country either unable or unwilling to come to terms with its tragic past. Had U.S. officials known of this outcome, it is unlikely that the return of captured Mexican flags would have ever occurred in the first place. The U.S. Congress finally agreed to pass the necessary legislation only because their actions were based on the assurances of Mexican Ambassador Rafael de la Colina that the Mexican Congress would pass similar legislation to relinquish its captured American flags. Mexico's failure to return a handful of tattered reminders of past hostilities also detracted from the sincere desires of American groups and individuals to return captured flags to Mexico in the hopes of forever improving the relations between the two neighboring countries.

It is difficult to explain Mexico's refusal to relinquish its handful of American battle flags after the United States returned 72 total flags to Mexico in 1947 and 1950. President Alemán remained in office until November 1952, so any potential legislation would not have been derailed due to a regime change. Mexico's Congress had recently reconvened on September 1, 1950, giving them plenty of time to pass the necessary legislation prior to the end of the current session. Unlike the United States, which was embroiled in the Korean War at the time, Mexico was suffering from no significant international or internal conflicts which could have overshadowed or shifted focus away from passing a minor piece of legislation such as the flag return. This failure to return American flags looks especially hypocritical of Mexico when considering the following remarks made by President Alemán at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on May 5, 1947: "Many flags are typically won by nations in combat; but perhaps the most significant are the ones which are offered – as symbols of friendship – during

peacetime.”<sup>232</sup> Most likely, the failure of Mexico to relinquish its captured American flags can be traced back to Mexico’s memory of the Mexican-American War. As the *New York Times* said in a 1901 article on the Spanish-American War, “it is very notoriously easier for the victor to forgive and forget than for the vanquished.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Alemán, *Remembranzas y Testimonios*, 271.

<sup>233</sup> “Admiral Cervera,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1901.



## Chapter 4 – A Just and Lasting Peace?: U.S.-Mexican Relations Since 1950

Some debate exists over the lasting impact of the exchange of Mexican-American War battle flags during the Truman administration. This argument centers on an incident which occurred between the state of Texas and Mexico over three decades after the ceremony in Mexico City. In 1986, to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the secession of Texas from Mexico, Texas legislators requested that the Mexican government return the flag of the New Orleans Grays to Texas on loan. This flag was captured on March 6, 1836 at the Battle of the Alamo during the Texas Revolution and had since been stored in Chapultepec Castle.<sup>234</sup> Despite the fact that Texans had been instrumental in the return of Mexican flags in 1950, the legislators received the following response to their query: “The flag cannot be loaned now because of restoration. Neither can a photo be taken. They are restoring it and it is going to take a considerable length of time.”<sup>235</sup> This was perhaps a legitimate response, considering the condition of many of the Mexican battle flags returned by the United States. More likely, however, the Mexican government’s unwillingness to loan the flag stems from the country’s memories of the conflict in which the flag was captured. Therefore, this reply does not signify a substantial departure from the generally amicable relations between the United States and Mexico, but rather reveals a lingering distinction between the views of Mexicans toward Texans and toward other Americans.

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<sup>234</sup> Pastor and Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship*, 24.

<sup>235</sup> Quoted in Pastor and Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship*, 24.

During the Texas Revolution, Texans and Mexicans participated in numerous atrocities against one another, most notably the slaughtering of enemy combatants and prisoners of war by Mexican troops at the Alamo and Goliad and by Texas forces at San Jacinto.<sup>236</sup> After Texas successfully gained its independence in 1836, relations between Mexico and its former territory failed to improve. Mexico refused to recognize Texan independence, understandably viewing the Treaties of Velasco as illegitimate documents signed by Santa Anna while under duress. Sporadic fighting between Mexico and Texas continued throughout the next decade, with each side attempting to extend its jurisdiction over the region.<sup>237</sup> By the start of the Mexican-American War, Mexico continued to disdainfully view Texas as a province in rebellion and therefore viewed its annexation by the United States in 1845 as an act of war.

With the passage of time failing to cool the simmering hatred Mexicans and Texans felt toward one another, the horrific, vengeful bloodletting of the Texas Revolution erupted once again during the Mexican-American War. Memoirs and letters from the war are filled with accounts of these atrocities, many of which were revenge killings. For example, after Mexican guerrillas attacked a wagon train north of Monterrey, killing the brother of a Texas Ranger, Captain Mabry B. Gray and his Rangers sought revenge on a nearby town. Twenty-four men, nearly the village's entire adult male population, were killed in retaliation.<sup>238</sup> In the town of Patos, near Saltillo, a drunken Texas Ranger trampled a priest to death and rode through town dragging behind him the church's crucifix. In retaliation, the townspeople lassoed the Ranger, tied him to a cross and flayed him. According to dragoon Sam Chamberlain, the Ranger's

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<sup>236</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 664-665, 667.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 667-669.

<sup>238</sup> Luther Giddings, *Sketches of the Campaign in Northern Mexico. In Eighteen Hundred Forty-Six and Seven* (New York: George P. Putnam and Company, 1853), 325.

comrades then descended upon the town and “charged on the [crowd of Mexicans] with Bowie Knife and revolver, sparing neither age or sex in their terrible fury.”<sup>239</sup> One volunteer wrote that instances like these were so common that “it is said that the bushes, skirting the road from Monterey southward, are strewn with skeletons of Mexicans sacrificed by these desperados.”<sup>240</sup> Soldiers and officers alike often decried the brutality of the Texans, blaming the increase in guerrilla activity in northern Mexico on their disregard for civilian lives and property.<sup>241</sup> Unfortunately, efforts by Gen. Taylor to impose any degree of discipline on the Rangers had little success.

It would be wrong to imply that all atrocities were committed by the Texas Rangers or that Mexicans during the war merely abhorred Texans, for they detested almost all volunteer units for the wrongful acts committed by them. Most telling were the Mexican Army’s propaganda efforts to entice U.S. soldiers to desert, which were directed only at soldiers in the U.S. Regular Army, as the U.S. volunteer forces were seen by Mexicans, and even U.S. Army Regulars, as nothing more than modern-day barbarians.<sup>242</sup> Unfortunately for the Mexicans, the Texans served a vital role as scouts and light cavalry in the U.S. Armies under Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott.<sup>243</sup> This reliance upon Texans, and the freedom of movement inherent in their duties, led to numerous atrocities against the Mexican population with few disciplinary

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<sup>239</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 174.

<sup>240</sup> Frank S. Edwards, *A Campaign in New Mexico with Colonel Doniphan* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), 156.

<sup>241</sup> Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 38.

<sup>242</sup> John R. Kenly, *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer. War with Mexico, in the Years 1846-7-8* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1873), 39-40; George G. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 162.

<sup>243</sup> Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 121.

actions taken by the U.S. Army commanders to punish these hostilities or prevent their recurrence.<sup>244</sup>

U.S. Army Regulars, on the other hand, were under very strict discipline and were severely punished for any outrages against the Mexican population. Whereas volunteers were often not punished for their numerous depredations, regulars could expect up to 30 lashes for stealing from Mexican citizens.<sup>245</sup> These harsh disciplinary measures meant few atrocities were committed by U.S. Army Regulars, who enjoyed much more amiable relations with the Mexican populace. Regulars, for example, were often garrisoned in Mexican cities, while commanding officers stationed volunteer units outside city limits in order to minimize the likelihood of atrocities against the local citizenry.<sup>246</sup> In his invasion of central Mexico, General Scott elected to leave many volunteer units along the Rio Grande for this same reason.

Thus, it is not implausible to hypothesize that the twentieth-century actions of the Mexican government reflected the experiences of nineteenth-century Mexico. The Mexican government's unwillingness to surrender the flag of the New Orleans Grays may signify the unwillingness of the Mexican people to forget the atrocities committed by Texans not only in the Texas Revolution, but in the Mexican-American War as well. U.S. soldiers during the war, on the other hand (excluding volunteers), served relatively honorably and respectfully and were probably viewed as worthy adversaries. Also, many Mexican battle flags remain in Texas to this day and, when the flag of the New Orleans Grays was requested in 1986, no attempts were made for a *quid pro quo* return any of these flags. Therefore, considering the often inhumane actions

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 121-122, 126-127.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

<sup>246</sup> George Ballentine, *Autobiography of an English Soldier in the U.S. Army* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1853), 205-206.

of Texans in the nineteenth century, as well as the Texas government's unwillingness to return any of the Mexican battle flags in its possession, might have made the Mexican government uninterested in relinquishing its captured battle flags to the government of Texas.

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, a number of key issues regarding the return of flags to Mexico in 1947 and 1950 remain unanswered, such as the fates of the three flags given to Mexican Ambassador Espinosa in 1947, whether or not the United States had previously returned a flag to Mexico in 1942, and why the Mexican government refused to return 11 American flags to the United States in the months and years following the September 13, 1950 ceremony. Nevertheless, the efforts of the Truman administration to return Mexican battle flags can finally be appreciated and understood. First, the return of captured Mexican battle flags was a much more difficult, delicate, and lengthy process than President Truman had first imagined. The original idea to return a few significant flags to Mexican President Alemán was greatly expanded in 1949 by the efforts of the American Legion, who championed the federal government to relinquish all Mexican flags in possession of the War Department. Only after three years, many intergovernmental debates, numerous consultations with Mexican authorities, and the passage of a Joint Resolution of Congress, did the idea finally come to fruition and Mexico finally received all of its long-lost battle flags.

Second, numerous contemporary issues influenced the flag returns of 1947 and 1950. Concerns over alienating voters in key Southwestern states in the upcoming presidential election of 1948 caused Truman to keep knowledge of the initial return limited to a handful of U.S. and Mexican officials. The escalation of the Cold War gave added emphasis to the necessity of the flag return, as well as other Good Neighbor Policy initiatives, to ensure that Mexico did not fall

to communism. Self-interest, specifically the desire to have Mexico return its captured American battle flags, also motivated the second, large, public flag return. However, the Truman administration's patience and continued support ensured that these motivations did not overshadow the true desires of friendship behind the act and ultimately allowed the final ceremony to be successfully and respectfully carried out.

Third, just as the 1950 return was made possible largely because the American public showed little concern for physical reminders of a long-forgotten war, the ceremonial return of Mexican flags on September 13 was largely ignored or overlooked north of the border. In the 60 years since the flags' return, historians have incorrectly given the event similar attention, failing to recognize its true significance. Due to the amount of planning and preparation involved in the final ceremony, the unprecedented act of returning flags to a former foreign enemy should be viewed as a much more tangible example of Truman's desire for amicable relations with Mexico than his laying of a wreath at the monument to the niños héroes in March 1947. The return of battle flags marked the greatest single attempt in either country's history to ameliorate the memories of the Mexican-American War and to prevent them from ever impeding U.S.-Mexican relations. It should therefore be considered the pinnacle of the United States' Good Neighbor Policy toward Mexico.

Lastly, this episode reveals the differing roles and levels of importance of war trophies in the psyche of militaries and nations. Since battle flags serve both a functional and a symbolic military role, Mexican flags were returned in 1947 and 1950 while other significant war trophies have been allowed to remain, and be prominently displayed, across the United States without similar attempts to return them to their country of origin. Therefore, despite his original vision of returning only a small number of flags as a symbolic gesture of friendship, Truman's

willingness and cooperation to ensure the proper, dignified return of all the Mexican battle flags in 1950 proved his sincere desire for amicable relations between Mexico and the United States.

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