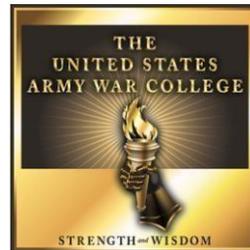


Countering A Holy War Narrative: Mexican War Case Study

by

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United States Army War College
Class of 2015

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**Countering A Holy War Narrative:
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The United States effectively countered enemy attempts to frame the Mexican War as a holy war against Catholicism. An actively engaged and hostile civilian population could have seriously jeopardized U.S. military operations during the invasion of Mexico. President Polk and General Scott planned and executed a strategy of conciliation toward Mexican civilians that sought to keep them on the sidelines of the contest. Negating a holy war narrative put forward by Mexican leaders was central to the U.S. strategy of conciliation. The United States accomplished this by incorporating Catholic priests into its army of invasion, cooperating with Catholic Church leaders, both in Mexico and in the United States, and by respecting Church property and symbols. Both U.S. political and military leaders accomplished this all during a time of strident anti-Catholicism in the United States. Although different in time and circumstance, the United States again finds itself fighting an adversary that seeks to put forward a narrative of holy war in reaction to perceived attacks on its faith. The U.S. experience in Mexico can be used to help shape potential approaches to countering such a narrative.

Countering A Holy War Narrative: Mexican War Case Study

The fulcrum upon which the outcome of the war balanced consisted not of clashes between national armies, but upon the extent to which Mexicans elected to fight their own government, to wage guerilla warfare against the invaders, or to stand aside from the conflicts.

-Irving W. Levinson¹

In the twenty-first century, the United States finds itself in an enduring conflict against radical terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These adversaries promote their global jihad with a holy war narrative, in which faithful Muslims should defend their religion from western crusaders. Although in some aspects this conflict is unique, it is not the first time the United States has faced an opponent who claimed it was defending its religion from foreign attackers. During the Mexican War, the United States successfully minimized the guerrilla threat it faced because it negated Mexico's ability to frame the conflict in terms of a war against Catholicism. The nineteenth century literature surrounding the Mexican War does not use the phrase 'holy war', but the term aptly describes a conflict between religions as opposed to one between governments. The modern usage of the term holy war includes a connotation of motivational appeal that fits squarely with Mexican attempts to use religion as an incitement toward insurgency.

By turning the struggle into a holy war, Mexican leaders could have provoked their people into widespread resistance against the American invasion.² President James Polk and General Winfield Scott foresaw this threat and executed a coherent information campaign focused on reassuring the Mexican people that U.S. troops were not in Mexico to attack their religion. They succeeded in shaping the narrative, defined as an information campaign used to influence public opinion and discourse, toward a

struggle between governments rather than religions. Polk and Scott understood the political costs associated with conciliation toward the Catholic Church, but both felt the threat of an inflamed Mexican population outweighed the discontent such a policy would cause.

The U.S. Army's experience in Mexico provides a successful example of negating an adversary's ability to build an insurgency through religious motivation. Since all conflicts are in some ways unique, practitioners and theorists should not expect a prescriptive model from the Mexican War. At the same time, this event provides a framework for considering the power of competing stories and it can help inform today's decision makers tasked with countering a holy war narrative.

Understanding the Threat

Avoiding a public perception that the U.S. invasion of Mexico represented a war against the Catholic Church was a critical part of the U.S. effort to mitigate the impact of guerrilla forces upon invading American armies. Central to understanding U.S. actions in this regard is an appreciation for the threat Mexican guerrillas posed to U.S. war aims. In large part because U.S. counter-guerrilla operations were so successful, historians seldom turn their attention to the irregular aspect of the war.

Traditional chronicles of the Mexican War devote little attention to this topic because irregular activity did not appear to drive the course of the struggle. Noted Mexican War historian, Justin Smith, states "The guerillas [sic] failed completely to affect the general course of the war, as they were expected to do, but even as late as March, 1848, the road from Vera Cruz to Jalapa was safe for large parties only."³ United States success in the Mexican War was far from a foregone conclusion. Ulysses S.

Grant put the U.S. effort in proper perspective when he said General Scott "invaded a populous country, penetrating two hundred and sixty miles into the interior, with a force at no time equal to one-half of that opposed to him; he was without a base; the enemy was always entrenched, always on the defensive; yet he won every battle, he captured the capital, and conquered the government."⁴ Given the magnitude of the U.S. endeavor to invade its southern neighbor and occupy its capitol city for over eight months, one can appreciate the trepidation U.S. leaders (both military and political) felt regarding the threat of an enraged populace.

The United States and Mexico went to war in 1846 primarily for territorial reasons.⁵ America's hunger for western expansion, fueled by the idea of 'manifest destiny',⁶ collided with Mexico's desire to retain its provinces of Upper California and New Mexico. An additional friction point existed at the contested boundary with Texas. In response to a breakdown of negotiations between the two countries over these irreconcilable territorial aims, U.S. President James Polk ordered Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to cross the Nueces River on January 13th, 1846, putting Mexico and America on the path to war.⁷

During the spring of 1846, General Taylor pushed into northern Mexico and won a series of sharp engagements against the Mexican military. His advance culminated in February 1847, when Taylor defeated Mexican General Santa Anna at the battle of Buena Vista.⁸ Unfortunately for the Americans, success on Mexico's northern frontier did not translate into strategic victory. Even though its armies had been defeated, the Mexican government refused to yield. The Polk Administration therefore changed its axis of advance to a southern approach with the intent of capturing Mexico City.

General Scott landed at the Mexican port city of Vera Cruz on March 9th, 1847, with roughly 14,000 men.⁹ After taking the city and then marching inland, Scott determined he had insufficient forces to both continue the offensive and protect his supply lines. At the city of Pueblo, he decided to sever his lines of communication to the sea and live off the land as his army advanced.¹⁰ Scott won three major engagements and eventually took the Mexican capital on September 14th, 1847. He then spent the next eight months effectively administering the country and assisting in negotiating the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War on May 30th, 1848. In retrospect, this seemingly inexorable march to victory appeared to be nearly preordained. With a numerically inferior force, Scott never lost a battle and forced Mexico to submit to American war aims. In fact, the picture in 1847 was much less clear to the actors engaged in the moment. Scott gambled his army and his country's chance at victory on being able to keep the Mexican populace on the margin. This successful strategy allowed him to pursue his war against the enemy army and the Mexican government. Scott developed a successful information campaign that negated Mexico's attempt to incite a fully materialized insurgency based on a holy war narrative. Although the lens of history has overlooked the guerilla threat, U.S. military and political leaders during the war understood the risks involved and spoke openly about their concern that a major Mexican insurgency would lead to U.S. failure.

American Perspective of the Guerrilla Threat

Winfield Scott understood the risk he was taking when he marched into the Mexican heartland with only 10,000 men. He clearly viewed the threat of a hostile population supporting a robust guerilla campaign as central to his success or failure. In

correspondence with Secretary of War William Marcy on May 6th, 1847, Scott explained his biggest challenge would be to supply the army "from a country covered with exasperated guerrillas and banditti, and maintaining with inadequate garrisons and escorts, communications with the rear."¹¹ Scott again expressed his concern to Marcy in a later letter on July 19th, 1847, when he reported Mexican generals were preparing "for a guerrilla war upon our detachments, train and stragglers, and they may, without great precautions on our part, do much harm in the aggregate."¹² Trepidation toward the guerrilla menace was not limited to the U.S. commanding general.

Other military leaders also feared a general uprising against the U.S. invasion. One of the most successful and aggressive counter-guerrilla leaders was Lieutenant Colonel Henry S. Lane, commander of the 1st Regiment of Indiana Volunteers. As part of Scott's advancing army, Lane wrote on May 9th, 1847, about the potential for guerrillas to disrupt operations. "They [the Mexicans] cannot for some time get up another force large enough to meet either Scott or Taylor, but if they chose they may make gurilla [sic] war upon us & protract this war for long years to come."¹³ Sharing Lane's concern, Major Philip Barbour of the 3rd Regiment, U.S. Infantry, confided to his wife that it was "but reasonable to expect that their people will rush to defend their own firesides, and they might raise an army of 10,000 men in short time, while we are cut off, not only from retreat, but from all succor."¹⁴ Another junior officer, Captain Robert Anderson of the 3rd Regiment, U.S. Artillery, emphatically stated that if the Mexican people rose against the American invasion they "would render the country unconquerable."¹⁵ Fear of a Mexican guerrilla campaign, however, extended beyond the soldiers who found themselves outnumbered in central Mexico.

In Washington D.C. there existed equally grave concerns regarding reports of a budding insurgency. Upon hearing Scott's advance had stalled at Pueblo and his commanding general decided to cut himself off from the sea, President Polk concluded Scott "has undoubtedly committed a great military error by breaking up the post at Jalapa and leaving his whole rear exposed to the enemy. The guerrillas were undoubtedly encouraged to make attacks by the fact, which was known to them, that General Scott had left his rear unprotected."¹⁶ Reflecting this reality, Scott wrote the garrison commander at Jalapa, Colonel Thomas Childs. He ordered Childs to abandon the U.S. positions in Jalapa and Perote and join the main force at Pueblo because he lacked the manpower to guard the road to Veracruz from guerrilla attack.¹⁷

General Scott understood a hostile and engaged populace would have made his invasion immensely more difficult and potentially impossible. In April 1847, Scott issued General Order No. 128 informing his men that supplies from Vera Cruz may not be forthcoming. He emphasized the importance of treating Mexican civilians well and all officers were to pay for any goods they requisitioned.¹⁸ Scott struggled against Mexican guerilla tactics throughout his campaign but was able to overcome this threat by effectively keeping the Mexican population marginalized. Before examining the ways in which he framed the narrative to avoid the appearance of a holy war against the Catholic Church, it is important to consider the Mexican leaders' perspectives toward guerrilla warfare.

Mexican Attitudes toward Guerrilla Warfare

Mexican attitudes surrounding the use of guerrilla tactics evolved as the conflict with the United States progressed. Before the commencement of hostilities, debate

raged within elite circles as to the best course of action to use against an American invasion. Some argued for a defensive strategy in which Mexico could fortify the passes through the northern Sierra Mountains. This idea faltered since it tacitly conceded the Texas boundary at the Rio Grande as opposed to the Nueces. A minority argued for a complete guerrilla strategy that would avoid conventional battles until the American invaders had suffered crippling losses due to guerrilla attacks on their supply lines.¹⁹ The camp that eventually won out, and propelled the Mexican government into an aggressive conventional response, based its argument on a belief the Mexican military could prevail in direct combat against the American army.²⁰ This initial confidence in Mexican arms eventually gave way to growing desperation as the United States continued to stack up impressive victories in the field. As first Taylor and then Scott defeated every major force sent against them, the Mexican government increasingly pinned its dwindling hopes on a guerrilla strategy.

Mexico's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jose Fernando Ramirez, recounted the spirited debate regarding the mobilization of a mass partisan effort to stop the North Americans as Scott advanced through central Mexico in 1847. He noted that at this dark point, the Mexican government put all its hopes in a massive guerrilla campaign that would turn the tide of war and had "become the central idea of its political maneuvers."²¹ Critical to this hope was the belief the Mexican people were culturally suited to guerrilla warfare. Many cabinet members pointed to Napoleon's disastrous experience in Spain fighting against guerrillas and the success of unconventional tactics during the Mexican War for Independence. Ramirez related an early version of the government's proposal that called for "the arming of 50,000 men with lances, daggers, and machetes in order

to carry on the guerrilla warfare."²² After two weeks of debate, the Mexican Congress approved a government proclamation endorsing guerrilla warfare on April 8th, 1847. With Mexican leaders desperately embracing an unconventional military strategy, the United States needed to counter this potentially disastrous new approach. General Scott's responding information campaign was a narrative of conciliation intended to negate Mexican efforts to cast the conflict as a religious war against the Catholic Church.

A Deliberate Policy of Conciliation

U.S. leaders understood the irregular threat to their war aims and acted decisively to limit the impact and effectiveness of the guerrillas. General Scott chose an operational approach of aggressively pursuing guerrilla bands using task organized units comprised of American troops and hired Mexican auxiliaries. He complemented this offensive style with a policy of conciliation toward the general Mexican populace in order to limit its support to guerrilla forces.²³ A cornerstone of this conciliation plan was a benign attitude toward the Catholic Church.

Scott understood he needed to negate any Mexican attempt to create a religious narrative that would incite the population against the North American invaders. As the Mexican government began to fully embrace a strategy of guerrilla warfare, Scott came to believe the success or failure of his policy of conciliation would hinge on his ability to placate the Mexican religious establishment.²⁴ His fear the Mexican authorities would try to use the Church as a motivation for resistance was not unfounded.

After hearing of the fall of Vera Cruz, the Mexican general and interim President, Santa Anna, attempted to rally his people in March, 1847, with a call to defend the

Church. "Mexicans! You have a religion - protect it! You have honour [sic] - then free yourselves from infamy! You love your wives, your children - then liberate them from American brutality."²⁵ With the Mexican government embracing a guerrilla strategy and Santa Anna calling for holy war, Scott needed to respond quickly to avoid the narrative becoming one of a North American Protestant crusade against the Mexican Catholic Church.

On May 11th, 1847, during his march toward Mexico City, Scott issued a proclamation seeking to reassure the Mexican people that his army was not intent on attacking the Catholic faith. He wrote his decree specifically for church leaders, civil authorities, and the people living anywhere occupied by U.S. forces. It emphatically stated his army "respects, and will ever respect private property and persons, and the property of the Mexican Church."²⁶

Scott reinforced his policy of conciliation by calling on senior Mexican Church leaders to verify his sincerity. In his May 11th proclamation he went on to say, "We have not profaned your temples...and we confirm it by your own bishops, and by the clergy of Tampico, Tuspan, Matamoros, Monterey, Vera Cruz, and Jalapa."²⁷ Scott then tried to undermine what he saw as the "falsity of the calumnies of the press, intended to excite hostility"²⁸ by arguing for the parallels between Mexican and U.S. religious beliefs. "We adore the same God: and a large portion of our army, as well as of the people of the United States, are Catholics, like yourselves."²⁹ Scott placed such great importance on keeping good relations with the church that he believed the decree "produced more decided effects than all the blows from Palo Alto to Cerro Gordo."³⁰ All the

proclamations in the world would not serve to negate a holy war narrative if Scott did not back his words with highly visible and often symbolic actions.

Scott personally set the example for respect toward the Mexican Catholic Church and urged his officers and men to do the same. Sensitive to prohibitions against working on Sundays, Scott ordered no training to be conducted on the Christian Sabbath. Robert Anderson remarked that General Scott "has ordered a spirit of conciliation to be practiced, and among other things, we should seem to evince respect for the Sabbath."³¹ Scott may have issued training restrictions on Sundays regardless of Mexican attitudes since many of his own soldiers came from a religious tradition that included respecting the Sabbath. In a letter to his father, Lieutenant Theodore Laidley remarked how the Mexican people "do not observe it as strictly as it is in the U.S. Their churches are open and many attend and seem very devout, but they do not proclaim it a day of rest and rejoicing by their dress, by shutting their shops, by abstaining from all labor & etc."³² Although he may have had multiple reasons for cancelling Sunday training, Scott insisted his decision for respecting the Sabbath was a way to honor common religious traditions between the two countries and squarely supported his intended narrative that the U.S. invasion was not a war against Catholicism.³³

Scott appreciated the importance of visible personal action as a component to leadership. He and his staff regularly attended Catholic mass and took part in several public processions and religious ceremonies.³⁴ He even went so far as to order his men to "salute not only the tasseled cane of the magistrate but cassock of the priest."³⁵ These public shows of support for Catholic norms caused resentment among some of Scott's men and proved to be unpopular in the United States. Lieutenant Daniel Hill, a

West Point classmate of Laidley and one of the young officers required to attend mass was not pleased with being ordered to worship in a Catholic church. He commented in his diary that "the mummery of the service would have been laughable had it not been so melancholy to reflect that 'twas an attempt at the worship of God."³⁶ Even with this resistance to his policy, Scott understood he needed to offer a narrative to the Mexican people that the U.S. invasion was not a war against their religion, but instead against their government. Led by Scott, and supported by other local commanders, the U.S. policy of religious conciliation did not stop inside of Mexico.

President Polk also grasped the importance of a strong information campaign and worked at the national level to ensure its success. He took a personal interest in shaping a U.S. narrative that negated the potential for the fight to turn into a religious war. Like General Scott, Polk understood the danger to U.S. war aims if the Mexican people were to rally around the idea that the U.S. action in their country was an attack on the Catholic Church.³⁷ In his diary he recalled his concern about "the false idea industriously circulated by interested partisans in Mexico, that our object was to overthrow their religion and rob their churches, and that if they believed this they would make a desperate resistance to our army in the present war."³⁸ President Polk sought out a respected Catholic Church leader to assist in presenting a different storyline. He enlisted the aid of New York Bishop John Hughes who agreed to assign two priests as Army chaplains to accompany U.S. forces in Mexico. The primary mission for the two chaplains was to reassure the Mexican people that "their religion and church property would be secure, and that far from being violated, both would be protected by our army."³⁹

Bishop Hughes routinely argued loyalty to the nation should be a core principal for U.S. Catholics "and sought to lay to rest any notion of contradictions between religious principals and patriotic action."⁴⁰ Hughes agreed with President Polk that the introduction of Catholic Army chaplains would be of benefit, so the following day Polk invited Hughes, Bishop Peter Kenrick of St. Louis, and Bishop Michael Portier of Mobile to the White House.⁴¹ The group chose two Jesuit priests, John McElroy of Maryland and Anthony Rey of Georgetown College, to serve as the U.S. Army's first Catholic chaplains.

Bishop Hughes maintained a close relationship with Polk and continued to advise the President throughout the course of the war on how best to avoid the perception that the conflict was a struggle between religions. Hughes even considered traveling to Mexico as a special Ambassador to reassure Catholic Church leaders. Secretary of State James Buchanan recounted how Hughes "might render essential services in removing the violent prejudices of the Mexicans, and especially of their influential clergy, which then prevailed against the United States."⁴² The prospect of this endeavor and Polk's overall willingness to work with Catholic leaders highlight the President's commitment to shaping the war's narrative as a conflict between governments--not religions. Although Hughes ultimately decided against traveling to Mexico, the Jesuit priests he chose for service worked extensively in the country.

Fathers Rey and McElroy went to Mexico in the spring of 1846 as the first Catholic U.S. Army chaplains. They spent much of their time ministering to sick and wounded U.S. soldiers in Northern Mexico near Matamoros. The two priests had little opportunity to interact with high level Mexican religious leaders and as such felt

frustrated with their initial progress. In December, 1846, McElroy confided in Rey that the two had done little toward "conciliating the natives by traveling among them...Our Lord had other views than those of the President in sending us here."⁴³ Unfortunately, travel in the volatile North was a dangerous proposition. In January, 1847, Father Rey ventured out from Matamoros with only a servant and was killed by guerrillas. Father McElroy continued his year of service before returning to the United States. Even Protestant soldiers and the U.S. media praised his devotion to ministering to the sick.⁴⁴ Although the Jesuits felt they were unable to make a significant difference in relations between the U.S. invaders and the Mexican Catholics, their very presence served the greater narrative President Polk sought to shape.

Anti-Catholic Sentiment in the Army and at Home

Polk's efforts in promoting conciliation with the Mexican Catholic Church did not come without political cost. McElroy and Rey's appointment as chaplains raised storms of protest from many in the Democratic Party and among the press who supported an anti-Catholic nativist agenda.⁴⁵ Since the 1830s, the United States experienced a rising tide of anti-immigrant activism embodied by the nativist idea. Nativism referred to a growing school of thought that in part believed Catholic teaching and subservience to the Pope stood in opposition to the republican ideals of the United States. During this time, large groups of primarily poor immigrants arrived from Catholic countries in Europe, such as Ireland and Italy. These new arrivals caused economic and political disruption and an ensuing social backlash.⁴⁶

On October 14th, 1846, William L. McCalla, an influential Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia visited the White House and met with President Polk for over an hour.

He delivered a "most intemperate & violent petition which attacked the Roman Catholic Church and denounced the Administration for appointing Catholic priests as chaplains to the Army."⁴⁷ McCalla demanded to be made an Army chaplain and threatened the President that if he refused, the petitioners would denounce the administration for appointing two Jesuits.⁴⁸ Polk chose to risk the minister's wrath and decided not to make McCalla a chaplain. The President managed to downplay tales of a Jesuit conspiracy, but at the cost of extensive criticism by the nations political and religious affiliated newspapers.⁴⁹

Bias against Catholics was not limited to Washington, as General Scott found in dealing with anti-Catholic problems within the ranks of his army in Mexico. Scott's policy of conciliation toward the Mexican Catholic Church was a key component of his attempt to shape the narrative of the war and thus keep the Mexican population on the sidelines. This approach, while militarily sound, did not sit well with all of his men. As the historian Paul Foos remarked, "Given the strongly anti-Catholic rhetoric embedded in manifest destiny, and in American political debates of the 1840s, it is not surprising that churches were particular targets of both calculated and spontaneous raids by Americans."⁵⁰ On numerous occasions, U.S. soldiers found themselves mortified by the public displays of respect their officers made toward Catholic symbols. As acting governor of Jalapa, Colonel Childs took part in the procession of the host and ordered his men to kneel as it made its way through the town square. Pennsylvania volunteers under his command believed this to be "a complete compromise of the national honor."⁵¹ This incident created a clamor of nativist protest in the United States, with several exaggerated accounts of the incident retold in newspapers.⁵² Childs was an excellent field

commander and his reputation survived this bad publicity, but the Jalapa example showed the very real discomfort some U.S. troops felt when following Scott's orders toward fostering good relations with the Mexican Church.⁵³ A policy of conciliation toward the Catholic Church came with political costs both at home and in the field. Fortunately for the United States, it was not the only country with internal discord.

Mexican Tension between Church and State

Scott and Polk's attempt to shape the war's narrative benefited from animosity between Mexico's political and religious elites. Mexican leaders hoped to raise an insurgency, similar to the one that Napoleon suffered against in Spain, but they failed to motivate the people through fear of a North American Protestant crusade. The Mexican Catholic Church was reluctant to back the liberal politicians in power in the capitol. This animosity made the U.S. policy of conciliation toward the Church much more likely to succeed. At the very founding of the Mexican Republic in 1824, there existed the seeds of future discord. One of the early political parties based its doctrine on an anticlerical ideology that "preached strict vigilance over the Church's financial activities and restrictions on its economic holdings."⁵⁴ As the war turned against Mexico and with the liberal political party in power, Vice President Gomez Farias took the opportunity to open old wounds and demanded payment from the Church to bankroll the fight against the dreaded Yankee invaders.⁵⁵ This disastrous move in January, 1847, while Scott was moving against the port city of Veracruz, seriously weakened the position of Mexico's political leaders.

The law Farias passed demanded 20 million pesos to be turned over from the Catholic Church to raise a new army for the fight against advancing U.S. forces.

Tension escalated in the ensuing weeks as "the clergy continued to campaign openly for repeal of the law, and rumors of rebellion persisted."⁵⁶ Eventually armed resistance broke out as several volunteer battalions, referred to as the Polkos, refused to march toward Scott's army and instead occupied strategic positions in Mexico City. A series of skirmishes between loyal government troops and the Polkos ensued, but these engagements remained relatively bloodless.⁵⁷

The chaotic situation paved the way for Santa Anna to return to the capitol where he mediated a resolution to the conflict. He reversed the law confiscating Church property on March 29th, 1847, and forced Farias from office.⁵⁸ Santa Anna restored order in Mexico City and he soon marched against Scott. The Polkos rebellion therefore held little military significance and is seldom mentioned in the more traditional histories of the Mexican War. It remains important as a stark example of the animosity between Mexican liberal political leaders and the more conservative religious establishment. The Polkos affair also showed how Scott's information campaign, guaranteeing the sanctity of Church property, would resonate with Catholic leaders who feared their own government would strip them of resources and power. Scott's ability to exploit internal divisions among the enemy reveals his firm grasp on the dynamics of an effective information campaign.

Lessons for Today

While looking for parallels between 1846 and the current battle against al-Qaeda and ISIS, one should be careful to appreciate the differences between the two conflicts and therefore not draw prescriptive rules of behavior. Digital media and the increased

ability of small groups to use the internet as sources of motivation, recruitment, and support have dramatically increased the difficulty of negating an adversary's narrative.

The nineteenth century information realm was obviously more limited than that of today. Scott issued declarations and used local newspapers to spread his narrative of conciliation toward the Mexican Catholic Church. Military decrees and Presidential speeches are still important, but they no longer have the primacy of an information monopoly. Additionally, Scott's men did not always adhere to the stated policy and atrocities against the Mexican populace and Church certainly occurred. The corrosive nature of war many times has a negative effect on discipline and the Mexican War was no exception. Given the prevalence of video and ease of distributing information through the internet, today's Army has a more difficult task in not feeding enemy propaganda with images like those from Abu Ghraib. In this regard, Scott's army had a much easier time managing and controlling his narrative of religious conciliation.

Perhaps the most significant difference exists in the important fact that leading up to the Mexican War, U.S. leaders anticipated the threat of conflict becoming one between religions as opposed to states. Today the United States is forced to respond to a mature holy war narrative. It seeks to react rather than preempt. Although Scott and Polk needed to contend with pervasive anti-Catholic bias in the ranks and in the public, they were able to foresee and negate the potential threat of a holy war narrative before it became entrenched. This approach took vision and strategic understanding, and allowed U.S. leaders to create a persuasive story as opposed to the more difficult task of responding to a well established enemy narrative.

Although different in time and circumstance, an understanding of the U.S. Army's experience in the Mexican War can help reveal some broad lessons when attempting to negate an adversary's holy war narrative. The following are aspects of the U.S. approach in the Mexican War that may be of use by today's strategic leaders as they design an information campaign to combat the jihadist message:

1) Obtain the support of respected religious leaders who can speak out against the enemy's holy war narrative. President Polk enlisted the aid of the Catholic Bishop of New York and took political risk to support constructive engagement with U.S. Catholic leaders. Additionally, General Scott referenced Mexican Church leaders in his May 11th, 1847, declaration and made efforts to develop good relations between his officer corps and Mexican religious officials.

2) Exploit differences between the religious establishment and the adversary's critical support systems. As we have seen, the conservative Mexican Catholic Church maintained a strained and, at times, an adversarial relationship with the liberal-minded Mexican government. Scott carefully shaped his policy of conciliation to explicitly exclude Mexican civilians and their religious institutions from attack. By maintaining good relations with the Catholic Church in occupied areas and ordering Church property not to be damaged, he undercut the Church leaders' motivation to side with a government they viewed as an adversary.

3) An information campaign may be the decisive line of effort and can be applied at all levels of national policy to drive a coherent and powerful narrative. General Scott understood the importance of minimizing support to guerrilla activity. Despite their leaders' exhortations, the Mexican people predominately chose not to conduct or

support a full blown insurgency against the U.S. invasion. At the national level, President Polk shared his commanding general's view and worked to shape a complimentary U.S. narrative at the strategic level.

4) Reinforce a narrative with demonstrative actions. Scott did not simply rely on declarations and rhetoric. At some cost to morale in his force and public disapproval in the United States, Scott actively courted the favor of Church leaders by taking part in public ceremonies and protecting church property. The success of his policy of conciliation rested on building a reservoir of goodwill that could then be used to counteract rumors of sporadic depredations against the Church. President Polk clearly understood the risk of the war becoming religious in tone and made no secret of his attempts to develop relationships with U.S. Catholic leaders.

Conclusion

Although beyond the scope of this work, a careful consideration of the numerous occasions when U.S. forces did not follow a policy of respect and conciliation toward the Mexican Catholic Church would be a fruitful avenue of additional study. Recent scholarship regarding the commission of U.S. mistakes, crimes, and atrocities committed in Mexico are enlightening, but they do not consider how these events influenced the U.S. attempt to shape the war's narrative.⁵⁹

A focused information campaign in search of shaping a national narrative is a difficult endeavor by any measure. Unlike today, the world of the mid-19th century did not enjoy nearly instantaneous and ubiquitous access to media and information. With that said, widely distributed newspapers, both in the United States and in Mexico, devoted extensive coverage to the war and to accounts of U.S. troops behaving poorly.

Reflecting on the situation, Historian Paul Foos observes, "General Scott and his field officers realized the potential for a powerful backlash...they sincerely tried to implement policies of respect for religion. Scott courted the Mexican clergy, soliciting and attaining their goodwill."⁶⁰ U.S. leaders ultimately succeeded in shaping the narrative and negating the Mexican's ability to use religion to motivate their people toward insurgency.

Knowing full well their policy toward the Catholic Church would cause resentment both inside the Army and the United States, General Scott and President Polk viewed their information campaign as an integral part of the overall strategy in the Mexican War and key to ultimate U.S. success. Both leaders appreciated the threat posed by guerrillas and understood the operational and strategic environments well enough to view the role of the Catholic Church as central to determining a possible insurgency's level of popular support. As today's strategic decision makers consider possible ways to counter a powerful terrorist holy war narrative, a careful consideration of the U.S. experience during the Mexican War may assist with the effort to frame the fight now taking place in the information realm.

Endnotes

¹ Irving W. Levinson, *Wars Within War: Mexican Guerillas, Domestic Elites and the Americans, 1846-1848* (University of Houston, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2003), vi.

² Both the people of the United States and Mexico have equally legitimate grounds to be called Americans, but for the purpose of this paper America and American will refer to the United States. This is done to both improve the readability of the work and because American and Norte Americano were popularly used in both countries in reference to the United States during the time of the war.

³ Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (Gloucester, MA: The Macmillian Company, 1919), 423.

⁴ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 83.

⁵ Jack K. Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1947), xix.

⁶ Journalist John L. O'Sullivan is typically credited with coining the phrase when he said in the December 27th, 1845, edition of the *New York Morning News*, "our manifest destiny to occupy and to possess the whole Continent which Providence has given us..." Norman A. Graebner, "Expansionism," in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, ed. John Whiteclay Chambers II, Fred Anderson, Lynn Eden, Joseph T. Glatthaar, and Ronald H. Spector (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 257.

⁷ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America, Revised and Expanded* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 145.

⁸ Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 56.

⁹ Maurice Matloff, eds., *American Military History Volume 1: 1175-1902* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1996), 174.

¹⁰ Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LL.D.* (New York: Sheldon, 1864), 453.

¹¹ John R. Kenly, *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, War with Mexico, in the Years 1846-7-8* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1873), 308.

¹² *Ibid.*, 310.

¹³ Henry S. Lane, "The Mexican War Journal of Henry S. Lane," *Indiana Magazine of History*, ed. Graham A. Barringer. LIII (December 1957), 432.

¹⁴ Philip Norbourne Barbour and Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour, *Journals of the Late Brevet Major Philip Norbourne Barbour and his wife Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour: Written During the War with Mexico - 1846*, ed. Rhoda van Biber Tanner Doubleday (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), 23.

¹⁵ Robert Anderson, *An Artillery Officer in the Mexican War, 1846-7* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 24.

¹⁶ James K. Polk, *Polk: The Diary of a President, 1845-49*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Capricorn Books, 1929), 250-251.

¹⁷ Scott to Childs, Lt Col Childs Order Book, June 3, 1847, U.S. Congress, 30th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 60. Mexican War Correspondence, National Archives: Office of the Adjutant General (Record Group 94), 1002 - 1003.

¹⁸ General Order No. 128, April 1847, Army of Occupation, Orders; Headquarters of the Army in Mexico. National Archives: Office of the Adjutant General (Record Group 94).

¹⁹ Alcaez, Ramon, et al., *The Other Side or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States*, trans. and ed. Albert C. Ramsey (New York: Burt Franklin, 1850), 439. This work is a compilation of fifteen essays written by Mexican intellectuals in 1848

presenting their recollections and perspectives on the Mexican War. It offers a glimpse into the strategic debate that existed in Mexico prior to and during the course of the American invasion.

²⁰ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 146.

²¹ Jose Fernando Ramirez, *Mexico During the War with the United States*, ed. Walter V. Scholes and trans. Elliott B. Scherr (Columbia Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1950), 125.

²² *Ibid.*, 126.

²³ For an overview of the Mexican War's guerrilla conflict and General Scott's overall policy of conciliation see: Eric W. Knapp, *War Without Pity: Guerrilla Conflict in the Mexican War* (master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1995). For a focused study of the legal aspects of General Scott's policy of conciliation see: Erika Myers, "Conquering Peace: Military Commissions as a Lawfare Strategy in the Mexican War," *American Journal of Criminal Law* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 201-240. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1481891 (accessed January 7, 2015). Irving Levinson, *Wars Within War*, previously referenced, offers a detailed description of the guerilla forces arrayed against General Scott and contends that the increasing insurgent levels after the U.S. military victory dissuaded the United States from seizing even more territory from Mexico.

²⁴ Edward D. Mansfield, *The Life of General Winfield Scott, Embracing His Campaign in Mexico* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1848), 410-411.

²⁵ Nathan C. Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War 1846 - 1848* (Philadelphia: Grigg, Elliot, 1849), 319.

²⁶ Scott, *Memoirs*, 549.

²⁷ Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War*, 346.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Anderson, *An Artillery Officer*, 211.

³² James M. McCaffrey, "*Surrounded by Dangers of All Kinds*": *The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 118.

³³ Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 161-170. This section of Johnson's excellent biographical work details Scott's development of the plan for minimizing the guerrilla threat. It explores Scott's academic grounding in studying Napoleon and Jomini as well as how his years battling the Seminole Indians shaped his approach to fighting an unconventional enemy.

³⁴ Smith, *War with Mexico*, vol. II, 221.

³⁵ Jacob J. Oswandel, *Notes of the Mexican War 1846-47-48* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1885), 104.

³⁶ Daniel H. Hill, quoted in McCaffrey, *Surrounded by Dangers*, 66.

³⁷ Isacc McDaniel, *The Impact of the Mexican War on anti-Catholicism in the United States* (University of Notre Dame, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 1991), 120.

³⁸ Polk, *The Diary of a President*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁰ Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 28.

⁴¹ McDaniel, *The Impact of the Mexican War*, 115.

⁴² James Buchanan, quoted in McDaniel, *The Impact of the Mexican War*, 136.

⁴³ Father John McElroy quoted in McDaniel, *The Impact of the Mexican War*, 128.

⁴⁴ Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ John C. Pinheiro, *Crusade and Conquest: Anti-Catholicism, Manifest Destiny, and the United States-Mexican War of 1846-1848* (University of Tennessee, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2001), 2.

⁴⁷ McDaniel, *The Impact of the Mexican War*, 121.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 27. The public debate over the Catholic role in the Mexican War raged primarily in the editorial pages of U.S. newspapers. Two excellent dissertations delve into the point - counterpoint characteristic of this debate in the media. McDaniel's *The Impact of the Mexican War*, previously referenced, and Tyler V. Johnson, *Punishing the Lies: Catholic and Immigrant Volunteers in the U.S.-Mexican War and the Fight Against Nativism* (Purdue University, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2009).

⁵⁰ Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 127.

⁵¹ Oswandel, *Notes of the Mexican War*, 105.

⁵² Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 131.

⁵³ John C. Pinheiro, "Extending the Light and Blessings of our Purer Faith: Anti-Catholic Sentiment among American Soldiers in the U.S.-Mexican War." *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 2 (Fall, 2001): 129-152. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/195364777?accountid=4444>. (accessed January 8, 2015).

⁵⁴ David C. Bailey, *Viva Cristo Rey: The Cristero Rebellion and the Church-State Conflict in Mexico* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1930), 10. For a broader perspective on the Catholic Church's history of political involvement in Latin America and the historic tension between the Church as a supporter for liberal agrarian reform versus the Church as a supporter of traditional conservative establishment see: Frederick C. Turner, *Catholicism and Political Development in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

⁵⁵ Justo Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, trans. Charles Ramsdell (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1969), 242. Sierra was a former Mexican Minister of Public Education who died in 1912. This work was published in Spanish in 1941 and is an excellent example of apologist history telling a romanticized version of the events leading up to and beyond the Mexican War. Sierra was an educator and bureaucrat, but his history is many times poetic. He lays the blame for Mexico's defeat at the feet of the elites who would have rather surrendered to the foreign invader than seen their political rivals benefit.

⁵⁶ Michael P. Costeloe, "The Mexican Church and the Rebellion of the Polkos," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no. 2 (May, 1966), 170-178.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵⁸ Sierra, *Political Evolution*, 243.

⁵⁹ See both: Amy Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), and Patrick T. Troester, *Direful Vengeance: A U.S.-Mexican War Massacre and the Culture of Collective Violence in Nineteenth-Century North America* (master's thesis, University of Akron, 2014). https://etd.ohiolink.edu/letd.send_file?accession=akron1405026667&disposition=inline (accessed 18 January, 2015).

⁶⁰ Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 127.