Chapter 8: WE TAKE NOTHING BY CONQUEST, THANK GOD

Colonel Ethan Alien Hitchcock, a professional soldier, graduate of the Military Academy, commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, a reader of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Hegel, Spinoza, wrote in his diary:

Fort Jesup, La., June 30, 1845. Orders came last evening by express from Washington City directing General Taylor to move without any delay to some point on the coast near the Sabine or elsewhere, and as soon as he shall hear of the acceptance by the Texas convention of the annexation resolutions of our Congress he is immediately to proceed with his whole command to the extreme western border of Texas and take up a position on the banks of or near the Rio Grande, and he is to expel any armed force of Mexicans who may cross that river. Bliss read the orders to me fast evening hastily at tattoo. I have scarcely slept a wink, thinking of the needful preparations. I am now noting at reveille by candlelight and waiting the signal for muster... Violence leads to violence, and if this movement of ours does not lead to others and to bloodshed, I am much mistaken.

Hitchcock was not mistaken. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase had doubled the territory of the United States, extending it to the Rocky Mountains. To the southwest was Mexico, which had won its independence in a revolutionary war against Spain in 1821—a large country which included Texas and what are now New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, and part of Colorado. After agitation, and aid from the United States, Texas broke off from Mexico in 1836 and declared itself the “Lone Star Republic.” In 1845, the U.S. Congress brought it into the Union as a state.

In the White House now was James Polk, a Democrat, an expansionist, who, on the night of his inauguration, confided to his Secretary of the Navy that one of his main objectives was the acquisition of California. His order to General Taylor to move troops to the Rio Grande was a challenge to the Mexicans. It was not at all clear that the Rio Grande was the southern boundary of Texas, although Texas had forced the defeated Mexican general Santa Anna to say so when he was a prisoner. The traditional border between Texas and Mexico had been the Nueces River, about 150 miles to the north, and both Mexico and the United States had recognized that as the border. However, Polk, encouraging the Texans to accept annexation, had assured them he would uphold their claims to the Rio Grande.

Ordering troops to the Rio Grande, into territory inhabited by Mexicans, was clearly a provocation. Taylor had once denounced the idea of the annexation of Texas. But now that he had his marching orders, his attitude seemed to change. His visit to the tent of his aide Hitchcock to discuss the move is described in Hitchcock’s diary:

He seems to have lost all respect for Mexican rights and is willing to be an instrument of Mr. Polk for pushing our boundary as far west as possible. When I told him that, if he suggested a movement (which he told me he intended), Mr. Polk would seize upon it and throw the responsibility on him, he at once said he would take it, and added that if the President instructed him to use his discretion, he would ask no orders, but would go upon the Rio Grande as soon as he could get transportation. I think the General wants an additional brevet, and would strain a point to get it.

Taylor moved his troops to Corpus Christi, Texas, just across the Nueces River, and waited further instructions. They came in February 1846—to go down the Gulf Coast to the Rio Grande. Taylor’s army marched in parallel columns across the open prairie, scouts far ahead and on the flanks, a train of supplies following. Then, along a narrow road, through a belt of thick chaparral, they arrived, March 28, 1846, in cultivated fields and thatched-roof huts.
hurriedly abandoned by the Mexican occupants, who had fled across the river to the city of
Matamoros. Taylor set up camp, began construction of a fort, and implanted his cannons
facing the white houses of Matamoros, whose inhabitants stared curiously at the sight of an
army on the banks of a quiet river.

The Washington Union, a newspaper expressing the position of President Polk and the
Democratic party, had spoken early in 1845 on the meaning of Texas annexation:

Let the great measure of annexation be accomplished, and with it the
questions of boundary and claims. For who can arrest the torrent that will
pour onward to the West? The road to California will be open to us. Who
will stay the march of our western people?

They could have meant a peaceful march westward, except for other words, in the same
newspaper: "A corps of properly organized volunteers . . . would invade, overrun, and
occupy Mexico. They would enable us not only to take California, but to keep it." It was
shortly after that, in the summer of 1845, that John O'Sullivan, editor of the Democratic
Review, used the phrase that became famous, saying it was "Our manifest destiny to
overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly
multiplying millions." Yes, manifest destiny.

All that was needed in the spring of 1846 was a military incident to begin the war that
Polk wanted. It came in April, when General Taylor's quartermaster, Colonel Cross, while
riding up the Rio Grande, disappeared. His body was found eleven days later, his skull
smashed by a heavy blow. It was assumed he had been killed by Mexican guerrillas
crossing the river. In a solemn military ceremony visible to the Mexicans of Matamoros
crowding onto the roofs of their houses across the Rio Grande, Cross was buried with a
religious service and three volleys of rifle fire.

The next day (April 25), a patrol of Taylor's soldiers was surrounded and attacked by
Mexicans, and wiped out: sixteen dead, others wounded, the rest captured. Taylor sent a
message to the governors of Texas and Louisiana asking them to recruit live thousand
volunteers; he had been authorized to do this by the White House before he left for Texas.
And he sent a dispatch to Polk: "Hostilities may now be considered as commenced."

The Mexicans had fired the first shot. But they had done what the American government
wanted, according to Colonel Hitchcock, who wrote in his diary, even before those first
incidents:

I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors. . . . We
have not one particle of right to be here. . . . It looks as if the government
sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for
taking California and as much of this country as it chooses, for, whatever
becomes of this army, there is no doubt of a war between the United States
and Mexico. . . . My heart is not in this business . . . but, as a military man, I
am bound to execute orders.

And before those first clashes, Taylor had sent dispatches to Polk which led the President to
note that "the probabilities are that hostilities might take place soon." On May 9, before
news of any battles, Polk was suggesting to his cabinet a declaration of war, based on
certain money claims against Mexico, and on Mexico's recent rejection of an American
negotiator named John Slidell. Polk recorded in his diary what he said to the cabinet
meeting:

I stated ... that up to this time, as we knew, we had heard of no open act of
aggression by the Mexican army, but that the danger was imminent that
such acts would be committed. I said that in my opinion we had ample
cause of war, and that it was impossible . . . that I could remain silent
much longer . . . that the country was excited and impatient on the subject..

The country was not "excited and impatient." But the President was. When the
dispatches arrived from General Taylor telling of casualties from the Mexican attack, Polk
summoned the cabinet to hear the news, and they unanimously agreed he should ask for a
declaration of war. Polk's message to Congress was indignant:

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent
information from the frontier of the Del Norte [the Rio Grande]. But now,
after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United