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Kentuckians in Mexico: Kentucky Volunteers and Their Attitudes Toward the War, Mexico, and Mexicans

Damon Eubank

The Mexican War was really two separate wars: the one the soldiers fought, and the one the newspapers and politicians portrayed. This divergence of the idealized and the actual war caused considerable tensions for the soldiers of Kentucky. They quickly realized that their situation was not the one painted in the newspapers back home. The Kentucky soldier was preoccupied with survival from the threats posed both by enemy soldiers and the harsh climate, and such survival also promised the achievement of honor. The civilian debates over war objectives, however, threatened this goal. As a result, the soldiers had to evaluate the war criticism and judge whether their own services contributed to the gaining of honor. The young Kentucky troops had to judge their situation while undergoing the difficult process of maturing politically, socially, and emotionally during the Mexican War.

The political maturation process usually revolved around the Kentucky troops' evaluation of their government's objectives and their opinion regarding the righteousness of the American government. Kentuckians asked the essential question which most soldiers ponder in wartime: why are we fighting? Similarly, the maturation process also dealt with the development of social consciousness: they evaluated and expressed their opinion about the Mexican land and people. The troops had to judge the impact of combat and the possibility of death on their emotions. By war's end, the soldiers usually had rather different opinions on the glory of warfare from those they had held when they had first entered the service.

When the war began, Kentuckians believed in the justice of the American cause. War enthusiasm was rampant. The Democratic newspaper, the *Hickman Weekly Commercial Standard*, encouraged the war enthusiasm by stressing the need to discipline the wayward nation of Mexico for unjustly provoking a war with the

United States. Another supporter of the war, the *Louisville Morning Courier*, inflamed public opinion with reports about the cruelty of the ancient Mexicans, especially the practice of human sacrifice. Likewise, the *Louisville Daily Journal* commented on the barbarity of the Mexicans issuing letters of marque in order to prey upon American maritime commerce. The volunteers clearly came forward because they believed they were going to fight a just war.¹

Later, the war came under question. President Polk, a Democrat, had made annexation, not the defense of national honor, a primary war objective. Kentucky politicians, representing a predominately Whig state, criticized the President's actions. Conversely, Kentucky Democrats criticized the Whigs for their partisan control of military appointments, and challenged their patriotism.²

Senator John J. Crittenden summarized the viewpoint of most Whigs when he noted that he would support all measures for national defense or protection of American troops, but that he would prefer that Americans show forbearance in regard to annexation lest American war motives appear impure in world opinion. Likewise, Henry Clay praised the patriotism of the American soldier, but sadly noted that his own son had died in an unnecessary war. In a similar vein, George Prentice of the *Louisville Daily Journal*, the leading Whig newspaper in the state, attacked Polk for his failure to compromise and thus secure immediate peace. He observed that more glory could be gained in helping the famine-stricken Irish than in annexing Mexican territory.³

The troops of the second requisition had to deal with the problem of evaluating the motives of the government more than those of the first requisition. The troops from the first call-up knew they had the probability of seeing combat and earning honor. The troops of the second call, in contrast, realized after they reached Mexico that they had relatively little chance of seeing any combat and, therefore, of earning any honor. They were in a miserable situation, with little chance of reward comparable to that bestowed on the troops of the first requisition.

The Kentucky soldiers of the second requisition criticized the long, slow peace negotiation process. They were tired of garrison duty and, and of Mexico's stalling in the negotiations. They turned this anger against the Mexicans, blaming them for prolonging the war. John G. Donan noted that the Mexicans benefitted from prolonging the war and should be treated harshly as a conquered

people, rather than being handled with leniency. Public opinion held that the Mexicans were through militarily; so why was there a delay in the peace negotiations? In a similar vein, Dan Runyon suggested that the Mexicans should accept the treaty offered by the United States, or face disintegration as a nation. The Kentuckians wanted to return home, and believed the Mexicans were prolonging their tour of duty.⁴

While the Kentucky volunteers in Mexico blamed the Mexicans for the delay in a peace settlement, Kentucky editors and politicians instead blamed President Polk. Soldiers believed that, if the Mexicans refused to accept the American peace terms, the army should march against the major Northern Mexican cities. Kentucky editors, on the other hand, criticized Polk for his "piddling" efforts to win the war. The Kentucky soldiers of the second requisition could not very well blame the American government for their situation, because this would dishonor the war and would only further weaken their claims to respect. The soldiers continued to insist they were fighting for something worthwhile—their country's honor—and left the criticism of the war motives to the civilians.⁵

Kentucky soldiers maintained solidarity on the issue of the honorableness of their military service, but there were differences of opinion about the Mexican land and people. The war had exposed them to new places and new people, which required them to reconsider their preconceptions about such things as poverty, religion, and war itself.

For many volunteers, this was their first time away from home. Many of the troops "persisted in looking upon the war as an adventure and as a welcome relief from the monotony of home life." Kentuckians were either fascinated or repulsed by the land of Mexico, and most expressed some opinion about it.⁶

Mexico held many charms for Kentuckians, being so different from their home land. Some volunteers enjoyed their term of service in Mexico, determined to see as much of the country as they could while they were there. They viewed the war as an exotic vacation, in addition to being a pursuit of honor.⁷

Kentuckians had the chance to see many new things in Mexico: they could examine the ancient ruins of the Aztec empire, for example, or the battlefields of General Winfield Scott's campaign of the previous year. Along the way, they could also enjoy the breathtaking beauty of the valley of Mexico.⁸

Upon arrival in Mexico City, Kentuckians immediately commented on the beauty of the city and its many fine buildings. One of the events which most fascinated them in Mexico City was the bullfight. They observed the size and grandeur of the spectacle, and also noted the fine display of horsemanship during the event.⁹

Not all Kentuckians, however, enjoyed their stay in Mexican territory. Some were completely unimpressed with the land they encountered. Some troops complained of the dustiness, the muddy water, and the prevalence of various diseases. One volunteer noted the wild frontier quality of the land and suggested that missionaries be sent in order to bring civilization.¹⁰

Many came to believe that Mexican land was worthless. The territory which Levi White saw did not have good timber, had few running streams, and offered a poor climate. Dan Runyon concurred with this observation, stating that the land was "a hilly, barren, and sandy region with no growth scarcely." He also noted the "millions and billions of scorpions, spiders, and ants" which infested soldiers' tents. The land did appear worthless, but, as William Carpenter noted, it had abundant natural resources if the people would only develop them efficiently.¹¹

The location of troops in Mexico explains most of the great divergence their opinions about the worth of the land. The troops of the first requisition served in Northern Mexico. Here the territory was desert and extremely poor. Since there was little here to impress the Kentuckians, they formed a negative image of Mexico. On the other hand, the troops of the second requisition served in southern Mexico and saw the most prosperous and beautiful part of the country and thus formed a more favorable image.

The Kentucky volunteers also expressed their opinions about the Mexican people and such institutions as the army, the government, and the Catholic Church. The Kentuckians assumed American superiority and thus emphasized Mexican inferiority. Although compassion might have softened the criticism, Kentuckians maintained their superiority to the Mexicans and their belief that Mexicans were *ipso facto* inferior to people in the United States.

The Kentuckians had a very low opinion of the Mexican army's fighting quality. For example, prior to the battle of Buena Vista, Walter J. McMurtrey believed that the Mexicans would not dare attack the American army. In the eyes of the Kentuckians, the pitiful nature of the Mexican army ensured their defeat. One

volunteer noted that "the Mexican Army is the most miserable creature you ever saw." Kentuckians noted the "wonderful bravery" of the American army and contrasted that with the alleged disgrace of the Mexican performance. Simon B. Buckner, a West Point-trained officer from Kentucky, observed that "Mexicans are never anxious to fight, and I have sometimes seen them run." He also recorded General Winfield Scott's estimate that the Mexicans needed about a 3.5 to 1 ratio in their favor for a chance of victory. Most Kentuckians believed that the war would be over quickly and felt that they might miss an opportunity to gain combat experience. Thus, the Kentuckians had little respect for such an enemy.¹²

The sense of superiority which the Kentuckians felt bordered on recklessness. Since the enemy was obviously inferior, the Kentuckians believed they could accomplish anything they wanted against them with little real effort. For example, Kentuckians were sure that General Antonio Santa Anna would never attack the American army. Buena Vista and the campaign of General Winfield Scott proved this assumption false. Another example of the Americans' feeling of invincibility concerned their attitude toward the Mexican artillery. The Kentuckians acted as if the artillery batteries could not harm them, but the harsh realities of war quickly disabused them of these notions, too.¹³

The soldiers also had a low opinion of the government of Mexico. They argued that since it did not have the stability of the American government it was therefore inferior. After the Mexican army had been defeated, Kentucky soldiers noted that its government had such confused leadership they could not even arrange a termination of the war. Observers also noted the lack of popular support for the Mexican government. According to Kentuckians, such a pathetic government did not deserve respect.¹⁴

The soldier's negative opinions also extended to the Mexican civilian population. Kentucky soldiers criticized the ignorance, poverty, and customs they observed among the Mexicans. They made little effort to understand the Mexican people or their ways, and simply wrote them off with little real thought.

Volunteers associated Mexican poverty with indolence. The argument ran that the Mexicans were ignorant and lazy, so they deserved their poverty. As one Kentuckian observed: "the Mexicans are at least one thousand years behind the United States in agriculture and machinism." Another volunteer noted the

concentration of wealth in a few hands and observed that many Mexicans were "perfect slaves . . . to the lords and aristocrats."¹⁵

The alleged arrogance of the Mexicans also shocked the Kentuckians. According to William Preston, the Mexicans were from the "most conceited and vain-glorious of nations" because they had been defeated by the Americans, were inferior to them both physically and morally, yet obstinately refused to accept their defeat. Preston felt it would be better for Mexico if the United States controlled the area and uplifted the people. The Americans could do much more good for the country than the Mexicans themselves ever could. Preston, in his arrogant American expansionistic attitude, could not admit that Mexico's weaknesses, like her harsh climate, were also her military strengths.¹⁶

The volunteers were baffled by Mexican customs and thus tended to criticize the Mexicans for what the Kentuckians could not understand. William Daniel noticed that the Mexicans did not observe the Sabbath, but still went about their business as normal on that day. He also watched a Mexican funeral and could not comprehend how the people could celebrate rather than mourn at the ceremony. He found such behavior unacceptable.¹⁷

The difference of religious faiths may very well explain much of the criticism of Mexican customs. Kentuckians serving in the Mexican War had probably never before seen so many Catholics in their lives. The Catholics of Kentucky, in the years before the Mexican War, were centered in Nelson and surrounding counties. They had become prosperous farmers and fit into Kentucky society quite well. Kentucky did not receive the first wave of Catholic immigrants from Europe until after the war. Mexico's poverty and apparent lack of economic promise only intensified the anti-Catholicism which Kentuckians, like most Americans felt.¹⁸

Kentuckians condemned what they did not understand. One soldier referred to the Mexicans as the "most priest-ridden people I ever knew." Some blamed the Catholic Church for all the country's problems. Henry S. Lane gave a common assessment when he noted: "The people here are ignorant and bigoted Roman Catholics and are more than one hundred years behind the improvement and spirit of the age and it requires no gift of prophecy to foretell their doom, they are destined soon to fall before the all grasping and all conquering genius of genuine Americanism." Thus, American Protestants ought to convert the Mexicans. As one observer noted, "If we kill them in battle it is our duty to try and save their souls."¹⁹

Kentuckians, like many other American Protestants, felt uneasy about their contact with this large Catholic population. This attitude helped the growth of the Nativist party. During the war, the Louisville *Morning Courier* often criticized the influence of foreigners and Stephen Trabue of Bourbon County, ran unsuccessfully for Congress on the Nativist ticket in 1847. The Kentucky Nativist party had its most spectacular growth after the war, and the Mexican War experience may have played a role in its development. Many Kentucky soldiers had certainly formed a negative opinion about Catholics, and this experience made them more susceptible to post-war nativism.²⁰

But it was a latent racism and a resentment over what Kentuckians perceived as war atrocities that probably caused the most intense Kentucky dislike for the Mexicans. The enemies' conduct of a guerilla war particularly put them beyond the pale of respectability, and the color of their skin predisposed Kentuckians toward a harsh assessment of them. Preconceived attitudes of the most virulent sort, therefore, affected Kentucky's view of Mexicans.

This prejudice can be seen in the frequent derogatory remarks about the Mexicans' skin color. Kentuckians compared Mexicans to slaves and Indians. For example, Henry Lane called Mexicans "copper skinned rascals" who were "lazy, ignorant, and perfidious with no patriotism" and noted that "it would be a great mercy to them to take their country and give them a settled form of free government and Americanize their Republic." Another volunteer observed that the poor Mexicans were worse off than the slaves in Kentucky. They lived in houses "that in Kentucky they would scarcely suffer a horse or cow to stand in." Even the Indians were believed to be superior to the Mexicans, so low an estimation did Kentuckians have of their Mexican enemy. The Mexicans probably sensed this American arrogance and their resentment may have been expressed in their conduct of the guerilla war.²¹

Kentuckians hated this Mexican guerilla style of warfare. Intimidation and isolated killing of Americans were common. For the Kentuckians, guerilla warfare was not an acceptable way to earn honor. For example, Edward Hobson had been advised that soldiers were gentlemen and that they should act accordingly. But, in this kind of conflict, there was no frontal assault, no combat experience to recall, only vigilance against an unexpected and cowardly enemy. The Kentuckians blamed the Mexicans for all their privations, but when they attempted to gain vengeance for

atrocities they often retaliated against innocent people. Guerilla warfare was not for gentlemen, and little honor was involved either for the guerrillas or their victims.²²

The Mexicans regularly preyed on isolated American troops. If a soldier strayed from his unit and ventured out alone, he ran the risk of being killed. William Daniel noted that the Mexicans were "very treacherous" and that they "pretended great friendship for any American," but if they "could ketch[sic] him out without arms they would make nothing of killing him." Likewise, John Donan observed that the Mexicans "would cut our throats if they had the courage or a good opportunity." Kentuckians had not volunteered to serve under such conditions, so such Mexican activity infuriated them.²³

Guerilla warfare often leads to atrocities, and Kentuckians encountered several such incidents during their time of service. William Carpenter recorded an incident where the Mexicans had cut out the heart of a dead American and placed his eyeballs in his wounds. The *Louisville Daily Journal* also reported the alleged mutilation of a Lieutenant Miller's body. Miller's heart had been cut out and left on a shrub. In a similar vein, the *Lexington Observer and Reporter* reported the death of a Lieutenant McGill. McGill had been lariatied and his body dragged for nearly a mile. His ears had been cut off and a saber run through his body several times. Kentuckians also believed that the Mexicans were under orders to kill any prisoners they captured.²⁴

Such Mexican acts led to retaliation by the Kentuckians, although evidence of mutilations by Kentuckians is lacking. William Carpenter recorded Kentuckians killing approximately 20 Mexicans at Monterrey in revenge for the isolated slaying of some Kentuckians. Both sides claimed the other was responsible for the atrocities. The Kentuckians resented the official policy of leniency toward the Mexicans, preferring to retaliate against them. As one soldier noted, whenever troops entered a town, they "ransacked" and "explored" their homes. If a Kentuckian had been killed or captured, his comrades wanted to take quick revenge. Unfortunately, the Kentuckians probably retaliated against many innocent Mexicans in their haste for vengeance.²⁵

Although most Kentuckians had a negative image of the Mexicans, some few were more positive. Several soldiers noted the backwardness of the nation but felt compassion instead of disgust for the people. Some acknowledged that the Mexican soldiers had

courage and endurance, even if poorly led. The most common words of praise for Mexicans concerned the women. Kentuckians disliked most Mexican men for racial and military reasons, but held women in high esteem because of their various acts of kindness. For example, William Carpenter noted that, while he was held as a prisoner, the men threatened to cut his throat while the women were sympathetic and tried to help him. Kentuckians disagreed over the beauty of Mexican women, but their kindness won universal praise.²⁶

During the war, the Kentucky troops had to mature emotionally. Edward Hobson admitted that it was his "wild and ambitious spirit" which influenced him to enlist. He felt he would improve as a person from his war experience. Thomas Summers also felt he had matured during the war. For him, maturity came from learning to obey others and control his temper.²⁷

By far the most sobering aspect of the maturation process was the experience of combat. Facing death and experiencing its lasting impressions, James Davidson somberly noted in his letters home that he might not see his family again, while William Preston made preparations for the care of his wife and children in the event of his death. John Halsey was horrified at what he saw on the battlefield, and never forgot the scenes of the dead, the dying, and the dismembered. Injured soldiers pleading for water upset him profoundly. Levi White echoed these sentiments when he noted that "however callous we may become there is still no holyday[sic] amusement in witnessing the slaughter of our fellow human beings."²⁸

The soldier also had to show courage in the face of battle in order to gain honor. Cowardice disgraced the individual. For example, a Lieutenant Fields, of Marshall's cavalry regiment, had served in the quartermaster's department. At the battle of Buena Vista, however, he found himself commanding troops. He was unprepared, and he asked another officer to direct his troops in the battle. As a result, Fields became an object of scorn among the Kentucky units. Combat was the ultimate test of manhood and courage, and to fail in it was unforgivable.²⁹

Because of war-inspired patriotism and latent racism toward the Mexicans, the troops blamed the Mexicans for the problems they faced in the war, absolving their own leaders from much of the blame. If soldiers criticized the war, they ran the risk of reducing or destroying the honor gained from military service. The soldiers

maintained a solidarity on the honorableness of their service. Thus, the soldiers let Kentuckians on the home front take care of the criticism of American leaders.

The Kentuckians developed a negative portrait of Mexicans which they rarely altered. Racism could be softened by compassion, but most Kentucky soldiers remained anti-Mexican throughout the war. The Kentuckians experienced a whole new world in the Mexican War, but this exposure did not often change their preconceptions. The Kentucky troops condemned what lay beyond their own experience, and made little effort to understand this new land and its people.

The young Kentuckians did mature as a result of the harsh realities of this war because combat and separation from family—among other experiences—forced them to grow up. In their search for honor, the boys became men.

NOTES

¹ *Weekly Commercial Standard*, (Hickman), May 28, 1846; *Morning Courier* (Louisville), June 11, 1846; *Daily Journal* (Louisville), June 11, 1846; *Daily Journal* (Louisville), November 30, 1846.

² *Kentucky Yeoman* (Frankfort), June 11, 1846.

³ *Western Citizen* (Paris), May 29, 1846; Henry Clay to Mrs. G. Walton LeVert, June 25, 1846, Henry Clay Correspondence, Filson Club, Louisville; Glyndon Van Deusen, *Life of Henry Clay* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1937), 382; *Daily Journal* (Louisville), January 9, 1847, December 15, 1847.

⁴ John G. Donan to Fountain Donan, December 29, 1847, John G. Donan Papers, Department of Library Special Collections, Manuscripts & Folk Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green; William G. Hobson to Edward H. Hobson, August 30, 1846, Edward H. Hobson Papers, Department of Library Special Collections, Manuscripts & Folk Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green; Dan Runyon to Marie Runyon, April 21, 1848, Runyon Family Papers, Filson Club, Louisville.

⁵ William Preston to Margaret Preston, April 8, 1848, Wickliffe-Preston Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington; *Licking Valley Register* (Covington), September 3, 1847.

⁶ Samuel M. Wilson, *History of Kentucky* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1928), 195.

⁷ Frank F. Mathias, "Incidents and Experiences in the Life of Thomas W. Parsons, Written by Himself" (M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1960), ix; Levi White to Sarah White, October 5, 1846, Levi White Papers, Filson Club, Louisville; Walter J. McMurtrey to Mrs. E. Stevenson, February 1, 1847, Filson Club, Louisville.

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¹⁰Edward Hobson to A.G. Hobson, September 22, 1846, Edward H. Hobson Papers, Department of Library Special Collections, Manuscripts & Folk Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green; William A. McClintock, "Journal of a Trip Through Texas and Northern Mexico in 1846-1847," *Southwest Historical Quarterly*, 34(1930), 246; Madison Mills Diary, 2, Filson Club, Louisville; William Daniel Diary, 6, Filson Club, Louisville; W.L. Booth to Richard Maupin, January 28, 1848, Richard A. Maupin Papers, Filson Club, Louisville; *Kentucky Yeomen* (Frankfort), October 8, 1846.

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¹²Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 22-25; Walter J. McMurtry to Mrs. E. Stevenson, February 1, 1847 and March 2, 1847, Walter J. McMurtry Papers, Filson Club, Louisville; William G. Hobson to Edward H. Hobson, October 23, 1846, Edward H. Hobson Papers, Department of Library Special Collections, Manuscripts & Folk Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green; Simon B. Buckner to Mary Kingsley, May 31, 1852, Simon B. Buckner Letters to Mary Kingsley, Filson Club, Louisville; John Lillard to Charles Lillard, July 23, 1846, Lillard Family Papers, Filson Club, Louisville; Theodore O'Hara to Kean O'Hara, March 2, 1847, Miscellaneous Papers-Military, Filson Club, Louisville.

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¹⁴John G. Donan to Fountain Donan, December 29, 1847, John G. Donan Papers, Department of Library Special Collections, Manuscripts & Folk Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green; *Daily Journal* (Louisville), March 11, 1847.

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²⁴ Carpenter, *Travels and Adventures*, 112; *Daily Journal* (Louisville), February 27, 1847 and April 12, 1847; *Observer and Reporter* (Lexington), March 17, 1947.

²⁵ Carpenter, *Travels and Adventures*, 29, 30; *Morning Courier* (Louisville), January 1, 1847; *Kentucky Yeoman* (Frankfort), October 1, 1846; *Tri-Weekly Herald* (Maysville), March 17, 1847.

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²⁹ *Licking Valley Register* (Covington), July 30, 1847.