THE POLITICS OF DESERTION

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My parents Brenda and Kevin Higdon who worked hard to give me everything.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This project examines the impact that deserting US soldiers had on the Mexican-American War. Three different groups each at a different level of the war effort explain the impact: US Politicians, military leaders, and deserting US Soldiers. My research provides a political analysis of US Politicians and the US Military during the war as well as a social analysis of deserters. The major findings of this paper are that politicians used deserters as a political tool to help legislate their vision for the nation. The military’s handling of desertion was influenced by the Presidential aspirations of the Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor. Deserters were men who either did not accept the patriotic appeals to nationalism and those who had that appeal wear off.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1492, Martin Alonso Pinzon arrived in the Americas. The beautiful and exotic landscape which Pinzon encountered altered his perception and loyalty causing him to abandon his Spanish crown approved mission. Rather than accompany his fellow conquistadors through the Americans, Pinzon deserted the crown appointed leader of the mission; Christopher Columbus.\(^1\) Pinzon’s case was not rare; as soon Europeans arrived in the Americas many men deserted on their expeditions. By 1846, little had changed as droves of men abandoned their commitment to the U.S. Army by deserting.

The Mexican American War saw the highest percentage of desertion of any foreign war waged by the U.S. The army had 40,934 regular and 70, 129 volunteer soldiers serving during the war. 78,718 of the soldiers saw actual conflict. Thirteen percent of the regulars and six percent of the volunteers deserted.\(^2\) In total, the desertion rate reached just over eight percent.\(^3\) America’s next highest war-time desertion rate was World War II at five percent followed by Vietnam at four percent.\(^4\)

James K. Polk campaigned and been elected to the office of the presidency in 1844 promising to acquire the western territories of North America for the U.S.\(^5\) By mid-June 1845, Polk and the Democrats had already annexed Texas.\(^6\) In June 1846 Polk began the diplomatic steps to purchase the Oregon Territory from Great Britain.\(^7\) He preferred to purchase Mexico’s western territory rather than to seize them through war. He ordered US

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1 *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*. Translated by Clements R. Markham. (New York, New York: Burt Franklin Publisher, 1967.), 152
3 Miller, 23
4 Ibid., 174
7 Merry, 266
representative John Slidell to travel into Mexico and find a diplomatic solution for U.S. acquisition of the territory. In the fall of 1845, Slidell made a 28 million dollar offer to Mexico for their western territories. By spring 1846, Mexico’s changing leadership and distaste for the U.S. involvement in Texas, cut off all communications with Slidell. Slidell reported to Polk that negotiations were at a stalemate.

Polk had been preparing for diplomatic relations to fail with Mexico. Since May 1845 Brigadier General Zachary Taylor had been preparing a force for war with Mexico if necessary. In January 1846 Polk ordered Taylor to march his 3,550 man force south into the Rio Grande. On the long march, soldiers deserted. On March 28, 1846, those who remained camped at Del Norte across the Matamoros River in Mexican territory. Since the U.S. Congress had not approved war, citizens still believed it was avoidable because war required congressional approval. However, Taylor was worried about desertion not congressional approval as he sat across the river from Matamoros, staring at the Mexicans staring back at him. For the entire month of March; Taylor watched desertion become an increasing problem in his ranks.

Politicians and the military would come to learn that despite expressed feelings that justified the decision to go to war; the public was not convinced war was necessary. Politicians battled over the legality and necessity of the war in fiery debates throughout the spring of 1846. The public was thrown into a tailspin as newspapers, orators, and zealots attempted to sway public opinion with fear and claims of “Manifest Destiny” as the war resolution passed. On the ground, the troops, many of which were recent immigrants, responded to the situation by deserting. The military led by two presidential hopefuls; Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor carefully tried to manage the information about desertion while not compromising their future electability. Despite this effort, they remained at constant odds with troops who recognized the ambiguities of the war and nationalism. The deserters respected their community of peers and unity, but not the nation’s imperialistic goals. Politicians tried to control the public’s interpretation of these events by framing

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8 Howe, 734-735, 803.
9 Ibid., 737
10 Merry, 188
11 Ibid., 240
12 Stevens, 65
desertion to their political liking, but in the end both parties and the nation experienced long lasting trauma from the political infighting, war, and desertion.

While there have been other historical works have studied desertion during the U.S.-Mexican War, this is the first study to examine the limits of nationalism and patriotism on the working class during the war. The first two chapters argue that politicians, newspapers, and the military changed, shaped, and crafted the image of desertion in an effort to fulfill their own political goals. This piece asks: What were politician’s true feelings about desertion? How did political context inform their decision on desertion? What role did party affiliation and sectional background play in opinions on desertion? Why did politicians and the press change their positions on desertion? What did they all have to gain from silencing or exposing desertion?

Wars provide a valuable window into the complex set of human loyalties. My first chapter examines how politicians used the issue of desertion to strengthen their loyalties to their respective political party. My work highlights that desertion came to be a central issue in the debate over the war resolution. Other historians have noted the mass polarization of issues surrounding the war resolution, but not desertion. Politicians were obsessed with their own political victories concerning the war, and not interested in protecting the people they claim to serve.

Politicians controlled the issue of desertion through a selection of reports, carefully worded speeches, and omissions of information. Whigs made desertion a political issue synonymous with brave war opposition while Democrats used desertion as a political tool to make war opposition and desertion synonymous with treachery. The newspapers were complicit in framing deserters’ behavior to fit their political agenda. The military was involved in politics using stories of desertion to silence war opposition at home, and protect the image of military leaders in the field. As each party attempted to control and shape the issue of desertion, other groups altered their stance on desertion.

My second chapter looks at the desertion problem faced by the U.S. Military in Mexico. I ask: how did Presidential hopes alter Military’s leader’s response to desertion? What political costs did desertion incur for military leaders? What economic costs did desertion incur for the military? What methods did the military take to stop or lessen
desertion? How did President Polk view and react to the military’s methods to quell desertion?

The effects of desertion and the methods to quell it consumed military leaders. Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott’s prospects for the Whig Presidential nomination often dictated their reaction to desertion. As a result, desertion impacted the 1848 Whig Presidential nomination. The constant agitation of deserters defeated the military on some level. The cost to the military was steep with an abundance of resources and man power needed for the war spent on desertion. The cost to Scott, Taylor, and Polk was their contested public image. The cost to the nation was a massive embarrassment highlighting leader’s inability to foster national support for a war.

Chapter two outlines the difficulties faced by the military as it remained in a tough position; surrounded by the will of politicians, the threat of the enemy, and the costs of desertion. President Polk and his cabinet stood by military leaders for most of the war. However, by the war’s end Polk publically admitted that the military was unable to combat desertion. In the field Taylor and Scott mirrored one another in their failed solutions to combat desertion; both ignored the issue, then used punitive measures, and then went after Mexico’s enticers. However, Scott was stuck with control of the military at the war’s end making the failures of combating desertion a problem for his electability.

My third chapter examines those at the bottom; the deserters. This social examination of desertion expands upon previous works on deserters because its scope is broader than San Patricos Battalion. As a result, it asks new questions beyond religion and ethnicity. It asks: What drove men to desert? What can be inferred about the causes of desertion? Who were the deserters? Why did they enlist? What did they experience? How did they view the military? How did soldiers interact across class, ethnic, and regional lines? How did deserters feel about each other? How did the deserters feel about the nation?

Central to the examination of desertion is the idea of U.S. nationalism in the war. Desertion can reveal a lot about nineteenth century U.S. nationalism. The root causes of U.S.
desertion are intrinsically tied to weak nationalism. This last chapter highlights the effects of the military’s attempts to alleviate weak nationalism by inducing enlistment with patriotic and economic promises. The nation came to realize that mass desertion was tied to a weak sense of nationalism that could only be temporarily alleviated with bonuses and patriotism.

Chapter three provides a social history of deserters as whole rather than specific groups. Bonuses attracted poor U.S. citizens and immigrants willing to sign anything for economic security. Many were disheartened to learn that the economic promises would go unfulfilled. Disparity was ubiquitous due to unfulfilled promises, social separation, and the reduction of social status. Some deserted while others created bonds of opposition to the military through a shared experience with other deserters. The assumption that widely available alcohol could cure that despair led to pervasive drunkenness. Soldiers found camaraderie in the act of consumption. They found the motivation to desert at the bottom of their glass. The common experiences of disparity led soldiers to create bonds and form new communities. The deserter communities made soldiers feel like an essential part of something where they had control. They had not felt that control since enlistment.

The earliest works recording the history of the war were written during the war and the few years after. Many of the works did not cover U.S. desertion instead they focused upon desertion from the Mexican Army. They blamed any U.S. desertion on Mexico’s efforts to entice soldiers. Most works argued that desertion was solved in a peaceful and justified manner. The early works provided point of inquires for future studies concerning John Reilly, Mexican enticement, and the execution of U.S. deserters in Mexico.

Brantz Mayer’s *History Of The War Between Mexico And The United States* (1848) blamed U.S. soldier’s desertion on Mexico. Mayer argued that Mexico’s enticement led to desertion, but Taylor put a stop to desertion by allowing the shooting of deserters swimming across the Rio Grande. Mayer claimed politicians were angry about executing U.S. soldiers in the field until they realized that Mexico enticements were responsible for desertion. Mayer offered the first scholarship on Mexico’s attempts to get US soldiers to desert. Mayer printed Mexican handbills which Mexico had distributed. They called for US soldiers to desert.
especially recent immigrants arguing that Mexico accepted Catholicism and the U.S. did not.\textsuperscript{14}

The comprehensive examination of the war: \textit{The Mexican War: A History Of Its Origin} (1848) by Edward D Mansfield. Mansfield focused on the military affairs. In relation to desertion, Mansfield only expanded upon desertion from the Mexican Army while briefly noting rare cases from the U.S. Army.\textsuperscript{15} Mansfield lambasted U.S. deserters as “a sadder tragedy” perpetrated by “unpitted and unhonored criminal[s].”\textsuperscript{16} He found that some were executed and punished.\textsuperscript{17} He found that some deserters joined Mexico in battle while others simply provided Mexico with vital information.\textsuperscript{18}

John Frost’s \textit{The Mexican War And Its Warriors} (1848) highlighted desertion in Mexico as a widespread problem. He briefly mentioned U.S. desertion, but not labeling it a problem. Frost argued that Mexico was badly injured and weakened from desertion.\textsuperscript{19} He explained that by the time of the battle of Buena Vista the Mexican Army was destroyed by desertion.\textsuperscript{20} He estimated that Mexico lost 2,000 men to desertion at the battle of Puebla.\textsuperscript{21} Frost found US desertion to be small problem. He claimed that US desertion derived from Mexican enticements, but was solved with Taylor’s threat to shoot deserters.\textsuperscript{22}

R.S. Ripley’s released \textit{The War With Mexico} (1849) nearly avoided desertion all together. However, Ripley briefly covered the enticement attempts by Mexico. He noted there were a few who did desert because of the handbills. However, beyond that Ripley provided no discussion of desertion.

N.C. Brooks’ \textit{A Complete History of the Mexican War: Its Causes, Conduct, and Consequences} (1849) was the first piece of scholarship to offer names, faces, and a story for particular deserters. He explained that Mexico attempted to encourage desertion amongst the

\begin{enumerate}
\item 14 Brantz Mayer. \textit{History Of The War Between Mexico And The United States}. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848., 147
\item 16 Ibid., 208
\item 17 Ibid., 148
\item 18 Ibid., 280
\item 19 John Frost. \textit{The Mexican War And Its Warriors}. (New Haven & Philadelphia: H. Mansfield, 1848.)103
\item 20 Ibid., 120
\item 21 Ibid., 206
\item 22 Ibid., 25
\end{enumerate}
US troops with pamphlets.23 He found the case of a German man who deserted and gave Santa Ana the planned movement of the U.S. Army.24 Brooks is the first to introduce Private John Riley who he called “traitor Riley” because he led a band of U.S. deserters in the Mexican Army. Brookes claimed that the band of deserters pulled down Mexico’s “white flag of surrender no less than three times” during battle with the U.S. He equated this bravery to the fear of facing “the penalty of their crime” which “was ignominious death.”25

John Stilwell Jenkins’ *History Of The War Between The United States And Mexico: From The Commencement Of Hostilities To The Ratification Of The Treaty Of Peace* (1849) relied on military documents to document the events of the war.26 Jenkins built upon the work of Brooks noting that there were deserters who fought for Mexico’s army only to be captured and executed by the U.S. Jenkins continued the narrative that only Mexico suffered from widespread desertion.27 He claimed that the U.S. soldiers who joined Mexico’s Army were manipulated through handbills playing to ethnicity and religion. He argued that U.S. deserters were mostly immigrants.28 Jenkins noted that there was an execution of the U.S. deserters who had fought in the Mexican Army. He claimed that the execution was seen as anti-Roman Catholics by the largely Catholic Mexican population.29

Abiel Abbot Livermore’s *War With Mexico Reviewed* (1850) argued that abusive camp life led to desertion.30 He argued that many were put to death over desertion.31 Livermore uncovered the story of two U.S. soldiers shot while swimming across the Matamoras River.32 He noted that as the war advanced Mexico’s enticements successfully increased desertion.33 His most important contribution is his profile of the U.S. deserters who

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24 Ibid., 328
25 Ibid., 381
26 John Stilwell Jenkins. *History Of The War Between The United States And Mexico: From The Commencement Of Hostilities To The Ratification Of The Treaty Of Peace.* (Auburn: Derby Miller & Company, 1849), vi
27 Ibid., 220
28 Ibid., 371
29 Ibid., 339
31 Ibid., 157
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
joined Mexico. He noted that the deserters were called “San Patricio” and commanded by John Reilly. He outlined their battles, capture, and execution at Churubusco. He argued that they were nearly half American and the rest immigrants.

The latter part of the 19th century saw the rise of nativist historians that lasted into the early 20th century. These scholars often blamed desertion on immigration and ethnic inferiority. Their works began in 1883 and continued into 1919. They blame Mexico for the war arguing it was a weaker, but antagonistic nation that first attacked the U.S. Like the previous historians they admit desertion existed in the ranks of the U.S. Army, but only had a widespread negative impact in Mexico’s Army.

Horacio Oliver Ladd’s *History of the War with Mexico* (1883) spoke less of desertion than the earlier works which had only briefly mentioned desertion. Ladd’s work sought to justify the war claiming it was necessary to vindicate the death of U.S. Colonel Cross who was found dead at the Mexican border before the war resolution had passed the U.S. Congress. The U.S. had argued his death was a result of an attack by Mexico while Mexico maintained that they had nothing to do with his death. Ladd claimed desertion was a huge problem for Mexico not the U.S. Any desertion in the U.S. he blamed on immigrants. He noted the same two desertion incidents as previous historians; the German U.S. deserter who provided Mexico with information about the U.S. Army and San Patricos.

George Lockhart Rives’ *The United States and Mexico 1821-1848: A History of the Relations between the Two Countries From The Independence of Mexico to the Close of The War With The United States* (1913) looked at the relations between Mexico and the United States from 1821 through the war. Rives argued that Mexico had experienced desertion since its independence. He argued that Mexico’s loss in the war resulted from desertion. He claimed that almost a fourth of Santa Ana’s Army deserted. Rives asserted that U.S.

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34 Livermore, 160
35 Ibid.
36 Horacio Oliver Ladd. *History of the War with Mexico*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1883.), 31
37 Ibid., 202
38 Ibid., 45
39 Ibid., 187, 243
40 George Lockhart Rives. *The United States and Mexico 1821-1848: A History of the Relations between the Two Countries From The Independence of Mexico to the Close of The War With The United States*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1913), 28
41 Ibid., 363
desertion resulted from Mexico’s enticements and the disloyalty of recent immigrants which were mostly Irish.\textsuperscript{42} He discussed San Patricos which he called “Irish Volunteers or the Battalion of St Patrick.”\textsuperscript{43} He claimed that all desertions came from Taylor’s Army because Scott was able to keep his men from deserting.\textsuperscript{44}

Justin Harvey Smith’s \textit{The War With Mexico} (1919) claimed that Mexico caused the war with the U.S.\textsuperscript{45} In relation to desertion Smith largely focused on the problems it caused for Mexico. He asserted that Mexico’s desertion resulted from its decision to pardon desertion early in the war. A decision Mexico later altered.\textsuperscript{46} He claimed that Santa Ana’s army dissipated due to desertion making it unable to attain victory.\textsuperscript{47} Smith argued that U.S. desertion derived from immigrants in the Army, harsh camp conditions, Mexican enticement, and the use of volunteers which were mostly immigrants.\textsuperscript{48} He noted that U.S. deserters were mostly Irish referring to all of them as “San Patricio.”\textsuperscript{49}

By the middle of the 20th century scholars began focusing upon social history. When they approached the war they began to look at what conditions and realities faced by soldiers led to desertion. These elements included an examination of race, ethnicity, economics, and religion. These scholars offered a depiction of the men in the military to explain how and why they reacted to the conditions they faced. Unlike previous works, they often cited the U.S. as being responsible for the war. The works greatly expanded upon the known numbers of deserters.

\textit{The Story of The Mexican War} (1950) by Robert Selph Henry connected all elements of U.S. desertion to San Patricos. He explained that Taylor erroneously blamed desertion on Mexico’s enticements. Henry blamed desertion on the military practice of flogging and the large number of immigrants enlisted.\textsuperscript{50} Henry noted that many deserters were shot and drowned at Matamoras, but at least thirty made it across and formed “San Patrico

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Rives} Rives, 339
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., 338-339
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., 433-434
\bibitem{Smith} Justin H. Smith. \textit{The War With Mexico}. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), I-155
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., I-376
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., II-176
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., I-207 II-370
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., I-550
\end{thebibliography}
He argued that it was San Patricos who were responsible for the large U.S. losses at Churubusco.\textsuperscript{52}

Otis Singletary’s \textit{The Mexican War} (1960) was the first to document U.S. deserters as having an effect on the outcome of the war. He wrote during a renewed interest in black history. Thus, he highlighted the role of slavery in the war. He claimed that New England provided the greatest war opposition because they “saw in the war a gigantic and devious plot to insure the spread of slavery.”\textsuperscript{53} He noted that the army was filled rambunctious and wild volunteers.\textsuperscript{54} He explained that from this culture arose desertion. Singletary expanded upon the known importance of U.S. deserters to the Mexican Army. He cited Mexico’s ability to hold Churubusco for a long period of time was only possible because of San Patricio.\textsuperscript{55} He underscored how important they were to Mexico. He noted that amongst Mexico’s demands at the end of the war were no slavery and the return of San Patricos.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{The Mexican War: A Compact History 1846-1848} (1968) by Charles DuFour argued that the enlistment process not camp conditions lead to desertion. DuFour claimed that on the march to the Matamoras River the troops matured and dealt in an admirable manner with the harsh conditions.\textsuperscript{57} He argued that the extension of time in the service put an end to the problem of desertion. He explained that the military feared desertion amongst volunteers more than regulars. In response, they raised the enlistment minimum from 3-6 months to 12 months. DuFour argued that the adjustment resulted in volunteers fighting with loyalty and desertion disappearing.\textsuperscript{58}

Jack Bauer’s \textit{The Mexican War 1846-1848} (1974) challenged all previous assumptions about desertion. He rejected the assumptions that religion, immigrants, and Mexico’s enticement caused desertion.\textsuperscript{59} He attributed desertion to the discomfort of service.

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\textsuperscript{51} Henry, 45  \\
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 342  \\
\textsuperscript{53} Otis Singletary. \textit{The Mexican War}. (University of Chicago Press, 1960.), 23  \\
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 144-146  \\
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 91  \\
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 158  \\
\textsuperscript{58} 52-53  \\
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 96-98  \\
\end{flushleft}
He noted that “despite the loud complaints of contemporary commentators, [desertion] is not an invention of the overcoddled youth of the 1960s and 1970s.” Bauer offered the first numerical study of desertion finding that 9,207 soldiers deserted from the U.S. with less than half (3876) being volunteers. Despite the large number of deserters, he focused on San Patricos Battalion which he referred to as the “Legion of Foreigners.” He argued that a Florida native named Francisco Rosendo Moreno commanded the Legion of Foreigners not Riley. He explained that at the end of the war there was an increase in desertion. He argued Scott hoped the execution of San Patricos would quell desertion.

John Edward Weems’ *To Conquer a Peace: The War Between The United States and Mexico* (1974) contends that most deserters swam to the other side of the Matamoras without being shot. He found that many immigrants joined the US military because racism had prevented them from getting jobs in the US. He asserted that Taylor’s Army was nearly half immigrants. Concerning desertion, Weems only focused on San Patricos. He explained that Mexico orchestrated enticement aimed at the Scottish, Germans, Irish, and British to fight in San Patricos. Weems claimed that San Patricos deserted purely for religious reasons. He highlighted how deserters fought with more vigor than Mexican nationals out of fear of execution. He repeated the claim that they took down the white flags of surrender. Weems concluded that the death sentence of mass hangings for San Patricos was unnecessarily violent.

The latter part of the 20th century saw scholars provide many monographs on San Patrico. The various works greatly expanded the size of known desertions from the U.S. during the war. Comprehensive works have since included deserters in the narrative noting that they had an impact on the war. While the studies have expanded the known population of deserters the works remained focused on San Patricos.

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60 Bauer, 397  
61 Ibid., 397  
62 Ibid., 43  
63 Ibid., 327  
65 Ibid., 220  
66 Ibid., 460  
67 Ibid., 426-427
Dennis J. Wynn provided the first monograph dedicated solely to San Patricos in *The San Patrico Soldiers: Mexico’s Foreign Legion* (1984). However, Wynn’s study dedicated most of its pages at placing San Patricos in the proper historical context. Wynn relied on National Archive documents. His work is put in the context of South-Western Studies not the Mexican-American War making it more expansive. Wynn attributed the French Revolution with a worldwide standard that not fighting under your flag was shameful. He argued that in the 19th century patriotism replaced profit as the motivator to enlist. He argued that Mexico’s creation of San Patricos resembled France and Spain who kept foreign legions in their ranks despite modernity.

Wynn provided the first social profile of San Patricos. He highlighted that many immigrants joined the US army due to job insecurity. He argued that enticement did little except produce San Patricos. Wynn outlined the trials, sentences, and executions of San Patricos. He explained that the one soldier who participated in testifying against Riley was John Wilton. He noted that the punishments for the men included being branded, hung, whipped, and imprisoned. He outlined how General Scott stuck to the code of war when approving the sentencing and trials. Wynn outlined that the post-war life of San Patricos saw them in Mexico’s Army. He explained they were a part of Mexico’s revolutions and they were feared as a force for a second rebellion after the war.

John Eisenhower’s *So Far From God: The U.S. War With Mexico, 1846-1848* (1989) is a top down analysis focusing on Polk, Scott, and Taylor who he referred to as “the big three.” Desertion is given little attention in his analysis. However, given its importance to the field he did mention that of the two hundred men who swam the Matamoras River one was Riley. He argued that Riley was “foreign-born and had never been assimilated into American society.” Eisenhower noted that desertion was not caused by, but expanded by

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69 Ibid., 2
70 Ibid., 2-3
71 Ibid., 29
72 Ibid., 10-16
73 Ibid., 20-24
74 Eisenhower, 62
Mexico’s enticement. He claimed that one of Mexico’s tactics to procure desertion was to provide wonderful treatment to a few captured soldiers then release them. He explained that the returning soldiers told fellow soldiers of the “attractive women and congenial people...” all over Mexico.76 Eisenhower argued that it was these stories which inspired men to desert.

Robert Ryal Miller’s *Shamrock and Sword: The Saint Patrick’s Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War* (1989) built upon the work of Wynn providing another social profile of San Patricos. He argued that the 19th century saw the U.S. take advantage of Mexico’s weakness. He argued that Mexico was agitated into war by the mass U.S. migration west and the annexation of Texas.77 His data concerning San Patricos led him to conclude that they were motivated into desertion by cash, drunkenness, women, racism and religion.78

Miller’s contributions to desertion history offered a huge leap in the field. Miller’s collection of data from the U.S. and Britain allowed him to expand upon what was known about who deserted and why.79 He asserted that harsh treatment and racism procured desertion inspiring men to join Mexico.80 He argued that Irish soldiers found Mexico to be more like Ireland than the U.S. Miller provided the first chart displaying that Mexico offered higher pay than the U.S.81 He documented the desertion and capture dates of the San Patricos.82 He examined the trials of the deserters, their witnesses, and their punishments.83 He ends the book with a chapter dedicated to dispelling myths concerning the battalion including a famous tale of Reilly returning to America and partaking in a frivolous and expensive lawsuit.84

Richard Bruce Winders’s *Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in The Mexican War* (1992) sought to combat the two dominant styles concerning the war: general history and individual tales. Winder’s work on deserters came from secondary sources. His

76 Ibid., 61
78 Ibid., 150
79 Ibid., Xiv-xv
80 Ibid., 120-150
81 Ibid., 39
82 Ibid., 173-175
83 Ibid., 90-112
84 Ibid., 170-179
book is a history of the military as a whole. He notes that most soldiers joined the military to avoid the mundane life at home especially recent immigrant avoiding nativist sentiment at home. He found that soldiers faced harsh conditions in the service leading to disenchantment with the military.

James E. McCaffery’s *Army of Manifest Destiny* (1997), sought to look at the war through common soldiers’ experience. McCaffery’s work uncovered a very disorganized and outdated military that led to frustration amongst troops. McCaffery also found that camp life was boring as soldiers faced the harsh conditions of bad water, nativism, racism, and disease. McCaffery’s analysis of the military documents found that 6700 men deserted which is about 4,000 less than Miller had found. McCaffery argues that desertions were less in the Mexican-American War in percentage than the Revolution or Civil War. He argued that the number was smaller because the war was short, they were surrounded by an aggressive enemy not friendly towns as in the other wars, and they were taking part in a string of victories.

Michael Hogan’s *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico* (1997) offered an extensive examination of San Patricos. Hogan traveled to battle sites and interviewed descendents of San Patricos. He put the desertion number at 9,000. He argued that the anti-Irish/Catholic sentiment in the U.S. led to the formation of San Patricos. He noted they were not entirely Catholic or Irish, but “the idealism of the group” was based on these realities. He concluded that necessary to the San Patricos phenomenon is “the lack of national identity” in the U.S. He found that there were forty-eight men in San Patricos in April 1846, and by

86 Ibid., 60
87 Ibid., 199
89 Ibid., 44-129
90 Ibid., 110
91 Ibid., 111
92 Michael Hogan. *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico.* (Guadalajara, Mexico: Fonde Editorial Universitario, 1997.),14-15
93 Ibid., 19
94 Ibid., 17
95 Ibid.
96 Hogan, 86
October it was two-hundred. 97 He noted that San Patricos enlisted a large number of former U.S. citizens who lived Mexico. 98 He found that it was not until 1847 that Reilly became company commander of San Patricos. 99 At their trials, he noted that thirty-two men blamed desertion on drunkenness. 100 He concluded that the sentences were especially harsh because of the anti-Irish/Catholicism prevalent in the U.S. 101

Peter F. Stevens’s *The Rogues March: John Riley and The St. Patrick's Battalion* (1999) built upon the work of Wynn, Hogan, and Miller. Stevens relied on Riley’s letters and government documents, and the archives of the US, Mexico, and Ireland. 102 He used San Patricos as a microcosm to document the anti-immigrant sentiment of 19th century U.S. He is the first to argue that the U.S. Military faced hardships as desertion spread. 103 Stevens argued that U.S. opposition to hiring immigrants and Catholics led many Germans and Irish to enlist where they were surprised to find the same anti-immigrant sentiment. 104 He argued that Taylor allowed ethnicity and religion to dictate soldier’s punishments. 105 Stevens found that many Roman Catholic San Patricos saw fighting for Mexico as fighting their religion. 106 He documented the position, pay, and battles for San Patricos arguing that given these factors Riley did not see “himself a traitor.” 107 He documented Riley’s post war years which included gaining donations from Mexican citizens and his eventual departure to Havana. 108

The early part of the 21st century saw a higher volume of comprehensive works on the war than the decades previous. These works offered a broader look at the war and desertion. By the time they were published desertion had become a necessary event to include in any examination of the Mexican-American War. Although Paul Foos presented a detailed

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97 Ibid., 41
98 Ibid., 58
99 Ibid., 57
100 Ibid., 163
101 Ibid., 159-193
103 Ibid., 100-156
104 Ibid., xi
105 Ibid., 55
106 Ibid., xi
107 Ibid., 93
108 Ibid., 275-294
Paul Foos’s *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during The Mexican American War* (2002) examined the state of the U.S. Military during the war with Mexico. Foos relied on government, military, and troop documents for his study. He argued politicians and press shaped the war as a chance to demonstrate white superiority.\textsuperscript{109} Using a House Document and Justin Smiths *War with Mexico*, Foos concluded that of the 6725 desertions, 3876 were volunteers, 2849 were regulars. He claimed that out of the regulars only 602 were from new regiments while 2247 were from old regiments.\textsuperscript{110} He noted that while some were forced into volunteerism many were coerced.\textsuperscript{111}

He argued that the empty promises of manifest destiny led to desertion. He found unequal punishment for soldiers. He explained that Catholics were punished for not attending Protestant mass. Thus, many deserters saw Mexico’s Catholic churches as providing refuge.\textsuperscript{112} He argued that the republican idea of volunteer and militia was undermined by the anti-republican practices of flogging, hard labor, and contract service.\textsuperscript{113} He noted that the U.S. political system and military silenced dissident soldiers.\textsuperscript{114} He cited three reasons as the cause of desertion; harsh conditions, change in enlistment periods (many signed up for 6 months, but Congress passed a law in Feb 1847 making less than 12 illegal, so all had enlistment extended to 12 month terms), and broken promises concerning enlistment land bonuses.\textsuperscript{115}

Joseph Wheelan’s *Invading Mexico: America’s Continental Dream and The Mexican War* (2007) examined the history of Manifest Destiny. Wheelan argued that the lesson taught to Polk would be taught later to Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush; The American people support war for only a short period of time and oppose long conflicts.\textsuperscript{116} Wheelan provided

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{109} Paul Foos. *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during The Mexican American War.* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.),4
\item \textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 85
\item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 61
\item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 26-29
\item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 16
\item \textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 9
\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 85-89
\item \textsuperscript{116} Joseph Wheelan. *Invading Mexico: America’s Continental Dream and The Mexican War, 1846-1848.* New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers,2007.)427-428
\end{itemize}
nothing new about desertion repeating previous findings. He noted that nine thousand Americans deserted, one thousand of which were Irish.\textsuperscript{117} He explained that deserters swam the Matamoras River daily “many of them were Irish and German.”\textsuperscript{118} He argued that Mexico’s success at Buena Vista was a result of San Patricos.\textsuperscript{119} Wheelan offered nothing new about desertion, but demonstrated how it had become a staple in any comprehensive examination of the war.

Daniel Walker Howe’s \textit{What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848} (2007) is a comprehensive analysis of the Mexican-American War. Howe explained that volunteers outnumbered regulars, but were less useful due to their limited training, discipline, and one-year enlistment period.\textsuperscript{120} He explained that Taylor’s force was half immigrants. Irish were a fourth and German a tenth.\textsuperscript{121} Howe highlighted how the first shots of the war were on April 4th with U.S. soldiers shooting deserters which inflamed the ire of Congress. He noted that the anti-Catholicism made many U.S. soldiers sympathize with and join Mexico. He noted that the Mexican handbills aided in this process by convincing soldiers that Catholicism was protecting only in Mexico. Howe claimed that three hundred U.S. soldiers joined the Mexican Army most of which were in San Patricos.\textsuperscript{122}

Howe’s comprehensive analysis demonstrates the current state of the field. Foos provided that last vast study to focus solely on desertion during the war. Since then, the field has been immersed with broad studies which repeat the previous findings. Much of the historiography concerning the Mexican-American War has focused upon Manifest Destiny. Scholars have honed in on how the U.S. strived to strengthen its nationalism by waging war against Mexico. My research fills in the gaps left by previous works highlighting that it was those with the weakest sense of nationalism who went into battle for the national cause.

While the war was waged to cement nationalism it sent those with the least to gain from victory into battle for the nation.

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 375
\item\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 87-88
\item\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 286
\item\textsuperscript{120} Daniel Walker Howe. \textit{What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848}. (Oxford University Press, 2007.), 749
\item\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 751
\item\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
My work adds to the historiography by providing a social profile of the deserters through an examination of the context in which they served. My extensive research at the National Archives in Washington D.C. provided a social profile of individual deserters and allowed for an examination of deserter’s habits during the war. My research unearths the reasons for enlistment and desertion amongst various soldiers including a documentation of their experience in the service.

This work is meant to highlight how war is often used to silent dissent and force compliance for an unjust and unnecessary cause. My generation experienced this oppression with twenty-four hour news cycles and the stripping of civil liberties that manipulated them into supporting the Iraq war. My goal is to show that this was nothing new. Those alive during the Mexican-American War experienced the same type of coercion and abuse that my generation faced 150 years later. Those who deserted Polk’s War chose to act upon what they saw on the ground not what they were commanded to do. They chose to look at the world without patriotic blinders. These men demonstrate that sometimes the bravest act is to abandon an unjust cause even if it requires behavior deemed “cowardice.” They demonstrate that only cowards offer “following orders” as the excuse for unnecessary war. The men in this story deserve the same praise as those who return from war to celebratory parades.
CHAPTER 2

POLITICS

Underneath the desert sky on an April evening in 1846 Carl Gross and Henry Laub saw their opportunity at freedom. Both had experienced the long march and grueling conditions of the US army. Now, with the noise of crickets chirping and camp fires crackling the two US Privates jumped into the Matamoras River. Behind them they heard the voices of their fellow military personal screaming. In the days before both men had seen others drown in the river while deserting. As they swam, the bullets from behind began hitting the water at a slow and steady pace. They swam unaware what they would find on the other side should they make it. Unfortunately, the darkness of evening and the crude weaponry did not prevent the shooters from hitting their target. Both Gross and Laub were shot and killed, left floating in the river.123

As 1846 approached the United States political system was divided amongst two political parties. Every politician realized that no issue was larger than the impending war with Mexico. Both opposition and supporters would come to frame every issue in the war debate for their own political benefit. In that debate, desertion quickly became a central issue. Desertion was galvanized in Congress by the war opposing Whigs. Whigs had no sympathy for deserters. They found desertion to be an effective tool for opposition. However, soon the issue of desertion was efficiently framed into silencing war opposition. The changing interpretation of desertion and its uses in debating the U.S. Mexican War are the focus of this chapter. The politicians who took part in this endeavor and the newspapers that disseminated their message demonstrate how and in what manner the issue was interpreted.

The US political system was divided among two parties in the mid 19th century. The Whig Party represented by politicians such as Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams, and the Democratic Party represented by politicians such as Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, and

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James K. Polk. The Democratic Party supported slavery and expansionism while the Whigs in large part opposed slavery and expansionism.

The differing view on the war were disseminated and controlled by the various newspapers. The papers that had an international perspective was the *Times* in London. The *Niles' National Register* of Baltimore, Maryland compiled multiple articles and political writing. In Virginia the *Richmond Whig and Advertiser*, was a Whig newspaper, and the *Richmond Enquirer*, a Democrat periodical. These papers and various others were the key vehicles for politicians both supporting and opposing the war to get their message out and frame public opinion.

As the Mexican-American war began it was highly controversial and divisive. Thus, both parties looked for any and all events which could be construed to build support for their cause. The Democrats wanted to shift the tide away from people like John Quincy Adams, Henry David Thoreau, and abolitionists who opposed the war. While Whigs wanted to embarrass men like President James K. Polk, Major Winfield Scott, and General Zachary Taylor who supported and executed the war. Desertion would turn out to be an issue that both sides recognized as aiding their cause.

James K. Polk campaigned for the Presidency in 1844 promising to acquire the Western territories of North America for the U.S.124 By mid June 1845, Polk and the Democrats annexed Texas.125 In June 1846 Polk began the steps to purchase the Oregon Territory from Great Britain.126 He preferred to purchase Mexico’s western territory rather than go to war. He assigned John Slidell a US representative to make an offer to Mexico for its land. In the fall of 1845, Slidell made a 28 million dollar offer.127 By spring 1846, Mexico refused to meet with Slidell. Slidell reported back to Polk that war may be necessary.128

Polk wanted Scott to lead the army because of his known success in the War of 1812. When Polk offered Scott the chance to lead, Scott turned him down.129 Scott did not want to

126 Merry, 266
127 Howe, 734-735, 803.
128 Howe, 737
129 Merry, 257
go into the war until October. However, Polk refused to wait that long. Polk chose Zachary Taylor to lead the army. Taylor’s political leaning were unknown. He had never voted nor claimed to support any party. Polk sent Taylor into the field while Scott remained at home as Taylor handled the war and desertion.

In May 1845 Brigadier General Zachary Taylor began preparing a force for war with Mexico. In January 1846 Polk ordered Taylor to march his 3,550 force to the Rio Grande. Along the way soldiers began to desert their post in droves. Those who survived the march camped at Del Norte across the Matamoros River on March 28, 1846. Since the U.S. Congress had not approved war, citizens still believed it was avoidable because war required Congressional approval. In the meantime militias were being created in most states. Taylor was worried about desertion not Congressional approval as he sat across the river from Matamoros. For the entire month of March, Taylor had watched as deserters became an increasing problem.

In early May 1846 The New Orleans Bulletin reported that “about thirty of the American troops had deserted” from Taylor’s ranks. Another article informed that “We have reports that Gen. Taylor has put a check to desertions from his ranks by shooting ten or twelve men who were in the act of crossing the river.” The article justified the assassination of deserters because it “had the effect of checking further desertions.” The New Orleans Picayune spread the story of Taylor allowing the execution of his men without a trial. For the Whigs this was an opportunity to build war opposition by highlighting that the troops on the ground were unsatisfied and mistreated.

No one saw more of a political opportunity in desertion than John Quincy Adams. Adams was a former President and in 1846 a Whig Representative from Massachusetts. He

130 Messages to the President of the United States. House History. 29th Congress. 1st session. (Washington: Wendell and Van Benthuysen Printers, 1848.), 9
132 Merry, 188
133 Ibid., 240
134 Peter F. Stevens. The Rogues March: John Riley and The St. Patrick’s Battalion. (Dulles, VA: Brassley Inc, 1999.) 65
137 “Army Journal May 2, 1846. “
had a long history of controversy; he had been accused of making a backroom deal to get the presidency in 1825 known as the “corrupt bargain”. In 1836 a gag order was created in Congress with the intent to silence him from discussing slavery. Although the gag order remained law until 1844, Adams constantly used political savvy to undermine it. In 1846, the proposed war with Mexico became another chapter in Adam’s career of controversy.

For John Quincy Adams, the outspoken politician, desertion was a tool to stop the growing fervor for war. He sought to use it and take on the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives under Speaker John W. Davis of Indiana. The Whigs made up just over 30% of the representatives and needed a powerful issue to stop the coming war. Adams realized deserters were opposing the war with their feet. He recognized that the death penalty was a legal punishment for deserters if given a court-martial trial. However, the deserters reported on in the papers had been executed without a trial. Thus, Adams assumed that deserters offered sympathy for the anti-war cause. Similarly, the execution of soldiers tapped American’s fear of tyranny in time of war.

On May 4 1846 Adams ignited the controversy over desertion. While he was on leave, he offered a resolution addressing the execution of two Privates; Carl Gross and Henry Laub. They had been executed as they tried to swim the Matamoras River. The resolution stated “That the President of the United States be requested to inform this House whether any soldier or soldiers in the army of the United States have been shot for desertion, or in the act of deserting; and if so, by whose order, and under what authority.” The request challenged the unofficial war Polk presided over by highlighting soldiers’ disapproval. It also offered a chance to build anti-war support through sympathy before the expected war resolution arrived. It sought to undermine General Taylor’s army. The request was approved by the House and sent to Polk.

142 Military Laws of The United States: including those relating to the army, marine corps, volunteers, militia, bounty lands and pensions. 3rd edition. (Washington City: George Templeton, 1846), 111
143 Congressional Globe, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. 756.
On May 6 1846 Polk’s report concerning desertion was presented to Congress. The report covered the early April executions of Laub and Gross, but justified them under military law. The *Baltimore American* reported that “Taylor, in his Report to the Adjutant General, states that there have been four desertions from the Army where the deserters were drowned and two where the deserters were shot while swimming.” The report explained that “They were old offenders, and their punishment had deterred others from deserting.” The first part of the conclusion may have been correct, but the latter part was wrong as the desertion numbers continued to grow throughout the war. Taylor’s brief report lacked new information. He claimed it was always a “last resort to fire upon deserters”.

The Adjunct General’s office added an explanation signed by General Winfield Scott. It noted that “no orders from the War Department, or head quarters of the army, have been issued on the subject.” This ignored Taylor’s field orders to execute deserters. It went on to elucidate that “the picket guard, or the party in pursuit” was under “the usual order to capture and bring back to the camp the deserters.” However they “felt justified, if not constrained, in the last resort to fire upon them in order to secure their persons.” The War department stood by the shooting of deserting soldiers, judging it self defense against an alleged threat. The threat was allowing “them to escape from our army, and still worse, to communicate with or join the Mexican camp.”

The House of Representatives had to decide what to do about the army shooting its own people. But the Democrats knew that if the issue was discussed openly it would aid the Whig anti-war cause. It would demonstrate abuse and tyranny on the front lines and the Democrats wanted the issue to disappear. Representative of Virginia George Coke

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144 “To the House of Representatives: Washington, May 6, 1846.” *A Compilation of The Messages and Papers of the Presidents, Volume 3.* Prepared by the Joint Committee on Printing of the house and Senate. James Richardson. (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897) 2287


149 “From the Adjutant General's Office. May 5, 1846.” *Niles’ National Register.* May 16, 1846, 164.
Dromgoole like Polk was a Jacksonian Democrat. He rose from his seat to put the issue of desertion away from the public eye and the House debate. He moved that the President’s message should be printed and laid upon the table. If approved it would end debate on the issue.150

Adams wanted to extract all he could from the desertion issue. He believed further investigation would show that soldiers were mistreated and forced to fight a war they knew was ethically wrong. Adams suggested that the issue be reviewed by a select committee of five members. However, Dromgoole and the Democratic House agreed that printing the presidential message and silencing debate was best. All members voted that the report should at least be printed.151 This silenced debate and for many Democrats seemed like a victory.

The following day on May 7, 1846, Adams returned to the House determined to use the issue to stop the coming war. He aimed to embarrass the President and the Democratic Party. His strategy was simple, he would again offer resolutions, but the new ones were more specific in their target and purpose152

Adams asked Congress to stop the rules and vote on three sundry resolutions which he provided. The first asked the President to “communicate to this House the name of each and every soldier in the army of the United States…..put to death by military execution without trial…” and the name of every military official who took part in those executions. Second he called for the President of the United States to have all arrested and “tried by court martial, for murder…” those who put to death fellow soldiers “without a trial.” Third he requested “that the Committee on Military Affairs…. [to] inquire into the causes of the recent increase of desertions from the army of the United States, and to report whether any further legislation by Congress be necessary or expedient on that subject.” Adam’s resolutions sought to show that soldiers in great numbers opposed the war, and that the war was led by a disorganized and tyrannical general with a complacent President Polk.153

Isaac Edward Holmes the Democratic Representative from South Carolina claimed he was willing “to investigate the matter after the war with Mexico had closed.” Holme’s ability to speak of the war in terms of an ongoing and sanctioned action demonstrated the shifting tide in the country. Holmes realized that publicity about issues like desertion could prevent the war he supported. He also knew that agreeing to look into the issue after the war appeared reasonable and could quell debate. The Democrat-controlled House voted to silence Adams; they refused to stop the rules and vote on his resolution by a vote of 45 to 86. Since the rules were not stopped his resolutions were ignored.\footnote{154}{Ibid.}

Joshua Reed Giddings the well known anti-slavery Ohio Whig sought to defend Adams. Joshua Reed Giddings used a parliamentary ploy for reconsidering the issue. Rather than directly addressing Adams resolutions, Giddings opposed the resolutions Giddings himself had approved to print on May 6\textsuperscript{th}.\footnote{155}{Ibid.} He made a motion “to reconsider the vote by which the House yesterday ordered the message from the President of the United States, …as to whether any soldier or soldiers of the army of the United States have been shot for desertion, or in the act of deserting, to be printed.” Giddings had voted to approve that resolution he now opposed; the loophole allowed him to control the floor on May 7\textsuperscript{th} so he could be heard and discuss Adams newly introduced resolutions.\footnote{156}{Ibid.}

Giddings explained the importance of the printed material introduced the day before. Simultaneously, he made a case for the May 7\textsuperscript{th} resolutions approval. He believed the sundry resolutions would deliver knowledge relevant to Congress and the public. Giddings stated that the documents from the previous day stated that “General Taylor…found himself, or his army in the act of being deserted….The soldiers who deserted from the camp were pursued by a sergeant’s guard…” While “attempting to swim across the river Rio del Norte, [The deserters] were shot by order of the officer in command of the guard. Thus were the lives of Americans sacrificed by the tyrannical order of a single sergeant, without arrest or trial[?]…” Journalists and onlookers were in the House and Giddings, aware of their presence, had
cleverly informed the public about what the documents contained by including them in his speech.\textsuperscript{157}

Giddings lambasted the politicians and press who silenced the issue. He said that the reports concerning desertion had been “suppressed; which has not been put forth; and, which by an order of this House has been suppressed.” Then Giddings accused “I do not hesitate to characterize the transaction as murder” in which Taylor was responsible. “The act was unauthorized as it would have been to have shot down in cold blood a member of this House.” Giddings language was an insult to the General, and the war supporting Democrats would not stand for an assault on the military leader.\textsuperscript{158}

Representative G.W. Jones a Democrat from Tennessee stood up and questioned Giddings. He asked “is not this gentleman out of order?” Speaker Davis requested that Giddings only focus his topic on “printing.” Adams defended Giddings arguing that “as a debatable manner, are not the character and nature of the document to be printed, matter of legitimate observation?” This agitated the opposition who now realized they were witnessing another political ploy aimed at discussing the issue Adams proposed. Adams and Giddings were expanding what “printing debate” meant to include talk of approving the resolutions the House had just voted against. It appeared they had coerced their presentation before the days legislation began. To quell the opposition Giddings agreed to outline his true reason for raising the matter. He said “My object is to show the importance of this very document; to let the people know the importance of a document which has been communicated to this House, but which is yet suppressed.”\textsuperscript{159}

Speaker Davis tried to get Giddings to sit since he was contesting the very printing decision he voted to support the day before. Giddings did not budge. Rep. Schneck asked “Is it always considered out of order for a gentleman to make a speech against his own motion?” Speaker Davis sarcastically explained “If examples are to have any weight, it is not always out of order.” Giddings proceeded to compare Taylor’s orders to kill a deserter to the execution by Colonel King in 1818, in which a military leader accused of unlawful

\textsuperscript{157} Congressional Globe, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. 772-773.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
King had ordered a deserter to be shot. This order had cost him pay and job for five years.

House members recognized that Giddings intended to keep talking about whatever was loosely related to the printing until it was approved or he was stopped. Representative Burt the Democrat from South Carolina had had enough; he could not sit as Giddings related Taylor’s behavior to the event with King. He argued that Giddings was out of order. He convened with a bipartisan group which concluded Giddings was out of order. As result the House reconvened on their daily legislation and the issue of Adams resolutions was dropped.160

President Polk was mindful of the debate that was ensuing in the House and the newspaper’s reports of desertion. It was reported that “About fifty of the American army have deserted and swam the river for the Mexican camp, but a number of them were shot as deserters while in the water.”161 Polk feared that the recent statements by Whigs in Congress and the increased desertion would eventually spell trouble for his coming war resolution. Polk and his cabinet found it politically valuable to investigate desertion so they appeared active on the subject. Polk informed Taylor that he wanted him to “transmit, as early a day as possible, the names and description of all deserters who may have been killed in the act of desertion from your command,...” 162

By May 11, 1846 the desertion debate was stopped as Congress became engulfed with Polk’s war resolution. As often happens in time of war, anything in opposition to war is silenced. Polk claimed that the United States had been attacked, and thus immediate war approval was necessary. In the House, a long debate ensued concerning the legality of the war. Eventually Adams and Giddings were defeated by a vote of 173-14 as the House approved the war.163 The Senate went through a similar debate on the legality of the war.

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161 “Chronicle.” Niles’ National Register. May 9, 1846 n, 160
Forty Senators voted to approve the war while only two opposed it and three refused to vote.\textsuperscript{164} The war had finally begun under American law.

A blind patriotism engulfed the nation fueled by the upbeat justifications for war. John Louis O'Sullivan a Democrat writer used his column in the \textit{Democratic Review} to claim that the war was justified because it was part of America’s “Manifest Destiny” meaning it was a religious destiny to take the continent.\textsuperscript{165} Newspapers previously opposed to the annexation of Texas and war, now reported favorably on the President and his war. \textit{The Martinsburg Gazette} clarified that “All who know us, know that we were violently opposed to the annexation of Texas to this union, and most especially to the manner in which it was accomplished… bare—faced violation of the Constitution.” However “it was done by the constituted authorities of our country, acquiesced and sanctioned by all the forms necessary to making her a member of this Union.”\textsuperscript{166}

The press and politicians continued to equate war opposition to desertion. Such a connection was devastating. In a House debate Giddings grandiloquently ranted against a bill to organize a company claiming “Heaven was on the side of the Mexicans, and that they \textit{never could be conquered} by the grasping and guilty Americans.” A reporter claimed Giddings’ speech offered “encouragement by words to the enemies of his country.” The speech was described as “openly trampled upon the American flag, and raised his voice in favor of the triumph of Mexican arms.” Rep. John P. Martin a Democrat from Kentucky said of the speech “the gentleman [Giddings] was perfectly in order, in defending his friends who had deserted from the American army across the Rio Grande!.”\textsuperscript{167}

Taylor, despite admitting to allowing the execution of US soldiers, was promoted. The Senate approved the appointment of Zachary Taylor from a Brevet Brigadier-General, to Brevet Major-General. This was same post held by Scott. They said it was done “for his gallant conduct and distinguished services in the successive victories over superior Mexican forces at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, on the 8th and 9th days of May, 1846.” The

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Merry} Merry, 251
\bibitem{Enquirer} “From The Senior Editor. Washington, May 12, 1846.” \textit{Richmond Enquirer}. May 15, 1846,Volume 43, 1.
\end{thebibliography}
Senate realized that such an appointment offered an opportunity for opponents to use the debate as a debate on the war. As a result the debate and vote was done under the “injunction of secrecy” which was only removed once the appointment was approved.\textsuperscript{168} However, the appointment did not clear Taylor from the issue of desertion. The Whigs did not suppress the issue.

Despite the outpouring of patriotism, desertion remained an effective weapon by opponents of the war. \textit{The Richmond Whig} reported that Mexican officials were mocking the United States Army pointing to the increasing number of desertions from its army. In a May 22, 1846 edition they printed a proclamation from Gen. Paredes which claimed that “Gen. Mejia reports twenty six U.S. deserters in his ranks.” He sarcastically claimed that “Gen. Taylor, it is said, employs one half his men to guard the other half, to prevent them joining the holy standard of the Mexican church and state.”\textsuperscript{169}

In late May Taylor’s information concerning desertion had arrived for Congress to view. He admitted that he had given “orders that all men seen swimming across the river should be hailed by our pickets and ordered to return; and in case that they did not return that they should be shot.” He then explained “that it is known that some of our deserters were employed against us, and actually served guns in the cannonade and bombardment of Fort Brown.” Taylor’s simple message confirmed what many at home had believed: deserters were killing US soldiers. He enclosed papers from General Arista's staff that had been confiscated supporting his claim.\textsuperscript{170} Taylor’s report made it political suicide to condone desertion especially during the patriotic outpouring.

The U.S. press printed Taylor’s report and the nation became aware of deserters fighting for Mexico. The \textit{Washington Union} printed Arista’s papers offering validity to Taylor’s claims. Arista’s papers asked US soldiers to join “peaceful Mexican citizens!.” The article asked “What irresistible inducements does he offer for desertion—to exchange the honorable and proud character of American citizens for the miserable and degraded lot of

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Journal of the executive proceedings of the Senate of the United States of America}, 1789-1873. May 27, 1846, 78.
\textsuperscript{170} “Headquarters Army of Occupation no. 47., Matarnoras, May 30, 1846.” \textit{Message From The President of The United States}. 29th Cong. 1st Session. (Washington, D.C., 1847.), 30
“peaceful Mexican citizens!” Simultaneously with fiery rancor the papers reported on John Riley’s St. Patrick’s Battalion, a rogue group of U.S. deserters who had joined the Mexican Army. The press now sided with Taylor concerning desertion.

The press disseminated stories and statements which depicted deserters as deficient in moral character. It was reported that “nine men belonging to Capt. Dess’s battery of horse artillery…deserted from camp.” They were described as “very bad fellows,” “scoundrels,” “wretches” performing “not creditable conduct, And filled with “immorality and insubordination”

Military loses were blamed on deserters when one paper reported “This movement was made known to the enemy by a deserter from our camp…” The paper went on to claim that the deserter told the enemy that “the main attack was to be on the right of their line.” Another paper noted that “Many more deserters have been hung, but the reader will be grieved to hear that Riley, the commander of the foreign legion, escaped that punishment…”

Despite the costs and casualties of desertion, the federal government remained silent on the issue. In June 1846, Polk submitted a report concerning the war and state of the army. The report dated June 12, 1846 lacked any mention of desertion. The record numbers were known to Polk and his cabinet however they remained silent on the issue. Polk’s report was filled with the perspectives of people like Taylor who had a vested interest in justifying the war and ignoring desertion. The soldiers on the ground were not heard, and Congress remained silent.

171 “From the Washington Union. Thursday, July 2, 1846.” Martinsburg Gazette Volume 47, Number 18, 2.
177 Every deserter Court-Martial trial was signed off by a high ranking military official and then sent to the Adjunct Generals Office. Polk had to discuss any report on the war with the Adjunct Generals Office since that is where he got his field information. The files on desertion were readily available to the Adjunct General Office demonstrated by a that offices signature on every file.
178 “The Operations and Recent Engagements On The Mexican Frontier.” 29th Congress. Senate. 1st Session. (Washington D.C., June 12, 1846.)
The message was clear to Whigs. They had to abandon desertion or lose out amongst the patriotic fervor that had engulfed the nation. The Whig party dropped the issue of desertion from its daily regimen of war bashing. They continued to fight against the war on the congressional floor, but desertion was not mentioned. They did well at the polls late that year. By 1847, Whigs made up roughly fifty percent of the House, and slightly less in the Senate.

A year after it was begun the country had grown restless with the war and this allowed the Whigs to openly challenge the war without facing political fallout. The Union reported that Whigs “piling resolutions upon resolutions against the war” which cannot be passed. Rep. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois accused Polk of seeking “to avoid the scrutiny of his own conduct….by fixing the public eye upon military glory.”\(^{179}\) Despite the large numbers of Whigs in Congress, they remained silent on desertion for the rest of the war.

On January 3, 1848, Whigs passed a bill by a vote of 85 to 81 that called the war unjust. It stated that the war was “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States.”\(^{180}\) John Quincy Adams happily felt that Congress “ought now assert, in the strongest manner, this right to call for information; and especially in such cases as those where questions of war and peace are depending.”\(^{180}\) The Union reported that Democrats were upset by the Whig-controlled Congress for “piling resolutions upon resolutions against the war.” A month later the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed ending the war. The bill Whigs passed was symbolic, assessing blame, but putting nothing in place to stop future abuses.

The U.S. press supported harsh punishment for deserters. The American Star unapologetically reported on the executions of deserters during the battle for Mexico City. They wrote “16 of them [deserters] were hung at San Angel on the 9\(^{th}\); and immediately after some ten or twelve were whipped and branded on the cheek with the letter D.”\(^{181}\) Afterward Winfield Scott stated “Let all our soldiers, Protestant and Catholic, remember the fate of the deserters taken at Churubusco…fifty of them have paid for their treachery by an ignominious

\(^{179}\) “The War with Mexico.”\(^{180}\) Daily Union, December 22, 1847.
\(^{180}\) “House Floor Debate, January 12, 1848.”\(^{181}\) Congressional Globe. 30th Congress 1st Session, 189-192
\(^{181}\) “War With Mexico. September 20, 1847.”\(^{181}\) Niles’ National Register. October 23, 1847, 118.
death on the gallows.”\textsuperscript{182} The mass execution without recourse to trial of fifty or so men went unchallenged in Congress.

With no mention from the federal government some felt only the courts could deliver justice for deserters. Charles Sumner a Massachusetts Lawyer and future Whig, challenged the constitutionality of Congress calling for militias to serve in the war. The Massachusetts Supreme Court determined the militias were unconstitutional. Then Sumner argued that if the militias were unconstitutional then the men who deserted were justified since no legal commitment bound them to serve. Sumner argued it was ridiculous to force soldiers “in the servitude of the army for an indefinite space of time, namely, ‘for the duration of the war with Mexico.’” In a lengthy argument, Sumner explained that the definition of volunteers and militias had been blurred, and men that legally left were incorrectly called deserters. However, the court like Congress offered no path to exonerate those accused of desertion.

Even though fighting had come to an end in September 1847 desertion remained a political problem. On April 14, 1848, it was reported that in “the last few days from fifteen to twenty American soldiers, deserters, have arrived” in Mexican territory.\textsuperscript{183} Later in the same month it was reported that “during the last three days twenty soldiers presented themselves to the Mexican Government, and were immediately incorporated in the San Patricio Company” a battalion of US deserters.\textsuperscript{184} On one Saturday night in May it was reported that “Between twenty and thirty desertions took place.”\textsuperscript{185} For Polk it seemed the problem would not go away.

The issue of war and desertion had split the Whig Party. General Zachary Taylor was now viewed as a war hero for his actions and given the Whig nomination for President. In November 1848, California papers published articles on Taylor’s election alongside articles on deserters.\textsuperscript{186} The same week Taylor was elected, there were reports that “In upper California the gold excitement is on the increase; on the 10th a court martial commenced on

\textsuperscript{182} “General Orders 296 Headquarters of the Army, Mexico. September 22, 1847.” \textit{Historical Records and Studies Volume XII.} (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1918.), 44.
\textsuperscript{183} “Later from the City of Mexico, Queretaro, April 14, 1848.” \textit{Richmond Enquirer.} May 12, 1848, Volume 45.
\textsuperscript{184} “Late and Important from Mexico, Queretaro, April 27, 1848.” \textit{Richmond Enquirer.} May 26 1848, Volume 45.
\textsuperscript{185} “Editors Picayune. May 26, 1848, City of Mexico.” \textit{Richmond Enquirer.} May 2, 1848, Volume 45.
\textsuperscript{186} “From California November 10, 1848.” \textit{Richmond Whig and Advertiser,} Volume 25, 4.
board the Congress for the trial of deserters from Warren; at Mazatlan there has been a counter revolution; all the ships composing the American squadron are now at La Paz; Com. Jones has appointed commissioners to examine claims of some people of lower California for losses sustained during the war.\(^{187}\)

President Polk realized that the new territories were in a fragile state. He had been working with Congress over the summer to discuss the “treason against the United States” in New Mexico.\(^{188}\) He also offered reports regarding mutiny at Saltillo from 1847.\(^{189}\) These reports addressed how costly desertion was to the military and to the image of the nation. Polk decided that something had to be done to stop the desertion and mutiny from these places.

On July 6 1848 the Adjutant General, printed Polk’s orders of amnesty to deserters. It said that “All deserters, enlisted for the period of the war, in confinement, or under sentence of courts martial, will be dismissed.” Polk noted that soldiers granted amnesty will see “the word "honorably" being erased from the face of the discharge.” However for most this was a small price to pay to go back home and live without fear of trial or execution. Polk explained that “No reward or expenses will be allowed for apprehending any soldier who deserted prior to this order; nor will any deserter be allowed to enter the army.”\(^{190}\) Polk’s message sought to end desertion and its costs through amnesty.

In his fourth annual message on December 5, 1848, President James K. Polk chose to highlight the problem of desertion in occupied California. He had remained publically silent on the issue during the Mexican-American War because of desertion’s dangerous political implications. Desertion had plagued the military and the nation during his presidency. The Mexican-American War and the occupation afterward both of which Polk presided over witnessed mass-desertion from the United States military. He said:

> Ships arriving on the coast are deserted by their crews, and their voyages suspended for want of sailors. Our commanding officer there entertains apprehensions that soldiers cannot be kept in the public service without a large increase of pay. Desertions in his command have become frequent, and he

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187 Ibid.
188 “July 10, 1848.” Journal Of The House Of Representatives Of The United States, 1847-1848, 1008-1013
189 “July 12, 1848.” Journal Of The Senate Of The United States Of America, 1789-1873, 463-465
recommends that those who shall withstand the strong temptation, and remain faithful, should be rewarded.  

President Polk was able to fend off desertion politically long enough to achieve his goals in war. Then and only then was he concerned about the reasons behind desertion.

Desertion was a political vehicle for effective dialogue by both war supporters and war opposition. As the public’s interpretation of desertion changed, political parties had to adjust their stance on desertion. The remarkable power of the issue is exhibited in the brilliant parliamentary tactics in which it was engaged. Adams and Giddings never had a genuine care for the deserters. They viewed deserters as an effective tool for stopping the expansion of the nation’s borders and the institution of slavery. Taylor’s well written statement to Congress concerning desertion was powerful. It framed the issue as too volatile for continuing dialogue. This left deserters without a defender. They faced the military, which had the authority to handle desertion with little oversight. At the center of the debate concerning desertion was General Taylor who was in the field dealing with the daily desertion. His reaction and the reaction of the military concerning desertion are the subject of the following chapter.

191 “Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, Washington. December 5, 1848.” Richardson, 2479
CHAPTER 3

MILITARY

On a November evening in 1847, five U.S. soldiers whispered as they stood close to one another. Each man read over and signed a document that was handed back and forth. The paper was a pact for group desertion. On December 1st the men made their escape, stealing military muskets and ammunition along the way. They trekked across the U.S.-Mexico border from Carmargo, Mexico into Texas killing animals for sustenance and a civilian. They tried to stay hidden, but their uniforms and killing of citizens drew attention to them. Within a day, they were apprehended by command of soldiers sent after him. They were forced to march to a prison in Monterey where they awaited trial. A month later they were sentenced to death. While in prison awaiting execution they met three other men. All eight deserted together in an aggressive escape. They made it as far as the Rio Grande until they were captured again. Two days later they were tried and sentenced to death.  

Desertion was costly to the military. The effects of desertion and the methods to quell desertion by the military are the subject of this chapter. Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott’s prospects for the Whig Presidential nomination often dictated their reaction to desertion. As a result, desertion impacted the 1848 Whig Presidential nomination. Desertion was an expensive game: deserters were escaping the military while the military tried to capture and contain them. Desertion exhausted the military’s manpower and resources as it faced an abundance of unruly men. As the war progressed, politicians much to the military’s embarrassment concluded that the Army was unable to handle desertion.  

The desertion issue irked Taylor because it questioned his leadership capabilities. With Scott on the sidelines, the war belonged to Taylor in voters’ minds.  

193 Historians have debates as to whether Taylor had Presidential hopes or not. Certainly, by mid-1846 the Whigs desired Taylor over Scott. John S. Eisenhower. Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott. (New York: The Free Press, 2007.),226 Historians agree that Taylor was interested at some point during the war, if not the whole war. While Scott was interested in it since before the war. John C. Pinheiro. Manifest Ambition: James K. Polk and Civil-Military Relations During The Mexican War. (West Port,
the field while Scott was planning for his movement still months away. He needed his army to appear strong and organized. The stories of desertion filling up newspaper columns made his army appear weak and disorganized. As early as mid March 1846 *The New Orleans Tropic* reported that “There were large stories also of desertions from the American army.”194 Taylor claimed the escaping men were just a few men of “bad character.”195 However, the newspaper’s ridiculing of Taylor demonstrated that the public was not focused on deserter’s “bad character” rather they focused on Taylor’s failures as a leader.196

Under military law desertion was supposed to be remedied by a court martial proceeding. Proceedings functioned like U.S. courts, but with six judges, all high ranking military officials.197 The judges presided over the proceedings interjecting sporadically to ask questions of witnesses and evidence. No jury existed; the judges decided the fate of the accused.198 The court martial was a long and costly process that added to the already long and costly process of desertion. The costly process motivated Taylor into using the extreme measure of execution to silence the problem.

Often when a soldier deserted, missions were compromised due to loss of manpower. Many of the men only deserted for a week or less.199 However some were gone for years. Private John Turkinton from Company M of the 1st Artillery was gone for over 1000 days.200 As a result of Turkinton and others like him, missions were compromised or canceled. The problem was a common occurrence; four volunteers left one night in Buena Vista in 1847, Company F of the 3rd Artillery lost four men one evening in 1846, and The New York
Volunteers lost five men one night in July 1848.201 The *London Times* reported that a Captain Albert Blanchard of the 2nd Louisiana Infantry had assembled a “company of volunteers, but when he thought he was ready yesterday, more than one half were found to have deserted his flag.”202 Similarly, *The Richmond Whig* reported that another Captain awoke to find that a “battery of horse artillery, which had been paid off in the morning, deserted from camp.”203

Often the desertion was more than just a loss of manpower because deserters often stole military materials as they departed. *The Richmond Whig* reported that “Two privates of the 3d Dragoons were caught in the act of deserting night before last, with their horses, arms and equipments.”204 The charge for such theft from the military was “Violation of the 38th Article of War.” It was a very common for deserters to steal from the military upon their exit.205 A soldier discussing methods of desertion from his island wrote that the most common was “to engage a boat to come over in the night time to take them off”, but others “trusted themselves and their fortunes to a single [wooden] plank” to float them to safety.206 He explains that “One morning we missed two large tubs” used by deserters heading to New York.207 In these cases the supplies were no longer available. In 1847, Thomas Calling from Company B of the 3rd Artillery deserted and sold his military clothing. He was a repeat offender, three months earlier in December 1846, he had been found guilty of selling military products.208

The process of capturing deserters was also costly. Men were sent in patrols to find the deserters.209 In February of 1847 Captain E. Kirby Smith writing to his wife at Camp at Brasos St. Iago, “I was sent to Point Isabel with a few men to search for deserters.”210 The

201 Record Group 153. EE611, EE421, EE243.
203 “From The South.” *Richmond Whig and Advertiser*, September 17, 1847, Volume 24.
204 “Correspondence of the Picayune. City Of Mexco, April 13, 1848.” *Richmond Enquirer*. May 2, 1848, Volume XLIV.
205 I found cases of men stealing while deserting in Record Group 153: EE624, EE654, FF44, FF169, EE327, EE522, EE528, FF122
206 *Adventures of an English Soldier In The United States Army*. (New York: W.A. Townsend and Company, 1860.), 26
207 Ibid.
208 Record Group 153, EE327
209 Record Group 153, EE318 is one of the cases where a high ranking official took men to hunt down deserters.
deserters and those hunting them put a strain on the manpower that leaders had at their exposure for the war against Mexico.

Rewards were given to cut down on military time wasted searching for deserters. Nearly half of all deserter captures resulted in the payment of a reward.\textsuperscript{211} Nearly all rewards given went at a rate of $30 per deserter. The reward served to get others involved in policing desertion through incentives. Police officers and citizens eager to collect rewards hunted down deserters.\textsuperscript{212} This took the burden off search parties who could spend less time searching and more time battling Mexico. However, it added to the war costs which, in turn, fueled as highly divisive debate between Congress and The President.\textsuperscript{213}

Military leaders found the manpower to be more important than the economic costs. These leaders offered $41.50 sometimes $50 as an incentive to find a particular deserter.\textsuperscript{214} The rise in value made that deserter jump ahead of the others for the profit driven deserters. Some were caught randomly as in the case of one schooner Captain “who picked up one of these deserters in the bay,” who had miscalculated the tides.\textsuperscript{215} The captain received “thirty dollars, the sum paid for the apprehension of a deserter, by delivering him [deserter] up to the authorities as soon as they should arrive at New York.”\textsuperscript{216} Men with multiple desertions ran a hefty bill. At least three men who had deserted and been captured twice cost the military $60 while two other men ran up $90.00 for their three desertions and captures.\textsuperscript{217}

Money from the War Department flowed to anyone willing to capture an accused deserter. Newspapers acted as advertisers reporting the proposed rewards and announcing when men had been caught. \textit{The Niles Register} reported that Capt. Mervince, commander of the United States forces in Monterey, offered $50 for the apprehension of the deserter.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[211] Out of my Random sample I found that out of the 634 Trials relevant to the war, 310 had a reward paid (49%).
\item[212] Record Group 153, EE350, EE564, FF29
\item[213] Only Congress can approve the fund for war. As demonstrated in the last chapter much of Congress opposed the war and the President. Thus any issue concerning the war including paying for desertion put another strain on that already divisive issue.
\item[214] My random sample showed that rewards of $41.50 were offered and paid for deserters. Record Group 153. Record Group 153, EE640. \textit{Niles' National Register:} February 6, 1847, 360
\item[215] \textit{Adventures of an English Soldier In The United States Army.}, 28
\item[216] Ibid.
\item[217] Out of my Random sample there were 282 $30.00 rewards, 5 at 41.50, 3 at $60, and 2 at $90.00 out of 292 known amounts. The $60 were Record Group 153. Washington D.C.: National Archives, EE476.5 and the $90 were from EE314
\end{footnotes}
William Parker. The Richmond Whig informed its readers that General John E. Wool offered a “reward of $300...for their apprehension” of artillery men who deserted. After a huge lot deserted in the fall of 1847 Police hunted down and captured the deserters so they could collect “$30 a head for each one who may be caught.” In 1847 it was reported that The Adjunct General had over “$33,300” in reward “for arresting 1,011 deserters from the U.S. army.” The constant reporting did offer opportunity to those wanting to capture deserters for cash. Much to Taylor’s dismay, the reports also informed the public about the growing problem of desertion.

Once captured deserters cost the military more manpower because men were needed to guard the deserter awaiting trial. The guards could not take part in any mission since they were bound to watching the deserter. Over a third of those found guilty were sentenced to confinement. The time spent in confinement ranged from just days to life. A ball and chain was often locked onto the deserter. Many were sentenced to confinement until they could go into battle. Huge numbers of prisoners bogged down the military with long court martial proceedings concerning charges of drunkenness, disobedience, disorderly conduct, desertion and other charges.

Many remained confined before their trial. A soldier explained the process of a typical desertion to sentence “having succeeded in apprehending … the commanding officer immediately caused a court-martial to be summoned for their trial; and after the lapse of a few days, during which the proceedings of the court were sent to the commander-in-chief for his approval,…” The soldier could not receive his sentencing until the commander and chief approved. High ranking officials were judges and their time was lost to the trials. The highest ranking officials like Taylor and Scott had to review each case and agree with the

218 Niles' national Register February 6, 1847, 360.
219 “From The South.” Richmond Whig and Advertiser, September 17, 1847, Volume 24.
220 “Re-capture of American deserters at Nassau.” Niles' National Register. Nov. 20, 1847, 177.
221 "Irish Legion" of deserters from the United States to the Mexicans.” Niles' National Register. March 13, 1847., 32.
222 Of my Random sample 208 of the known 599 sentences included some form of confinement at sentencing.
223 Record Group 153. has numerous boxes which contain numerous sets of court martial files. They demonstrate court cases taking place day in and day out.
224 Adventures of an English Soldier, 28-29
court’s ruling. Only then could the sentence be carried out. Waiting for their approval created a costly sacrifice of manpower and time.

The length of time a soldier waited for desertion varied. Most men waited a few weeks for a trial. In an extreme case Henry Dugan from Company A of the 2nd Dragoons waited 295 days for a trial. A private letter demonstrates the long wait for a trial. “Some forty deserters from our army are among the prisoners” then the letter highlighted the difficulty in finding the time and people for a court martial proceeding remarking that the men “will be hanged so soon as we can have a military commission convened for their trial.”

Desertion steadily increased as the war went on. The year 1847 saw nearly two and a half times as many court martial proceedings for desertion as in 1846. As a result Generals had to go without their top men for days as they presided over the trials. This could compromise or cancel missions as they went through the backed up trials. In August 1847 a court martial, with Colonel John Garland as president took place for 72 deserters each individually tried. Events like this led to an all too common backup in trials and punishment. When time finally presented itself available, days of massive punishment followed.

Methods of punishment for deserters varied. Depending on the judges a deserter could potentially be hanged, shot, whipped, forced to forfeit money, discharged, branded, have his laces and buttons removed, forced to march carrying weight, demoted, required to ride a wooden horse, placed on his head atop a barrel, confined, or any combination of punishments. Overwhelmingly, everyone who deserted had to pay something back to the military. The amount given was to cover pay for time lost, apprehension costs, and

225 Of my Random sample 564 of the known wait times saw the bottom half range from 1-16 days while the top half ranged from 16-295.
226 Record Group 153. Washington D.C.: National Archives, EE573
227 “From a private letter, written by a gentleman of the army after the battle near Mexico.” Niles' National Register. October 2, 1847, 75.
228 Of my Random sample 1846 had124 court martial’s for desertion while 1847 had 321.
229 “Letters From General Scott’s Army From The South.” Richmond Enquirer, September 17, 1847, Volume 44.
231 Out of my random sample these were the various charges applied to those found guilty.
sometimes to force destitution. These sentences recovered some of the costs, but the process cost so much in time, manpower, and supplies the gain was little if any.

Punishment cost the military. After being charged money the most common punishment was lashes on the back. This was done in the open for other soldiers to watch, costing their time and the time of the man who meted it out. Almost 75% of those sentenced to be whipped received fifty lashes on the back. Although the number went as low as 15 lashes for some. Dishonorable discharge was another common and costly punishment. Over 10% of the cases resulted in the deserter having his head shaved as he was “Drummond out of the service.” A soldier describing the process writes “the prisoners were marched back to the guardhouse, where they had their heads shaved bare, in pursuance of their sentence.” The next morning all soldiers “marched from thence round the garrison, a fifer and drummer playing a tune specially used on these occasions called the "Rogues' March." This ritual was costly considering all the high ranking and low ranking men who by ritual had to be on hand.

The time deserters were gone often cost less in supplies and man power than the process of capture, trial, and execution. Over half of the deserters were gone 10 or fewer days. The time spent on soldiers guarding the deserter before the trial, the few days spent by the six judges presiding over the trial, the soldiers guarding the deserter as he waited for execution, and the man power needed for execution of the sentence combined cost more in manpower than the ten days deserter was gone.

By April 1846, Taylor had grown tired of the costly and long process of court martial proceedings. He attempted to overstep his legal obligation by shortening the time and lessening the cost of desertion. He had seen a five-fold increase in the amount of trials from January to March 1846. He understood that soldiers could not be shot when imprisoned for

232 Out of my random sample of 599 trials, 494 had to pay something to the military once found guilty.
233 Out of my random sample of 599 trials, 272 were sentenced to being whipped once found guilty. Of those 272, 272 were sentenced to receive 50 lashes.
234 Out of my random sample of 599 trials, 73 were Drummond out of the service once found guilty.
235 *Adventures of an English Soldier*, 28-29
236 Over half of the men were gone 10 or less days according to my random sample of 499 known desertion periods.
237 Out of my random sample 1846 trial went from 2 in January to 11 in March.
desertion. However, he concluded that a soldier could be shot while deserting because of the potential threat their desertion posed.

Deserters were threatening according to Taylor because they shared military secrets with Mexico. Taylor believed court martial proceedings fixed nothing when it came to deserters sharing information. By the time the trial commenced the soldiers had already shared information. Taylor was right about the sharing of information, a soldier explains that “a deserter from our dragoons, a German, going into their camp at night, and informing them that the main attack was to be on the right...”238 Private John Guidee from Company C of the 2nd Artillary was accused of “Relieving the enemy with ammunition.” He took musket cartridges issued to him and gave them "to one Oussaie Maria del Castillo, a Mexican and an enemy of the United States.”239, Taylor assumed all men deserting wanted to join the enemy and he became alarmed when officers who were more privy to more sensitive information began deserting. A report explained that “there are not only American soldiers, but also American officers, who have deserted within a short time.”240

Taylor radically shifted military policy in response to desertion. He allowed soldiers to shoot their fellow soldier as he deserted. On the first of April 1846 Taylor decreed shooting deserting men under his command was acceptable and encouraged.241 In the days following Taylor’s decree his men shot and killed deserters as they swam across the river at Matamoros. Two of those killed were Carl Gross and Henry Laub, and their desertion was responsible for the political thunderstorm later that month. As the men swam across the Matamoros River toward Mexico they were shot by their fellow US soldiers under the orders

239Record Group 153. EE522
240 “Later from the City of Mexico, Queretaro, April 14, 1848.” Richmond Enquirer. May 12, 1848, Volume 45.
of Taylor.\textsuperscript{242} Taylor was not the only future President on hand for the killing. Among the men who witnessed the shooting was Ulysses S. Grant.\textsuperscript{243}

The opportunity for desertion presented by the Matamoras River was easy for many to discern. Capt. W. S. Henry’s diary documented the increasing desertion upon arrival. On April 3, 1846 he wrote that “Several of the men have deserted.”\textsuperscript{244} The next day he wrote “This afternoon a rapid discharge of musketry was heard below the camp, on the river bank” aimed at deserters.\textsuperscript{245} Ethan Allen Hitchcock who later became Brigadier General wrote after hearing gun shots “Colonel Whistler rode up and said a deserter had been shot and killed while trying to swim the river.”\textsuperscript{246} Hitchcock did not record that Privates Thomas Riley, Ithima Eastwood and James Mills made it to the other side that same day.\textsuperscript{247}

The first gunfire many of the soldiers heard was aimed at deserters. On April 5\textsuperscript{th} before the official war began the sounds of gunfire led many to believe it was battle, but soon found out it was deserters.\textsuperscript{248} Ethan Allen Hitchcock referred to the shootings as “an unpleasant state of things.”\textsuperscript{249} By, the next day it became commonplace as Captain Henry wrote “another attempt at desertion, and another death.”\textsuperscript{250} The next night Henry wrote “More of our men deserted last night. This morning our guns were placed in battery “preparing for more that evening.”\textsuperscript{251} Two days later he wrote “Some four or five of the deserters have been drowned in crossing-the river.”\textsuperscript{252} Captain Kirby Smith writing to his wife near Matamoros “Our pickets and patrols have exchanged some shots and several deserters have been killed in endeavoring to cross the river.”\textsuperscript{253}

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\textsuperscript{242} Headquarters Army Of Occupation, Matamoras, May 31, 1846. U.S. Congress. Executive Correspondence With General Taylor: Message From The President of The United States. 29th Cong. 1st Session. (Washington D.C., 1847.), 31
\textsuperscript{244} Capt. W. S. Henry. Campaign Sketches of The War With Mexico. (New York: Harper And, Brothers, 1847.), 72
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{246} Ethan Allen Hitchcock. Fifty Years In Camp And Field Diary Of Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock. Edited By Wa Croffut (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 220
\textsuperscript{247} Record Group 153, EE224D, EE531
\textsuperscript{248} Henry, 72
\textsuperscript{249} Hitchcock, 221
\textsuperscript{250} Capt. W. S. Henry. Campaign Sketches of The War With Mexico. (New York: Harper And, Brothers, 1847.), 72
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 72-73
\textsuperscript{253} To Mexico with Scott, 37
\end{flushright}
A month would pass before Taylor felt especially justified about his radical change of military policy toward deserters. On May 3, 1846, he found out that San Patricio Battalion or The Legion of Strangers, as they were also known, were a group of former U.S. soldiers fighting for the Mexican Army. Some of the San Patricia men had deserted by swimming across the Matamoras River. They had helped bombard American garrisons at Fort Brown. They were led by John Riley who had deserted just a week after Taylor’s decree.254

Taylor would feel justified about his April decree for only a few weeks. On May 8, 1846, only days after finding out about San Patricio Company, Taylor was informed that John Quincy Adams had proposed House resolutions against Taylor. The Adjunct General wrote “I in close herewith a copy of the "Daily Union," of the 7th instant, containing certain resolutions offered...by J. Q. Adams, under the head of" desertion from the army,".” Taylor was then informed that Polk wanted him to “transmit, as early a day as possible, the names and description of all deserters who may have been killed in the act of desertion from your command,...” 255 Taylor must have been in awe that Adams was calling for his men to be “tried by court martial, for murder...” Taylor correctly perceived the Adams resolutions were a direct attack on him.256

The military stood by Taylor and his decree. The War department reasoned that the huge costs of court martial and potential transfer of information were reason enough to shoot soldiers.257 When George Brinton McClellan then a lieutenant heard of Adams resolutions he was petulant. He believed the resolutions were usurping authority from the military into Congress. He angrily wrote “Congress has shown their beautiful appreciation of military matters, by appointing a Committee for the purpose of causing the officers who had those deserters show when crossing the river tried for murder!! If that is the way in which they intend to manage things, they will find it hard work to get officers to remain in the service.”258 Scott sitting echoed McClellan’s support for Taylor. Scott reported that “no orders from the War Department, or head quarters of the army, have been issued on the

254 Miller, 41
258 George Brinton McClellan. The Mexican War diary and correspondence of George B. McClellan. Edited by Thomas W. Cutrer (Louisiana State Press, 2009), 17
subject.” Scott’s claim ignored Taylor’s field orders to execute deserters which Scott would have become aware of by then.259

In newspapers the military strongly framed shooting deserters as just and necessary. The military wanted to sway public opinion and soldiers on the ground against desertion. The press reported military falsehoods concerning desertion. It was reported that “A private letter” found by the military explained deserters in Mexico were living in the “most wretched condition, many of them going about begging, and despised by both Mexicans and foreigners…they have been much deceived about Mexico, and heartily wish themselves back in Gen. Taylor's camp again.”260 A story from the Star warned that “those who have deserted find little comfort from their new friends.” “Mexicans came across them, took their horses and stripped them of everything but their shirts.”261 These articles sought to minimize desertion by instilling fear in potential deserters. Simultaneously, they ignored stories of men of San Patricio who saw increased pay and a higher rank.262

The opposition press and politicians continued to attack Taylor over desertion. Taylor saw politicians like Adams and the press as destroying his presidential hopes with each barb at his leadership decisions. The Niles Register reported an incident that had happened where “About fifty of the American army have deserted and swam the river for the Mexican camp, but a number of them were shot as deserters while in the water.”263 If Taylor wanted to keep his political hopes alive he would need to reframe the issue. He needed an opportunity to explain his version of events. He wanted people at home to understand that desertion was costing the country victory in war.

Polk’s request for Taylor to give a report on desertion allowed Taylor the opportunity to present a public defense. Taylor used his political savvy to respond to Congress and change the debate. On May 30, 1846 Taylor explained the problem of desertion and the costs

259 “From the Adjutant General's Office. May 5, 1846.”
263 “May 9 1946 Chronicle.” Niles' National Register. May 9, 1846, 160.
it had incurred. He outlined the affects it had on the military. He admitted giving the orders to shoot. He then explained “that it is known that some of our deserters were employed against us, and actually served guns in the cannonade and bombardment of Fort Brown.” Taylor enclosed papers from Mexico General Arista's staff that had been confiscated proving his claim.

Taylor’s report changed the perception of himself to Americans back home. He watched happily as the press printed his report to the nation. In response, newspapers reported on John Riley of San Patricos Battalion with a vigorous hatred. A paper noted that “Many more deserters have been hung, but the reader will be grieved to hear that Riley, the commander of the foreign legion, escaped that punishment…” Taylor referred to deserters as “Such rascals… it would be wasting powder and shot to shoot them.” Taylor no longer feared the political fallout of speaking tough on desertion.

Although the political problem concerning desertion had dissipated the strategic military problems remained. Taylor had dealt with desertion and its costs since taking control of the army. However, it grew as the war officially began. The six months after the declaration of war saw a leap in desertion three times that of the six months before the official declaration of war.

After successfully gaining control of most of Taylor’s forces through politicking, Scott began to move in the field. He planned an attack on Mexico City following the same route Cortez had taken more than three centuries earlier. Scott wanted and needed victories fast, but the unruly military and desertion split his focus. Historian Otis Singultary explains
that the “drinking, gambling, and brawling” of Volunteers stalled Scott’s success.\(^{272}\) Within a month of Scott being in the field, Court Martial Trials for deserters doubled in frequency and doubled again in the summer.\(^{273}\) Scott had dealt with deserters like Taylor had in the past. In 1814 Scott oversaw the shooting of five deserters.\(^{274}\) However, Historian John C. Pinheiro concludes that Scott was more hungry than Taylor in his political ambitions making him more wary of how important the appearance of his decision back home meant.\(^{275}\) Scott was also facing the press reports on desertion as a report claimed that he had lost 1,000 men to sickness and desertion before the march to Mexico.\(^{276}\)

Scott and Taylor separately came to the conclusion that the Mexican Government’s intensifying of enticements to US Soldiers was successful in escalating desertion. The Mexican Government had promised instant citizenship for any immigrant American or non who took up arms against the US Army.\(^{277}\) Knowledge of these enticements caused paranoia as rumors of desertion spread rapidly. A reporter explained that “There is much talk about a desertion of four to five hundred men that it is said, is to take place in a few days from the American troops quartered about the city of Mexico, and it is further said that several agents have left this place in order to facilitate the desertion.”\(^{278}\) Zachary Taylor called for “efficient measures” to battle the “contagion.”\(^{279}\)

The Mexican Government offered incentives for any soldier willing to desert. They promised instant citizenship for any deserter who took up arms against the U.S. In April 1846, Commander-in-chief of the Mexican army Arista disseminated a handbill to US Soldiers explaining that if a soldier was to desert “Lands shall be given to officers, sergeants, and corporals according to rank...” The offer ranged from 200 to 8000 acres of land.

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\(^{272}\) Otis Singletary. *The Mexican War.* (University of Chicago Press, 1960.),146
\(^{273}\) Out of my Random Sample the trials increased in doubled in amount from 11 in February to 20 March 1847 reaching 44 in August and 40 in September.
\(^{276}\) *Niles’ National Register.* October 2, 1847, 76.
\(^{277}\) Stevens, 140-141.
\(^{278}\) “Later from the City of Mexico, Queretaro, April 14, 1848.” *Richmond Enquirer.* May 12, 1848, Volume 45.
depending on the rank of the deserter. Each extra year of service would increase the land amount by 50% meaning if a soldier received 200 acres initially for each extra year of service they received another 100.\textsuperscript{280} These were the same handbills that Taylor gave to the politicians and newspapers as proof of his claims against deserters. A decree from President Santa Anna offered “$10 to each unarmed deserter from the American army, and in case they be armed, an extra allowance to the value of their arms, is to be made.”\textsuperscript{281}

Handbills also attempted to frame the manner in which American soldiers should view the war. They appealed to the weak state of nationalism that existed in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century America. A leaflet from Juan Soto read in Spanish that America “makes a most unjust war to the Mexicans.” Appealing to the common religiosity of Catholics it stated that “You must not fight against a religious people,…The Mexican people wishes not to shed the blood of those who profess their own religion.” After making his religious justifications for desertion Soto asked them to desert, “[We] invite you to abandon them [Americans]…” Then playing to the anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in the U.S. it claims that “After the war is over the magnanimous and generous Mexican nation will duly appreciate the services rendered, and you shall remain with us, cultivating out fertile lands. Catholic, French and German!!” He ends with an appeal to religion and the principal of liberty that U.S. patriotism is so heavily vested in “Long live Liberty!! Long live our holy Religion!!”\textsuperscript{282}

The military was split concerning the success of the handbills. Like Taylor and Scott, Volunteer George Furber blamed the handbills for desertion writing that “Some of the regulars, induced by the promises of the Mexicans, had deserted, and also one of our men had done the same.”\textsuperscript{283} Conversely, Captain Robert Anderson of the 3rd Artillery intercepted Mexican papers which included handbills. He concluded they were worthless, referring to them as “Addresses in bad English.”\textsuperscript{284} Capt. W. S. Henry writes that “General Ampudia has

\textsuperscript{280} Miller, 164 cites (Source Wilfred H. Callcott, Church and State in Mexico, 1822-1857, 198; Smith, War with Mexico, 1: 507.)
\textsuperscript{281} “Incentives to Desertion.” Richmond Whig and Advertiser, Friday October, 15, 1847, Volume 24.
\textsuperscript{282} Voices of a People’s History of the United States. Edited by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove. (New York, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004.), 158
\textsuperscript{283} George C. Furber. The Twelve Months Volunteer; Or, Journal Of A Private, Tennessee Regiment Of Cavalry, In The Campaign, In Mexico,1846-7. (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James, 1849.), 491
\textsuperscript{284} Robert Anderson. An Artillery Officer in The Mexican War 1846-7: Letters of Robert Anderson. (New York: P. Putnam's Sons, 1911.), 80
distributed along the road a printed proclamation,... How ignorant he must be of the character of the American soldier to think, for a moment, his offer could provoke other than a feeling of disgust.”

Captain Kirby found the handbill to be nothing more than a good souvenir for his wife. He wrote to his wife “I picked up a curious proclamation signed by him written yesterday to induce our men to desert. I shall enclose it in this.”

The success of the handbills appears to be little. Historian Dennis J. Wynn concludes that enticement lured few soldiers, but the few it produced San Patricos battalion. Less than 5% of the soldiers cited enticement as their reason for desertion. 8% of soldiers blamed Mexicans for their desertion, but did not blame it on Mexican enticement. The majority who blamed Mexicans were the men who joined Mexico in battle. These men explained they had been captured and threatened with death or destitution if they did not join. In response to the threat they joined Mexico. Although these men did desert willingly it appears the decision to fight on the other side was not due to the handbills.

Exemplifying the anti-immigrant sentiment of 19th Century America and the threat perceived by Taylor and Scott the military chose harsher punishments for enticers. The harsher punishment ignored the fact that deserters were not citing handbills as their reason for departure. Enticers were usually Mexican. They often offered some goods and promises. Taylor and Scott approved death sentences for Mexican enticers while white Americans who deserted received lesser sentences.

Taylor held hostage and threatened the execution of one enticer. In January 1847 it was reported that “Three Mexicans were arrested on a charge of trying to induce some of our men to desert. One of them is the son of the Alcalde.” The Alcade was a Spanish term for municipal magistrate which was still used after the Spanish left Mexico. Taylor explained

285 Henry, 188
286 To Mexico with Scott, 196
288 Out of my Random Sample the 214 trials that presented reasons for desertion, 9 claimed they were enticed by Mexicans while 19 claimed Mexicans forced not enticed them to desert.
289 Out of my Random Sample of 599 only 7% were put to death. Most of which had either deserted violently or joined the enemy.
publicly that “unless some three or four men, who had been seduced off, were brought back in a given time, he would hang them in the Plaza.”

Scott’s men also went after enticers harsher than deserters. Martin Fritschler a German became a victim of the anti-immigrant sentiment. He was tried on June 20, 1847 for enticing soldiers to desert. His case was one of four enticer trials that Scott signed off on that week. The court listed him as “A German” where others were listed by job or rank if in the military. The trial saw faulty testimony of soldiers and many in the town. Most raised concerns that Fritschler was insane and thus not fit for trial. The accusers Privates Henry Peterson and Charles Katzenberg, appeared to be hiding their desertion attempt at the expense of Fritschler. Another Soldier contradicted their testimony. The accusers picked his name “Fritschler” out of three names, the other two which were American sounding. He was found guilty. The court ruled he should be shot to death. Scott was so appalled by the trial’s findings that he over-ruled the court since there was valid evidence that the man was insane.

The military had a bias in its reaction to enticers. The harsh punishment reserved for Mexican and German enticers was not applied to men recognized by the courts as American. John Smith, a Lieutenant of the 3rd Battalion Louisiana Volunteers was found guilty of enticing soldiers to desert. He had five soldiers testify that he had caused them to desert through lies, manipulation, and abuse of his high ranking position. However, he avoided a death sentence unlike the Mexican and German enticers.

Mexican citizens had a voice in the treatment of deserters. Scott and the military recognized the importance of the Mexican people finding peace with America. Many citizens demonstrated sympathy for the deserters. In the case of San Patricios Battalion, Mexican civilians approached Scott asking him to step in and save the men from the death
penalty since they were recognized as national heroes. Richard M’Sherry a surgeon explained that “General Scott has got out of the good graces of the fair sex, by rejecting the petition of numerous ladies in favor of the San Patricio prisoners.” The women cited the punishment to be “very cruel indeed to keep the probes in irons...” M’Sherry’s conclusion that Scott ignored the ladies requests was premature.

The volatile state of Irish soldiers and Mexican citizens were factors in Scott’s reaction to desertion. Although Scott did not commute every sentence of San Patricos men he did demonstrate leniency. Scott did not want to alienate Mexicans by being too harsh on the “national heroes.” Nor did he want to risk expanding desertion by further angering the Irish in US uniform that already felt mistreated. M’Sherry noted some of the ladies “draw a parallel between General Tyler and General Escott (as they call them); they think the former, who, they say, is beloved by the whole Mexican nation, would not have been deaf to their prayers.” Although it is not known what effect the ladies had on Scott’s political consciousness, he ultimately reduced some of the sentences. Scott reviewed each of the 72 cases individually. He sent fifty men to death, pardoned five, and fifteen sentences were reduced, including John Riley.

Any gains in popularity Scott had garnered from the Mexican and Irish people by pardoning some of San Patricio’s men was destroyed with the execution of the non-pardoned. Colonel William Harney presided over the execution. He chose to make the execution a grand display for all to watch even those who saw these men as heroes. He had each deserter placed on a mule cart with a rope around the neck. As the American flag was raised during the battle of Chapultepec over the walls of the former Mexican stronghold symbolizing victory for the U.S., he screamed for the mules to move. The mules ran causing the deserters to lose their support and have the rope break their neck as they hung. The dead bodies

301 M'Sherry, 158-159
303 Ibid., 297
304 Ibid.
hung down for all horrified onlookers to watch. The Irish in U.S. uniform and the defeated Mexicans looked at this theatre.

As the war drew to a close Scott was less cautious in his speech since he had not experienced the political fallout that consumed Taylor a year earlier. By 1847 he began making threats in grandiloquent speeches in the same fashion Taylor had done months earlier “Let all our soldiers, Protestant and Catholic, remember the fate of the deserters taken at Churubusco. These deluded wretches were also promised money and land; but the Mexican government,…After every effort of the general in chief to save by judicious discrimination, as many of those miserable convicts as possible, fifty of them have paid for their treachery by an ignominious death on the gallows.”305

In the final months of the war the military was unable to resolve increasing desertion. The grand fashion of the execution did nothing to quell the problem. Scott’s declaration of martial law on soldier’s banditry was devoid of success.306 The number of deserters remained steady after the San Patricos execution.307 Desertion persisted after the battles of the war had ended. On September 14, 1847 fighting stopped. The U.S. had achieved what its President wanted. However, American soldiers continued to desert. At the time Capt. W. S. Henry wrote that “Desertions of late have been alarmingly on the increase… A plan was laid by some of our men to catch the scamps.”308 In April 1848 it was reported that “twenty eight deserters I spoke of in my last letter as being about Chapultepec, are still at large.”309 Captured deserters were still remedied with the costly process of court martial. From June 1847 the number of Court Martials increased to its highest levels since the war began.310

308 Henry, 249
309 “Correspondence of the Picayune. City Of Mexico, April 13, 1848.” Richmond Enquirer. May 2, 1848, Volume XLIV.
The surge in desertion at the end of the war put the issue back in the press at a difficult time for Scott. In January 1848, *The Niles' National Register* reported that General Anastasio Torrejon and his party, were captured with two American deserters with them.\(^{311}\) Scott’s presidential prospects would have benefitted from reports on his victories not his inability to stop desertion. *The Richmond Enquirer* contained many reports in May 1848 on desertion. In early May it noted that “Two privates [were] found guilty by a court martial of absenting himself without leave from his command, of disobedience of orders, and of conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman, in charging in a pay account,...”\(^{312}\) It also noted that “an artillery officer, who deserted six days ago” was also being searched for.\(^{313}\) The next day the paper reported “During the last few days from fifteen to twenty American soldiers, deserters, have arrived here, who enlisted immediately into the Mexican army.”\(^{314}\) Later that month it reported that many in Mexico held out hope that San Patricio Company would be revived. “American deserters are continually arriving here” they “were immediately incorporated in the San Patricio Company.” By the end of the month they reported that the garrison which they were in was “composed of 820 men of all arms.”\(^{315}\)

The last months of the war burdened the military with the cost of missing men and supplies. It was reported that “Eight hundred men have deserted, with arms and baggage,...”\(^{316}\) In early May 1848 it was reported that “Last night, about twenty soldiers and teamsters deserted, taking with them the best horses they could lay their hands on, together with their full arms and equipments.”\(^{317}\) The June 23 1848 edition of the *New-York Daily* read “The American Deserters” column on its front page. It reported that the Mexican government was just issuing money to keep desertion on the rise. “They give each man that deserts as high as a hundred dollars.” \(^{318}\)

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311 “Capture of Torrejon.” *Niles' National Register*. February 19, 1848, 387.
312 “Correspondence of the Picayune. City Of Mexco, April 13, 1848.
313 “Later from the City of Mexico, Queretaro, April 14, 1848.” *Richmond Enquirer*. May 12, 1848, Volume 45.
314 Ibid.
315 “Late and Important from Mexico, Queretaro, April 27, 1848.” *Richmond Enquirer*. May 26 1848, Volume 45.
316 Ibid.
Those caught met the same fate as earlier deserters. In late May 1848 “Several soldiers who had deserted with Lieut. John Smith, had been flogged on the plaza.” Again the army focused on capturing those who enticed deserters. They also employed spies to catch deserters as one report claimed “Measures have been taken to trap the gentlemen. Several faithful men have been allowed to go to them as deserters, and these men are communicating information of their movements.”

Early military assumptions about the causes of desertion were moot when the end of war desertion surge occurred. Throughout the war many believed religious and ethnic differences lead to desertion. Ethnic differences and bribery seemed irrelevant since the Mexican government had fallen. Mexico could no longer offer bribery or protection from U.S. prejudices. For many the banditry was an exciting opportunity that led to desertion. A letter explained that many deserters goal “is to form a banditti, for the purposes of plundering the highways, the haciendas, and the churches of the small towns.” The letter went on to note that “We learn that there is already a band of American deserters and followers of the Army, to the number of about 100, now organized and operating in this way.”

The repeated surge in desertion exhausted the man-power needed to quell rebellious soldiers. Rebellious behavior had prompted Scott to issue "martial law order" against violence, sexual attacks, and larceny. General Cushing described sixty-five rebellious soldiers from the First Regiment of Massachusetts as “incorrigibly mutinous and insubordinate.” George Meade remarked that a group of American soldiers had “killed five or six innocent people...for no object than their own amusement...They rob and steal the cattle of poor farmers, and in fact act more like a body of hostile Indians than civilized Whites. Their officers have no command or control over them...” General Taylor, aware of the troops lawlessness commented “There is scarcely a form of crime that has not been

320 “Editors Picayune: May 26, 1848, City of Mexico.” Richmond Enquirer. May 2, 1848, Volume 45.
321 “Incentives to Desertion Richmond Whig and Advertiser.” October, 15, 1847, Volume 24.
322 “American Deserters in Mexico.” Richmond Whig and Advertiser. May 9, 1848. Volume 25.
323 “American Deserters in Mexico.” Richmond Whig and Advertiser. May 9, 1848. Volume 25.
324 1786-1866, Cuartel General del Egercito, Ordenes generales numero 20.
325 Zinn, 124
reported to me as committed by them." Drunkeness and disobedience were common in court martial proceedings. The volunteer regiments of “Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina rebelled in Northern Mexico” mutinied 100 men against Colonel Robert Treat Paine. Paine killed one of the rebels, but only after two of his lieutenant’s had been killed. It was reported as an “alleged mutiny” on the Senate floor.

Scott and Taylor had lost control of the military, and the people at home were noticing. The state of the army signaled to politicians that the military was unable to combat desertion. The increased desertion demonstrated that men did not want to serve in the army. Polk recognized that forcing them to continue in service would be costly and impossible. Thus, with victory certain he decided to sign a waiver stopping all court martial proceedings against deserters. Polk’s decree effectively concluded that the cost of policing was too high. The deserters had used created a cost so grand that the military could not function. As a result the government had to step in where the military failed.

At the end of the war President Polk’s faith in the military to handle desertion plummeted. By the summer the increase in desertion forced him to act. He informed the nation that “All deserters, enlisted for the period of the war, in confinement, or under sentence of Courts Martial, will be dismissed the service, the word "honorably" being erased from the face of the discharge.” And that "The President directs it to be announced in "general orders" that deserters from the army at large may peaceably return to their homes without being subject to punishment or trial on account of such desertion. No reward or expenses will be allowed for apprehending any soldier who deserted prior to this order; nor will any deserter be allowed to enter the army." President Polk’s decree symbolized the failure of Scott and Taylor to the nation. Six months later, in his fourth annual message

327 Ibid.
328 Record Group 153 has numerous boxes which contain numerous sets of court martial files. They demonstrate court cases taking place day in and day out.
329 Miller, 154
330 Zinn, 124
331 “June 21, 1848.” Journal Of The Senate Of The United States Of America, 1789-1873.
333 Ibid.
President James K. Polk recommended a “large increase of pay” to prevent future desertion.  

Taylor and Scott’s failures handling desertion mirrored one another. Both ignored the issue until the press covered it. Both chose to use punitive methods of containment; for Taylor it was shooting deserters, for Scott it was grand executions. Both went after enticers; Taylor relied on threats and Scott court martial. Taylor had the political capitol for a pen to frame the desertion and receive national support. Scott battled Polk at home preventing himself from having the influence that Taylor enjoyed.

By the summer of 1847, Taylor’s public image fueled his political aspirations. In September 1846 when Taylor lost the majority of his men to Scott, Taylor stayed out of the press. He moved with fewer in a quieter public role until his men claimed victory in the battle of Buena Vista. The victory provided a vehicle of heroism to ride to the White House. The Life of Major General Zachary Taylor an 1847 biography of Taylor, highlighted desertion as a problem for Santa Ana, not Taylor. Taylor with his political opportunities expanded sat quietly while Scott dealt with desertion.

Desertion in part prevented Scott from benefitting from the war as Taylor had. He was constantly at odds with The President over the state of the desertion riddled military. His quarrels had him conclude that there “a fire upon [his] rear from Washington and the fire in front from Mexico.” His leniency toward some enticers and deserters and his daughter’s Catholic conversion had voters fearing he was a “closet papist.” The grand execution of Irish deserters lessened his immigrant vote. In response, he praised the German and Irish soldiers “I witnessed with admiration their zeal fidelity and valor in maintaining our flag in the face of every danger…” However, Scott could not escape the political chains of

335 Henry Montgomery. The Life Of Major General Zachary Taylor. (Buffalo, New York: Derby and Hewson Publishers, 1847.)
336 Montgomery, 297, 339
337 Howe, 778
339 Allan Peskin. Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms. (Kent State University Press, 2003), 212.
340 Ibid.
341 The Political Text Book Or Encyclopedia Containing Everything Necessary For The Reference Of The Politicians And Statesmen Of The United States. Edited by MW Cluskey. second edition (Philadelphia, PA: James b smith & co., 1858), 551
desertion. Taylor would go on to win the Whig nomination and eventually in 1848 the presidency.

Desertion defeated the military on some level by remaining a constant agitation that may have prolonged the war or at least lessened the possible goals. Polk’s decision to get involved and grant amnesty for deserters exemplified the military’s inability to solve the problem. The deserters cost an abundance of resources and man power needed for the war. The public images of Scott, Taylor, and Polk were contested by the desertion filled military. Desertion was a massive embarrassment for the nation and military highlighting leader’s inability to foster national support for the war. Scott exemplified the shame when he tried to attach the issue to Taylor, “truth obliges me to say that, of our Irish soldiers – save a few who deserted from General Taylor, and had never taken the naturalization oath.”342 Later, Scott must have concluded that the shame could be eradicated only if he acted as if it never happened “our Irish soldiers... had never taken the naturalization oath – not one ever turned his back upon the enemy or faltered in advancing to the charge.”343 Scott knew these statements were a lie, he had personally signed off on over 100 desertion sentences which he had seen and read.344

The shame of desertion was long lasting and far reaching. Historian Peter Steven’s notes that for over a century the Department of Defense was successful in hiding the shame of desertion. The war department denied the existence of San Patricos Battalion for decades. They hid the files from public access until the 1970s. Simultaneously, the army hid the number of overall desertion numbers for over a century.345 Hiding the issue from the public and families was the way in which the problem survived because it kept academics and citizens asking. Public officials conceded that the shame of desertion was too intense for the public so they sought to evade it. The voices of the men they chose to silence in the archives are the subject of the next chapter.

342 Chichetto, 5.
343 Chichetto, 5.
344 Based on my Random sample I unearthed 132 deserter court martial’s that General Scott had signed off on. Not all had deserted while Taylor was in charge nor were they all Irish.
345 Stevens, 295
CHAPTER 4

DESERTERS

Private Thomas Corbit from Company E of the 1st Infantry deserted Camp Washington on April 7, 1847. Sergeant Bese was familiar with Corbit’s behavior. He did not find the desertion to be unusual. Nor was it odd when Corbit returned five days later. The commander blamed Corbit’s problems on his “habitual drunkenness.” He had been drunk and absent at least once a month for the past three months. Sergeant Bese at Corbit’s desertion trial explained he "has been habitually drunk whenever an opportunity has occurred since the 12th of April 1847."^346

This chapter examines what desertion can reveal about 19th century U.S. nationalism. Scholars have been interested in the relationship between nationalism and desertion during the Mexican-American War. However, those works have focused upon San Patrico’s brigade.^347 This chapter takes a broader focus looking at all deserters revealing a wider range of causes. This chapter asks: Who were the deserters? What did they experience? Why did they enlist? How did they view the military? How did soldiers interact across class, ethnic, and regional lines? What conditions and realities did they face? What drove men to desert? What can be inferred about the causes of desertion?

The root causes of U.S. desertion during the Mexican-American War resulted from weak nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s landmark book *Imagined Communities* defines *nation* as “an imagined political community.”^348 He argues “the nation is always conceived

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346 Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Record Group 153, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Box 161, Folder EE555.
as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”349 However, deserters demonstrate that an all inclusive military comradeship was lacking. Building on Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm contends that nation states exist when an illusion of nationalism binds the people.350 He notes that nations are built from above, but cannot be understood without looking from below.351 Deserters’ lack of support for U.S. leaders’ war-aims reveals that the illusion of the “nation” was inept at convincing men that the war was worth the sacrifice.

The military attempted to alleviate weak nationalism by inducing enlistment with patriotic and economic promises. The broken moral and material promises bred desertion. Deserters believed in a reciprocal relationship with the military: The military had to treat them properly or they could desert. Soldiers viewed the military as usurping the freedom guaranteed in a republic which led to widespread despair. Alcohol heightened the despair by numbing the feelings of alienation and lack of camaraderie amongst troops. The bonds cemented with alcohol created the foundation for communal desertion.

**ENLISTEES AND THEIR DISCONTENT**

The military attempted to alleviate weak nationalism through incentives. U.S. citizens came to enlist for the economic opportunity not afforded to them at home. Many were enticed to join by the promised bonuses and land grants. Enticement became a breeding ground for corruption as many deserters remained in the service only until they attained their bonus. Some of these deserters re-enlisted under false names to attain multiple bonuses. Many military officials were equally deceitful during the enlistment process; promising recruitment bonuses they had no intention of fulfilling. As soldiers came to realize they were the victim of chicanery; they responded with widespread desertion.

The military attracted soldiers through the promises of economic opportunity. As the war approached, volunteers were desperately needed because the military had its lowest troop levels since 1808.352 Historian Jack Bauer notes that due to the “unwillingness of the

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349 Ibid., 7
351 Ibid., 10
352 Ernest Dupuy. *Where They Have Trod: The West Point Tradition in American Life.* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940.), 249
late Jacksonian period soldier to serve his nation at personal discomfort” bonuses had to be offered.\textsuperscript{353} There were two calls for volunteers. The first call was in the spring of 1846 with volunteers signing up for a year of service. The contract’s ambiguous language claimed the war would end in a year. These men could and did return home after a year with the military unable to stop them. The second call, in the fall of 1846 signed men up “for the war” closing the previous enlistment loophole. In all 33,596 volunteers signed up for the war, 18,210 for 12 months, 11,211 for 6 months, and 1390 for 3 months.\textsuperscript{354}

The bonuses were successful in securing enlistment. Many were facing harsh economic conditions at home. This pushed many to enlist, especially immigrants.\textsuperscript{355} Joseph Wheelen asserts that drifters and penniless immigrants were naturally drawn to the military.\textsuperscript{356} The government promised 160 acres or $100 in land script for 12 month enlistment. Shorter enlistments received less.\textsuperscript{357} The majority were privates earning 7 to 8 dollars a month.\textsuperscript{358} One volunteer explained “I could \textit{sic} make three dollars a day working at the carpenter trade or I could \textit{sic} get $35 pur \textit{sic} Month for to drive a wagon.”\textsuperscript{359} Deserter, Private Isiah Chapman from Company E of the Mounted Riflemen claimed he was motivated to join the military by a promise of 100 acres of land.\textsuperscript{360}

As the war continued many realized they had been duped into longer enlistment terms. A year into the war, the span of soldier’s enlistment changed without their consent. Congress passed a law in February 1847 making enlistment for less than twelve months illegal, so all enlistments became twelve month terms despite what was agreed upon at enlistment. Soldiers continued to sign six month contracts unaware that they were really signing twelve month contracts.\textsuperscript{361} They were promised “bright new dollars” and “farms as

\textsuperscript{354} Richard Bruce Winders. \textit{Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in The Mexican War}. (Texas A&M University Press, 1997.), 66-87
\textsuperscript{355} Stevens, xi
\textsuperscript{357} Winders, 71
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 122
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., 71
\textsuperscript{360} Record Group 153, EE289.
\textsuperscript{361} Foos., 85-89
big as Texas.”362 Howard Zinn found whole regiments that were never granted the land promised to them.363 Colonel Ward B. Burnett explained that men were further dissatisfied as the broken promises led to poverty stricken calls from home. He wrote that “the men became more and more dissatisfied. Mothers, wives, and suffering children crying for money to buy bread, which they were expecting to receive from the promised ‘three month's pay.’”364

Many deserters testified that unfulfilled promises caused them to desert. Private William Chittick from Company A of 4th Artillery felt justified in desertion when the cavalry position promised to him at enlistment by Captain Andrews was not granted.365 Private Chauncey Carpenter from Company F of 4th Infantry argued that he was manipulated into enlistment by a military official whose “statement proved not to be correct, and I became dissatisfied and deserted.”366 Recruit William Crossen deserted because he was promised land which was never delivered.367 Private Bernard Goss from Company J of the 4th Artillery deserted because he did not get "half" of what he was promised and had "nothing to eat."368 While Private John Coyler from Company F of the 1st Dragoons was on trial for desertion, he claimed “I did not enlist entirely of my own accord, inducements were held out to me which were not fulfilled. I was dissatisfied with the service and I therefore deserted.”369 Soldiers’ testimony reveals a widespread belief that enlistment was a contractual arrangement.

Others felt they had been manipulated to enlist while drunk. While on trial for desertion, Recruit John Rene claimed he was drunk when he enlisted. When sober he realized he had made a mistake because he had a good trade at home before enlisting so he deserted.370 At Recruit James Smith’s desertion trial he noted “I was drunk and out of my

362 Winders, 71
364 Corporal Of The Guard. The High Private. (New York: printed for the publisher, 1848.) 28-29
365 Record Group 153, FF242.
366 Ibid., EE321.
367 Ibid., EE431.
368 Ibid., FF97.
369 Ibid., EE146.
370 Ibid., EE493.
right mind when I enlisted." At his desertion trial Recruit Daniel Reid noted that he was drunk with friends when he enlisted in Bangor Maine.

Others deceived the military by enlisting for the bonus and then deserting. Recruit Levi Tucker deserted the night after he signed up. Recruit William Smith enlisted January 22, 1847 in New York and deserted later that day. Some soldiers re-enlisted to attain multiple bonuses. After deserting, James Wood of the 2nd Dragoons re-enlisted. Recruit James McDonald deserted in July 1846, and re-enlisted in Pennsylvania six months later. Private John Rourke deserted for a few days before he re-enlisted. One of the biggest offenders was Alexander McDonald who had four enlistments, three of which were in 1846.

False names enabled multiple enlistments and bonuses. Veteran deserter Private Russell Ellis from Company A of 4th Artillery deserted under his real name then re-joined under the name Henry Jackson. Private William Gaston AKA William Clarke deserted twice in 1847. William Ferguesen deserted from Company F of the 4th Artillery, until he reenlisted as William Marshall. Recruit Michael Riley enlisted, deserted, and then re-enlisted under the name Michael Brady only to desert again. Private Thomas Donoughe deserted as Thomas Inge in 1846 then re-enlisted at West Point in 1847.

Other deserters could qualify for bonuses with their real name, but not real age. Private John Dien from Company A of the 2nd Artillery testified he was underage when he enlisted without his mother’s approval and lied about his age. Private Isiah Chapman from Company E of the Mounted Riflemen claimed he was too young when he enlisted and his

371 Record Group 153, FF163O
372 Ibid., EE298.
373 Ibid., EE274.
374 Ibid., EE330.
375 Ibid., EE274.
376 Ibid., EE300.
377 Ibid., EE308.
378 Ibid., EE300.
379 Ibid., EE217.
380 Ibid., EE476.5.
381 Ibid., EE261.
382 Ibid., EE420.
383 Ibid., EE423.
384 Ibid., FF97.
dad did not consent so he deserted.\textsuperscript{385} Recruit John Gibson deserted while at West Point and claimed he needed parent permission to enlist because of his age. So when his step-father approved his enlistment he joined. However, when his step-father wanted him home he believed he could desert because the permission had expired once his step-father changed his mind.\textsuperscript{386}

Desertion continued after hostilities ended. The concept of remaining enlisted to occupy did not resonate with soldiers. Many concluded that once the fighting was finished, so was their enlistment. However, the military saw the war as ongoing and labeled these men deserters. Private Alexander Cox of the New York Volunteers believed his one year of "war" service was only during the war. Despite having 3 months left he believed since combat had ended he could leave. He argued he was innocent because he signed up for “one year…to bind ourselves to serve during the war.”\textsuperscript{387} Private Bernard Goss had enlisted with Company J, 4\textsuperscript{th} Artillery “for the war” in June 1847. He deserted in January 1848 believing when combat was done so was the war.\textsuperscript{388}

As the discovery of gold leaked to the public, men deserted the military for better economic opportunity. Privates Edward McCarty and William Green from Company C of New York Volunteers used the military as a vehicle that paid their way to California mining. In June 1848 they arrived in California and deserted.\textsuperscript{389} Deserting Private Phillip Brown from Company H of New York Volunteers was found mining for gold near Sutter’s Fort in May 1848.\textsuperscript{390} Deserting Privates Ferdinand Nagle and Joseph Dow from Company C of the New York Volunteers were also captured mining for gold near Sutter’s Fort in June 1848.\textsuperscript{391} Private Frances Miller of the same company deserted to the same spot they had mined for gold a week later.\textsuperscript{392}

Both the military and recruits took advantage of the enlistment process. The desertion for profit demonstrated soldier’s weak nationalism; the war was an opportunity to profit not

\textsuperscript{385} Record Group 153, EE289.  
\textsuperscript{386} Ibid., EE220.  
\textsuperscript{387} Ibid., FF254.  
\textsuperscript{388} Ibid., FF97.  
\textsuperscript{389} Ibid., FF257.  
\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., EE255.  
\textsuperscript{391} Ibid., FF260-261.  
\textsuperscript{392} Ibid., EE263.
defend the nation. The bonuses produced a weak foundation for the service because it tied men to serve for pay not loyalty. It sent men into battle looking for profit not victory. Thus, these men could only be expected to stay as long as bonuses were paid and the cost of service was worth the pay according to each soldier’s estimation.

**IMMIGRANTS**

The large influx of immigrants escaping poverty to U.S. shores led to a high volume of enlistment. Poor immigrants mirrored poor U.S. citizens in their desire for enlistment bonuses. Enlistments offered immigrants an escape from the harsh economic and social realities they encountered in the U.S. However, once in the military many deserted in response to anti-immigrant sentiments and unfulfilled enlistment promises. The existence of competing loyalties in religion and ethnicity propelled these men to desert. The weak sense of nationalism amongst immigrants was further displayed by those who pursued a career in the Mexican Army.

Prior to the war, the U.S. experienced an influx of immigration mostly from Ireland. Lawerance McCaffery explains that by 1845, the worsening potato failure in Ireland saw a third of the population (nine million people) living in poverty. In response, 1.5 million Irish immigrated to America over the next ten years.394 Their arrival often did not grant them the opportunity they had hoped to find. Bob Considine asserts that arriving Irish experienced the first American segregation.395 The poverty stricken Irish were taken advantage of and manipulated by criminals and scams.396 Despite being poor, they were charged a $1.50 tax on arrival by the newly created US Emigration Bureau in New York.397 From the docks they were forced into shanty towns.398 McCaffery argues that the ghettos preserved traditions and created a community resembling their home.399

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394 Ibid., 61-62
395 Bob Considine. *It’s The Irish.* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1961.), 31
396 Ibid., 67
397 Ibid., 67-68
398 Ibid.
399 McCaffery, 66
The harsh conditions faced by immigrants led many to join the U.S. military. John Edward Weems explains that many immigrants joined the US military because of their difficulty finding employment. The U.S. was filled with anti-immigrant sentiment. Richard Bruce Winders explains that nativism in the military resulted in immigrant abuse. Due to false identities at enlistment, an accurate number of serving immigrants is unknown. Weems asserts that Taylor’s Army was nearly half immigrants. Michael Hogan notes that European immigrants met the same “exclusiveness” and nativism in the military they had tried to escape by enlisting.

Immigrants were placed at the bottom of an ethnic military hierarchy facing callous treatment. Joseph Wheelan found that “Immigrant soldiers were three times more likely than native born American Soldiers to be severely punished for minor infractions.” The case of Prussian volunteer Victor Galbraith is suggestive of the harsh treatment experienced by immigrants. One night, Galbraith pulled his gun on an intruder in his bed who turned out to be Captain Meers, his superior. Meers was angered by the understandable mistake and harshly fought for Galbraith’s execution which Taylor approved. Galbraith met a firing squad. Samuel Chamberlain explains after the shooting “he was still alive and cried out ‘Water! For God’s sake water!’” He was given water out of canteen and then shot in the head.

The harsh treatment reserved for immigrants led to desertion. The military made immigrants feel like outsiders who lacked a connection to the nation. Wheelen claims that those from German and Irish ancestry deserted due to ethnic slanders. Immigrant desertion became so common that Volunteer George Furber assumed Private Wiley who was Dutch, deserted to join “his countrymen.”

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400 Weems, 110
401 Winders., 60
402 Weems, 110
403 Hogan, 20
404 Wheelan, 87
406 Ibid., 225
407 Wheelan., 87
service was not surprised by Private John Sorder’s desertion since “He was a foreigner by birth.”

Some had competing national loyalties that led them to desert. War has the ability to dissolve ties, and create new ones. Catholics were discriminated against for not attending Protestant services and practices. Hogan asserted that anti-Irish and anti-Catholicism caused soldiers to join Mexico. Paul Foos argued that Mexico offered a safe haven for their Catholic identity. Robert Ryal Miller argued that many soldiers found a community in Mexico close to the one they left by coming to America. Weems notes that there was antagonism in identities with many Scottish, German, Irish, and British soldiers. In response, the military separated regiments by race and ethnicity, with Germans and African Americans often providing labor. The separate companies agitated the already weak nationalism. It visually displayed immigrants distance from the American identity.

Many immigrants who enlisted in the U.S. military believed that Mexico offered them great opportunities. Mexico disseminated handbills which appealed to the weak state of nationalism in the U.S. Army promising economic benefits. The Mexican Army enlistment promises were larger than those of the U.S. Army. Private William Cooke from Company F, 2nd Artillery deserted on June 15 1848 and was enlisted in the Mexico Army within two days. While in prison Private Carpenter met a man who joined the Mexican Army for a better life. The man “was formerly a miner in Wisconsin...he had exhausted his funds” so “he enlisted in the United States service.” After receiving his bonus, “He deserted and joined

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409 Albert G. Brackett, M. D. *General Lane's Brigade in Central Mexico.* (Cincinnati: Ohio: H. W. Derby & co, 1854.), 151
410 Hogan, 17
411 Foos, 26-29
412 Miller, 39
413 Weems, 110
414 Foos, 91
415 Miller, 39. Miller points out that Mexico offered higher pay than the U.S. in every position. He made a chart of US-Mexico Army pay scale: Colonel 81-200, Lt. Col 65-133, Major 54-100, Captain 44-67, 1st LT 34-57, 2nd LT 29-45, 1st SGT 16-20, SGT 13-16, corporal 9-10, Musician 8-9, Private 7.5-8. This is at $.96 for each peso. He compiled his information from Exley, A Compendium of Pay, 9, 48, 50-51 AND Dublán and Lozana, Legislación mexicana, 5:323. He follows San Patricos experience in battle and how they adapted to living in Mexico
416 Record Group 153, EE169.
the Mexicans at Matamoros.” Carpenter explained “He has been amply rewarded by the Mexican government for his treachery so in fact have all the deserters.”

Mexico’s Army promised immigrants the opportunity to avoid the destitution they faced in the U.S. Once Private Thomas Riley from Company H of the 3rd Infantry was captured he explained that "having no work" caused him to join the Mexican Army. Private William Wallace mentioned "having no work" as the reason he joined the Mexican Army. Deserter Private William O'Connor from Company K of the 1st Artillery joined other Americans in the Mexican Army after experiencing poverty. He explained “I reached the streets I had no employment and Reilly persuaded me to join the Legion of Strangers.” Private William Outhouse from Company J of the 2nd Infantry was captured and kept in "confinement without food" at which point he felt "compelled to join".

Immigrants’ sense of nationalism was weakened further by the harsh treatment they faced in the U.S. Military. Competing identities with other ethnicities and religions propelled them to desert. Once they realized that enlistment promises would go unfulfilled, they like their U.S. counterparts deserted. The inability of the U.S. to keep soldiers fighting could not be remedied by bonuses to immigrants or native born citizens. The military further aggravated the problem by keeping immigrants and citizens in separate companies. Deserters’ decision to join the Mexican Army illuminated the weak state of nationalism at home and in the military.

**ENLISTING FOR THE REPUBLIC**

Many soldiers enlisted for moral and rhetorical purposes believing that they were securing the nation and its way of life through enlistment. However, their sense of commitment to the nation was immediately weakened as the reasons for enlistment proved false. Soldiers faced unfulfilled promises, and the forfeiture of their rights. They could not comprehend how losing republican principles was necessary to protect the republic. Soldiers

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418 Record Group 153, EE531.
419 Ibid.
420 Ibid.
421 Ibid.
concluded that the pretenses under which they had enlisted were false and their treatment was unfair thus desertion was justified.

The military seized upon the enlistment opportunity created by the outpouring of patriotic fervor. Winders noted that many were motivated to enlist by patriotic fervor. Columnist John Louis O'Sullivan’s “Manifest Destiny” convinced soldiers that the war was worth fighting. Volunteers enlisted after hearing fiery patriotic speeches that predicted a short and easy war. Foos noted that the US convinced soldiers the war was just by depicting Mexicans as a lesser people. Politicians and the press shaped the war as a chance to demonstrate white superiority.

The confrontation between republican ideology and military needs lead to enlistment difficulties. McCaffery explains that there was legal confusion as to who had the authority to call for volunteers. It was a question of state versus federal power. John Pinheiro noted that American citizens loved state militias because it was seen as protecting from tyranny. Winders argued that Americans only supported volunteerism and state militias to expand the military’s size. Foos explains that it was viewed as the most republican way to have a military. The War Department asked each state for a desired number of volunteers which the state was obligated to produce.

After completion of the enlistment process, deserters escaped soon after arriving to camp. Foos argued that the patriotic promises of manifest destiny failed to live up to soldiers’ experience. A preliminary sample of thirty-five known enlistment dates found that fifty percent of those who deserted had only been enlisted a month or less. Immediately after enlistment, soldiers in the US Army faced a march to the US-Mexico border. The march

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422 Winders, 66-87  
423 Zinn, 114.  
424 McCaffery, 18-24  
425 Foos, 3  
426 Ibid., 4  
427 Pinheiro, 4  
428 Winders, 66-87  
429 Foos, 10  
430 McCaffery, 16  
431 Foos, 10  
432 This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Out of 35 known enlistment dates the Average was 125 days until desertion. 50% deserted within the first 34 days while 50% waited between 34 and 725 days.
convinced many soldiers they had made the wrong decision by enlisting. Ethan Allen Hitchcock who would later become Major General explains that on “the long march” to the border “They have lost three by death and nearly fifty by desertion.” 433 Many deserters marched to the Matamoras River then jumped in swimming to Mexico.

The first deserters swimming the Matamoras River were in a precarious position. They had to swim under the fire of both the US and Mexico. Private Castinero Puesta from Company A, 8th Infantry successfully made it to Mexico without being shot by either side. 434 However, Captain W. S. Henry writes in early April 1846 of an unsuccessful deserter “One man to-day succeeded in reaching the opposite shore, and as he crawled out the sentinel fired, and he fell dead.” 435 Hitchcock estimated “that four out of our six deserters the other night were drowned.” 436 Captain Kirby Smith explained to his wife that “The Mexican authorities have shot or hung one of our Dragoons as a spy. He was in truth a deserter...” 437

Others deserted as the picturesque illusion of war promised at enlistment was replaced with the violent reality of war. Private Frank Edwards wrote of battle that “The fear which possesses the soldiers is well known,…this is proved, by the desertion of several of them.” 438 General Samuel French in the Battle of Buena Vista was taken by surgeons after being wounded. French writes that when he saw General Taylor after the fighting had ended “I said to the General I hoped he would gain a complete victory on the morrow, and his reply was: "Yes, yes, if too many of my men do not give me the slip to-night.” This comment made sense to French because “he was mortified and pained to find so many men at the hacienda who had deserted the field, many of them by carrying off the wounded and not returning to their companies.” 439

433 Ethan Allen Hitchcock. Fifty Years In Camp And Field Diary Of Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock. Edited By W.A. Croffut (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1909), 198
434 Record Group 153, EE292.
436 Hitchcock, 221
437 To Mexico with Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to his Wife. Prepared by his daughter Emma Jermone Blackwood. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1917.), 37
438 Frank s. Edwards. A Campaign in New Mexico with Colonel Doniphan. (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847.), 179
Deserters recognized that the military was usurping their freedom by undermining their republican citizenship. Foos points out that the flogging, hard labor, and contract service opposed republican citizenship. 440 One Pennsylvania volunteer wrote “[T]onight on drill an officer laid a soldier’s skull open with his sword… A soldier’s life is very disgusting.”441 Soldiers found the violent treatment of soldiers abhorrent. Private George Ballentine claimed that rather than watch the punishment of fellow soldiers extolled, men would “fall out of the ranks …owing to a sensation of faintness caused by witnessing this exhibition of modern torture.”442 A Corporal of the guard explained that he was “kept more like a slave than like a freeman….”443 Soldiers treatment resembled slavery; hard labor, imprisonment, guards, harsh punishment, and patrols.444

Deserters felt mistreated due to the horrid living conditions. A soldier at Governor’s Island said that soldiers were put “into tents, where they are roasted as if in an oven during the day, and frequently drenched with wet, and starved with cold during the night.”445 While in Mexico, Captain Smith wrote home to his wife that in his camp “fleas and ticks are too wise to live [here].”446 Private William H. Richardson marching near Mexico wrote on May 5, 1846 that after “40 miles” of marching through thick dust, they found “a pond of brackish water.” The men were so thirsty that “The water was quickly drunk.”447 The lack of healthy food and water supply led to desertion. Samuel Chamberlain explained that volunteers were angered by the “inadequate rations.” Two regiments broke out in open mutiny over the matter and then deserted.448

Deserters were further inflamed by the archaic medical practices and killer diseases. Wheelan explained that the camps were “ecosystems for dysentery, pneumonia, yellow fever, 

440 Foos, 16
441 Zinn, 124
442 Adventures of an English Soldier In The United States Army. (New York: W.A. Townsend and Company, 1860.), 28-29
443 Corporal of the Guard, 55
444 African American slavery demanded a labor force constantly guarded by men preventing desertion, often whipped and beat for not following orders, and hunted down by patrols if he did escape.
445 Adventures of an English Soldier In The United States Army, 25
446 To Mexico With Scott: Letters Of Captain E. Kirby Smith, 151
448 Chamberlain, 58
and malaria.” He noted that disease and illness were more responsible for death than combat. Many were infected with venereal disease with little medical attention if any offered. Disease without medical attention drove soldiers to desert. Major Walter March wrote that soon after the “terrible cholera had begun… there were few remaining to look after the sick.” The medical treatment offered was primitive, employing for example leeches to treat yellow fever. Soldiers cited the sickness as their reason for desertion. Private William Reese from Company A, 2nd Dragoons was so sick he deserted to get to a hospital.

Deserters could not fathom how enlistment for the national cause justified their reduced status. Many deserted in response. Private William Rank of Company G 3rd Artillery left because he was “abused.” Bernard Rake from Company K of 6th Artillery deserted twice explaining that “I did not wish to suffer the insults of the non guard officers.” Private John Reilly deserted due to abuse by a captain, who he later killed in battle. Colonel Ward B. Burnett claimed that the bad treatment led to “insubordination, desertion.” Private William Blaiden claimed “My reason for leaving was bad treatment…” Lieutenant Reynolds claimed that Private Carpenter deserted because of “misrepresentations and ill treatment after recruiting towards himself and friends.”

Violent punishment expanded rather than quelled desertion. After punishment had been administered deserters deserted again. Corporal William Berner AKA William Miller was motivated to desert by harsh punishment. He stated “I received a reprimand that I did not

449 Wheelan, 162
450 Ibid., 415
451 McCaffery, 104
452 Major Walter March. Faca: An Army Memoir (Detroit : Raymond & Selleck, 1857.), 143
453 Wheelan, 162
454 This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Out of 214 trials where the reason is stated, 11 said sickness.
455 Record Group 153, FF107.
456 Ibid., EE225.
457 Ibid., EE416.
459 Corporal of the Guard, 28-29
460 Record Group 153, EE573.
461 Record Group 153, EE321.
deserve.....” so he deserted. Private David Barabee from Company B of the 2nd Infantry deserted in March 1845 and after being captured and punished in January 1846 deserted again. Private William Allen from Company B, 4th infantry had been captured for desertion and been branded with a D. Yet, he deserted again. Private John Smith from the Kentucky Volunteers experienced three punishments for his three desertions in 1846. Private Robert Barnett from the Louisiana Volunteers and Recruit William Gilmore each deserted three times in 1847, each receiving three separate punishments.

The threat of violent punishment caused some soldiers to remain absent. Men who had mistakenly overstayed their furlough did not return out of fear of the violent punishment reserved for desertion. Nearly 16% cited a misunderstanding concerning their furlough return date. However, fear of punishment kept these deserters away. Private William Blaiden did not return fearing he would be "flogged." Private James Wood of the 2nd Dragoons claimed he was lost then afraid, but did not return out of fear for a deserter’s punishment.

Others responded to the violent usurping of freedom with a violent desertion. Foos argued that US soldiers were frustrated with the service often resorting to violence. Pinheiro found that the military camps were full of rowdy men who destroyed property. There was a large concentration of rambunctious soldiers who violently attacked Mexicans citizens and ignored orders. Violent desertion is demonstrated in the case of Private James Lovejoy from Company F of the 1st Dragoons. He "violently" struck Private Greely with a carbine, pulled a knife on him, and escaped prison. While deserting he drew a knife and threaten to “cut the guts” out of numerous soldiers. Then he was approached by Corporal

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462 Ibid., EE420.  
463 Ibid., EE217.  
464 Ibid., FF29.  
465 Ibid., EE305.  
466 Ibid., FF13, EE399.  
467 This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Out of 214 reasons given 34 were a misunderstanding and 7 of those cited fear of returning as the reason they remained absent.  
468 Record Group 153, EE573.  
469 Ibid., EE274.  
470 Foos, 10  
471 Pinheiro, 84  
472 Pinheiro, 86-87
James Coalker, who asked him to “produce the arms” stolen during his prison escape. Lovejoy replied “search me, I have got a pistol find it, and a bowie knife for you too.”

The perception of entering a glorious war with a just military was crafted at enlistment. Soldiers brought republican ideology with them into the field. However, they soon discovered that the rhetoric did not live up to the reality. They faced awful living conditions, irrational medical treatment, relegation to a lower social status, and widespread violence in camp and the battlefield. Soldiers came to see the distortions at enlistment as justifying desertion. The military failed to grasp this concept and continued to generate desertion.

**ALCOHOL**

The broken economic and moral promises of enlistment led to widespread despair. Soldiers turned to alcohol to assuage the despair. For many soldiers, alcohol provided an escape both mentally and physically from their mundane existence. It could transport soldiers to the environment they had left at home upon enlistment. Alcohol was a major part of U.S. military and citizen life. The high volume of readily available alcohol from Mexicans and the military led to pervasive drunkenness. Alcohol consumption provided the state of mind and context for widespread desertion.

Nothing was cited as the cause of desertion more than alcohol. Alcohol had a role in 35% of all desertions. McCaffery noted that soldiers were consumed by a feeling of boredom in the service. William Rorabaugh argued that it was customary for 19th Century Americans to quell boredom with alcohol consumption. John Eisenhower found that the service often lacked excitement and soldiers drank in the hopes it would bring excitement. For many the boring situation coupled with military duplicity at enlistment led to despair. The corporal of the guard best explains soldier’s despairing situation “Too truly has the

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473 Record Group, EE278.
474 This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Out of 214 men who gave reasons, 74 claimed alcohol was responsible. (34.5)
475 McCaffery, .81
private suffered not only by the War, bad "promises," and bad treatment by many officers, but in sickness, shattered frames and broken down constitutions."  

Some soldier’s exhibited symptoms of what today is called Post-Dramatic Stress Disorder. A desertion court-martial determined that Recruit Isaac Dunkham was too insane for trial and recommended a discharge. Private Gabriel Arena was suspected of being insane and said that the “madness” was caused “by the loss of his wife and family.” The court found accused deserter, Private John Goldsmith of Company D, 3rd Artillery unfit to enter a plea. Lieutenant Judd concluded that Goldsmith’s “mind was very much unsettled.” Sgt. McGovern explained he knew Goldsmith since 1842, but had never seen him like this. He said at one point Goldsmith talked loudly to himself all night incoherently. He said that Goldsmith appeared “not connected.” Lieutenant F.L. Thomas explained that since he saw Goldsmith enlist 8 to 10 month earlier he had seen him turn into “deranged” person. When arrested he was peaceful and confused by all accounts.

Alcohol was recognized as offering relief for despair by providing the feeling of liberty and individuality. Rorabaugh noted that alcohol presented egalitarianism and offered a feeling of “independence and liberty.” He found that “the primary reason people drink is to relieve anxiety.” Most liquor in 19th century America was consumed in the home. Alcohol offered soldiers a chance to transition into the feeling of being home. Soldiers recognized home as a symbol of the freedom and liberty stripped from them upon enlistment.

Alcohol was a central part of the military. McCaffery found that drinking was so widespread that some soldiers created temperance leagues. In November 1847 R. J. Walker, Secretary of the Treasury removed the duties on certain imports to Mexico. He wrote to the President that for “the practical operation of the system” he wanted to remove certain duties. Among the many items was beer. He felt beer was so important that the duty on it

478 Corporal of the Guard.
479 Record Group 153, FF3.
480 Ibid., FF52.
481Ibid., EE222.
482 Rorabaugh, 151
483 Ibid., 146
484 Ibid., 16
485 McCaffery, 104
should be removed for 90 days.486 Beer was cheaper and more readily available as a result. However, the military wanted to control who drank the alcohol. A letter from August 1846 released to the press stated that “The Generals swear by all that is holy, they will have each box, barrel and package examined, and if they find any smuggling [alcohol] they inflict a punishment...”487 Private George Ballantine claimed these policies were meaningless “To drink ardent spirits when upon guard is strictly forbidden…I never knew or heard of a soldier refusing a glass of spirits.”488

After the arrival of troops, alcohol became a profitable industry for Mexicans. A letter printed from an anonymous soldier near Matamoras on April 5, 1846 typifies this change: “On our arrival in Corpus Christi Bay, about fourteen low, shabby shantees contained the inhabitants of the so-called town. What a change!” In the three weeks after arrival fifty shops selling alcohol came about resulting in soldiers “borne to their graves, the victims of intoxication and diseases of every kind arising from excess.”489 Soldiers found alcohol to be an important concern when budgeting. A volunteer explained that "it is pretty tough, I can tell you--wages only seven dollars a month, whiskey from one to two dollars a gallon, and other necessaries of life in the same proportion." In Matamoras prices on cider cost $2.50 per gallon while whiskey which American deemed “inferior” cost $4.00 per gallon.490

Mexicans recognized the demand by soldiers for alcohol. By late 1846, Mexican citizens were profiting from American soldiers addiction to alcohol. Major Luther Giddings explained that “The dealers in pulque (a kind of beer) in the city of Mexico, had requested the government to double the tax on that article, which would yield in an increase in revenue, in the capital, of a thousand dollars a day.”491 Mexicans had alcohol readily available for the troops. The New Orleans Bee, printed a letter from “The Corporal,” at Matamoros on May 26, 1846. It noted that “All along the road they[Mexicans] were found waiting with … assort

487 “Regiments Toward Monterrey, Sickness, Inactivity For Want Of Wagons.” Ibid., September 12, 1846, 23.
488 Adventures of an English Soldier, 243
490 “Complaints From Volunteers At Matamoras About High Prices For Provisions” Niles National Register. Sept 5, 1846, 16.
491 “Maj. Luther Giddings’ account of Monterey and its capture.” Niles National Register. Sept 5, 1846, 167-168
of liquor resembling in looks and taste San Croix rum. We paid them liberally for all we obtained...”

The reliance on readily available alcohol for quelling despair led to widespread drunkenness in the military. Drinking was so common in the military that the *Martinsburg Gazette* praised General Taylor for not drinking alcohol. Private Emmitt Haddock from Company F, 6th Infantry was charged with desertion and worthlessness. They deemed him worthless because he "was drunk and absent from his company without authority on" five different occasions between January and March 1848 in Mexico City. On Christmas Day 1846, Private Timothy Corner “was drunk and utterly incapable of performing the duties.” Private Michael Berry from Company H, 2nd Infantry was charged with desertion and “Habitual Drunkenness.” The drunkenness was on eight different days between May and September 1847 where “he was too drunk to perform his duty.”

Soldiers were emboldened to desert under the influence of alcohol. Private Gibson McDowell from Company A of the 8th Infantry claimed he deserted after getting drunk because his “feet got soar...” Recruit James Smith’s excuse for desertion “I was persuaded to desert by a citizen of Utica and furnished with clothing, liquor, and provisions. When Private Thomas Eyles from Company J of 4th Artillery needed to go home, but was denied a furlough he took to drinking. He then deserted, claiming that drunkenness is “what made me desert.” Even high ranking officials imbibed to the point of desertion, Captain Hatheway was tried and found guilty of absence without leave and alcohol is implicated in the case. John Richardson was charged by the military with habitual drunkenness from July 1847 until February 1848. According to the military this led to “Utter-worthlessness” due to frequent intoxication and finally desertion.

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494 Record Group 153, FF107.
495 Ibid., EE300.
496 Ibid., EE631.
497 Ibid., EE324.
498 Ibid., FF163.
499 Ibid., FF97.
500 Record Group 153, FF6.
501 Ibid., F126.
Other deserters consumed such a large volume of alcohol that the thoughts which justified desertion could not be recalled. Deserter Private Philip Rouse claims he and Private Andrew Baker from Company B of the 3rd Artillery were so drunk that they “wondered off …but I did not intend to desert.”\textsuperscript{502} Private Franklin Grey noted he was drunk that he got lost when he deserted. He pointed out that by remaining in uniform he had not intended to desert.\textsuperscript{503} Deserter Jeremiah Frisbee claimed that when he woke up from drinking "I had no idea of deserting."\textsuperscript{504} Recruit Chandler Grover claimed that the morning after drinking he remembered nothing but waking up confined for desertion.\textsuperscript{505} Concerning his desertion, Private Robert McFarland from Company of the 4th Artillery said “I had been drinking pretty hard that week.” When deemed too drunk for duty, he just kept drinking “I continued drinking till the night before, …went on [duty] again after drinking the next morning.”\textsuperscript{506}

The unfulfilled promises and omnipresent boredom of the military led to despair. Alcohol was recognized at home and in battle as an appropriate form of alleviation for despair. It could transform men to the feeling of liberty and individuality left at home upon enlistment. The abundant consumption of the ubiquitous substance led men to think and act in different ways. While in a drunken state of mind many chose desertion.

**Comradery of Deserters**

Alcohol provided the foundation for the most fascinating and important aspect of desertion: communal desertion. Communal desertion demonstrates the desire for and power of comradeship amongst soldiers. Companionship was scant in a service separated by ethnicity, race, rank, and region. Enlisted soldiers felt lonely in their reduced social status facing violence from the military and the enemy army. Alcohol alleviated loneliness by cementing bonds through a common experience amongst soldiers. The comradeship branched into communities allowing for the trust needed to discuss desertion. The discussion of desertion led many communities to plan and execute communal desertion.

\textsuperscript{502} Ibid., EE222. 
\textsuperscript{503} Ibid., EE298. 
\textsuperscript{504} Ibid., EE535. 
\textsuperscript{505} Ibid., FF3. 
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., FF257.
Soon after enlistment, many soldiers became dissatisfied with the service. The second most common reasons for desertion cited by soldiers was the difficult separation from loved ones and home.\textsuperscript{507} Soldiers missed being a part of a community where they were seen as an equal. Almost 54% of those who deserted did so while on US soil. This demonstrates dissatisfaction with the military before battle. These soldiers did not want to leave their homeland. New York had 23% of all desertions take place on its soil.\textsuperscript{508} Major Walter March saw a man so attached to his family he brought them with him until he deserted. He said "Two soldiers had just deserted with their families, including, of course, a flock of noisy children, whom I delighted to tease, and who loved to cry out."\textsuperscript{509} A reporter explains that of the forty who deserted from one regiment "The regulars have invariably gone to the enemy, but what of the volunteers who have left us...have made tracks for a Christmas dinner in the white settlements."\textsuperscript{510}

The importance of comradeship to desertion cannot be overstated. For some the lacking companionship upon enlistment caused desertion. John Scales of Company H 4\textsuperscript{th} Artillery claimed he deserted because he missed home and what he left behind.\textsuperscript{511} Private Henry Butler from 4\textsuperscript{th} Artillery wanted to see his brother in Pittsburgh and another private convinced him to go.\textsuperscript{512} Recruit William Allen ignored his superiors and deserted to visit his family after he was refused a furlough.\textsuperscript{513} Recruit Thomas Williams explained his desertion was caused by a visit to town where he met some "former shipmates" and they got into a "spree" causing him to be gone until apprehended. He explains it was not his intention to desert.\textsuperscript{514}

Others deserted for the companionship of women. As soon as soldiers arrived in Matamoras Captain Henry noticed women enticing his men. Wheelan found that soldiers

\textsuperscript{507} This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Out of 214 men who gave reasons, 21 claimed home and issues relating to home were responsible for their desertion. (9.8) \textsuperscript{508} Ibid., These numbers consider Fort Gibson, Cherokee Nation (OK) as not American soil. Those who deserted off of US soil were 248 out of 538 (46.09%). The other 290 (53.9%) deserted while on US soil. New York: 121 (41.75 of US desertions) (22.49 of all desertions)\textsuperscript{509} March, 17 \textsuperscript{510} “From Monterey, December 1, 1846 .” Niles’ National Register. January 9, 1847, 290-291. \textsuperscript{511} Record Group 153, FF242. \textsuperscript{512} Ibid., EE269. \textsuperscript{513} Ibid., EE274. \textsuperscript{514}Ibid., EE321.
lined the river banks to watch Mexican peasant women bath nude in the river. Private Corydon Donnavan explained how Lieutenant Deans swam for a woman. Deans noticed a group of women across the Matamoras River and he “became suddenly enamored with one of these, and after mutual signs and tokens were passed, he plunged into the water and swam to Mexico.” However, he was captured in the process, but after “his trial and acquittal for desertion, he married the object of his violent passion.” On March 31st 1846 he writes that as “women were washing…Two men swam the river” toward them. Wheelan noted that an Arkansas Cavalry Volunteers “purportedly molested some of the Agua Nueva women on Christmas Day.” Others relationships were not so volatile such as deserter Jeremiah Frisbee who went out drinking for days with a woman.

Some deserters found comradeship so essential they took it by force. Private Alfred Ludlow from Company B of the Mounted Riflemen tried to force a group desertion on Private John Borden. Borden said that Ludlow “wished me to go with him offering to furnish me with a gun.” Ludlow wished to desert for fortune and rob people. Ludlow showed Borden “a knife and said that he had his riffle with him.” Borden then had the prisoner take a drink with him while he called the Corporal who arrested Ludlow. Ludlow had the courage, weapons, and plan to escape. However, he stayed and attempted to force companionship rather than desert.

Comradeship through alcohol created bonds amongst soldiers. Rorabaugh explains that taverns were viewed as a meeting place associating alcohol with bonding. Andrew Barr notes that drinking was considered as “good fellowship” with friends, polite with strangers, and way to create ties amongst those working together. Soldiers’ built the trust to discuss and plan for desertion under the influence of alcohol. Private Charles Downey

515 Wheelan, 164
516 C. Donnavan. *Adventures in Mexico; Experienced During A Captivity Of Seven Months.* (Boston: George R. Holbrook & co.1848.), 23
517 Ibid., 23
518 Henry, 70
519 Wheelan, 275
520 Record Group 153, EE535.
521 Ibid., EE553
522 Rorabaugh, 26-27
claimed that while drunk, Private Lloyd convinced him to desert. Privates Henry Holton and Charles Downey from Company F, 3rd Artillery deserted together. They cited drunkenness as the reason for leaving.

The scale and size of alcohol bonding went beyond simple pairs of camaraderie. Andres Resendez noted that communities are built when people view themselves as sharing a common and unique experience. Thomas R. Pegram explained that alcohol could “bound together families and communities.” Large communities were assembled from a common bond of military suffering cemented through communal alcohol consumption. These communities provided the trust and camaraderie for communal desertion.

Community desertion became more common as the war continued. Private’s John Wylin, John Hall, John Vooahries, and James Henry of the 1st New York Volunteers deserted together in July 1848. In February 1847 Francis Collins an Artillery Officer wrote “Last night six men from Stephen's battery deserted in a body to the enemy...” In May of 1848 “Between twenty and thirty desertions took place..on [a] Saturday night.” Private Chauncey Carpenter deserted “in company with a number of young men who enlisted at the same time with himself...”

Community desertion bound men into battling with determination against the U.S. military. In November 1847, U.S. Privates Anthony Auberly, John Collins, Issac Dowdrick, James Hale, Michael Quigley, and Samuel Sanford signed an agreement to desert together. They made their escape as they stole muskets and ammunition. They marched from Carmargo, Mexico into Texas where they killed livestock, stole more weapons, and killed Mexican Citizen Alejo Rodriguez. Their rambunctious antics got them caught within a day. They were captured in possession of the property belonging to Rodriguez. They were all

524 Record Group 153, EE496.
525 Ibid.
528 Record Group 153, FF243.
530 “Editors Picayune.” May 26, 1848, City of Mexico, Richmond Enquirer. May 2, 1848, Volume 45.
531 Record Group 153, EE321.
found guilty and given death sentences. While in prison awaiting execution they met three other men. All eight deserted together in an aggressive escape that included an assault on the guard and theft of materials. They made it as far as the Rio Grande where they were captured again. Two days later they were tried and sentenced to be executed amongst the community they had created.  

Some communal desertions required chicanery. Lieutenant John Smith from the Third Battalion of Louisiana Volunteers forced some his subordinates into desertion. He gathered a dozen men; five were lied to and told it was a hunting trip. Smith took eight stand arms, forty rounds of musket cartridges, and eight sets of accruements. 2nd Sergeant John Peyton was approached by Smith and his men as they left. Smith informed him he planned to desert and showed him the clothes and weapons he had taken. Peyton wanted to know if Smith planned on joining the enemy to which Smith replied in the negative. Days later, Smith and his men were captured by nearly fifty soldiers. Peyton had informed the military of Smith’s plan. Smith denied deserting. He claimed he was taking care of a sick private which extended the hunting trip. Smith received a branded letter D on each of his cheeks, confinement for the rest of "the Mexican War, and confinement for the rest of "natural life" with a ball and chain at such a place the President of The United States may direct.  

Some deserters built and lived in deserter communities after they had escaped. This may have been John Smith’s intention. In January 1847 Private John R. Kenly a member of the Maryland Volunteers near Coatepec wrote that “a considerable number of deserters from the American Army were being secreted in a village fifteen miles distant.” Captain Lloyd Tilghman along with one hundred soldiers broke up the community. Mexican citizens including a priest lived amongst them. In 1848, it was reported that deserters were living in bandit communities. An anonymous letter claimed that “twenty soldiers and teamsters deserted, taking with them the best horses they could lay their hands on, together with their

532 This data is based upon the random sample I performed from the Court Martial Proceedings found at the National Archives in Washington D.C. from Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG153. Box 166, Folder EE640 concerning the trials of Privates Anthony Arberly, Issac Marked, Samuel Sanford, James Hale, Solomon Winters, Johnathon Oliver, James Goodwin and John Collins of Company K from the 4th Artillary.  
533 Record Group 153, Folder FF126.  
534 Ibid.  
full arms and equipments….their object is to form a banditti, for the purposes of plundering the highways, the haciendas, and the churches of the small towns.” The letter said that they were “100, now organized and operating in this way. They may have Mexicans connected with them.”

The communities were not united forever. Private Peyton who stayed behind to turn in Lieutenant John Smith was not the only one to betray a community of deserters. Samuel Stanford who deserted with the band of five men that killed Mexican citizens and livestock was the first of the group to be caught. He ousted the others in exchange for saving his own life. Private John Wilton saved his own life by turning in everyone from San Patrico battalion whom he called “The Legion of Strangers.” Similarly, Private Thomas O’Connor was a Mexican Prisoner who claimed he was “in the legion of strangers, not quite a month.” He ousted each member by name and challenged their deserter’s claims in exchange for a lesser sentence.

The extensive measures taken for comradeship and community demonstrate the loneliness soldiers felt upon enlistment. It is a reflection of the weak sense of nationalism which lacked the connectedness for a common cause. Soldiers found camaraderie and built communities through the shared experience of deceitful enlistment practices and harsh military treatment. They cemented these bonds with alcohol as they endured the unpleasant situation. The community delivered the feeling of freedom and autonomy associated with being home. It provided the platform to discuss and plan for desertion.

CONCLUSION

Mass desertion resulted from a weak sense of U.S. nationalism. Bonuses attracted poor citizens and immigrants willing to sign anything for economic security. When those economic promises went unfulfilled men deserted. Those who stayed created bonds of opposition to the military through a shared experience. Disparity was ubiquitous due to unfulfilled promises, social separation, and the reduction of social status. The assumption that widely available alcohol could cure that despair led to pervasive drunkenness. Soldiers

536 “American Deserters in Mexico.” Richmond Whig and Advertiser. May 9, 1848. Volume 25.
537 Record Group 153, EE640.
538 Ibid., EE531
539 Ibid.
found camaraderie in the act of consumption. They found the motivation to desert at the bottom of their glass. The common experiences of disparity led soldiers to create bonds and form new communities. The deserter communities made soldiers feel like an essential part of something.

Those who did not desert continued to experience broken promises even after the war had ended. James McCaffery found that many soldiers never saw their bonuses. Mexican-American War veterans did not get pensions until 1887. A soldier had to be over 62 and unable to work to receive the eight dollars a month pension from the military. By 1903 the number jumped to twelve dollars a month excluding those who had fought for the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{540}

The deserters represent a brave generation of men making difficult decisions. They were aware they would be running for the rest of their lives once they escaped. After the war, many deserters experienced shame as they lied daily about their time in the service. Other deserters experienced the feeling of satisfaction that can only come from brave action in the face of deadly consequences. The bonds created by deserters demonstrate that in time of war rational thought by egalitarian communities can overcome the fabrications that lead men to war.

\textsuperscript{540} McCaffery ,204
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

On November 7, 1848, Zachary Taylor was elected President of the United States. The same week of his election the *Whig and Advertiser* reported that “on the 10th a court martial commenced on board the Congress for the trial of deserters from Warren”\(^541\). Desertion remained in the headlines just as it causes remained in the minds of those who served. One soldier remembered “I always was, while in the army, kept more like a slave than like a freeman, or treated with the rights or honor of a non-commissioned officer! The only excuse I can form for their unmanly treatment is, great stupidity and ignorance of human nature and duty.”\(^542\) Politicians and military leaders’ inability to understand soldier’s feeling of discontent and alleviate its causes is what allowed desertion to expand during the war.

My examination of the politicians in chapter one demonstrated their lack of understanding of the root causes of desertion. The political context in which they operated informed their decision to support, oppose, or even ignore desertion. In turn the context was largely informed by the political party and slavery conscious sectional background of the politicians. Much of the press was culpable in creating context because they were often voices for political parties. Politicians had re-election to gain or lose depending upon their stance on the war and issues that accompanied it such as the problem of desertion. Opposing desertion allowed politicians to pose as national patriots and every politician wanted to be remembered for supporting the war if land was won, but they wanted to be remembered for opposing war if the war was lost.

My second chapter found that 1848 presidential candidates Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott largely constructed their response to desertion based on what it would do to their electability. Presidential hopes quelled Taylor’s praise for the shooting of deserters until

\(^{541}\) “From California.” *Richmond Whig and Advertiser* November 10, 1848, Volume 25.

\(^{542}\) Corporal Of The Guard. *The High Private.* (New York: printed for the publisher, 1848.) 55
the press and politicians altered public opinion into believing that deserters were synonymous with support for Mexico. The military was thankful for public support since they needed to take belligerent measures to quash desertion. The military used aggressive and violent punishment and execution to stop desertion. However, Polk’s decision to pardon deserters demonstrated that the military whether aggressively violent or legally compliant was incapable of preventing desertion and that the deserters not entirely to blame.

My third chapter found that soldiers varied in their reasons for desertion. They were comprised of men largely unaffected by appeals to nationalism and those who quickly found that the putative nationalism of the cause rang hollow. They ran the gambit from cowards avoiding war, to scoundrels looking to profit and dupe the military who had duped them. The deserters were ethnically diverse and largely from the working class. Many enlisted for the opportunity to escape financial hardship. They experienced a military that treated them like second class citizens. They immediately recognized this in the limits on freedom, the physical abuse allocated, and the enlistment promises unfulfilled.

The interaction between deserters was complex. Soldiers connected across class, ethnic, and regional lines. They shared a common bond through experiencing an undesired and often ruthless contractual service. The wide-spread use of alcohol in the military contributed to those connections and heightened discontent with military service. Alcohol offered these men an escape from their situation by providing a relaxing communal environment for honest complaints to be heard. However, it also gave them a place to cement the bonds of friendship and interact in a way that resembled interactions at home. Through these connections developed the necessary planning and bravery for desertion.

My research found alcoholism to be endemic in the military. Future research needs to examine patterns of depression and alcoholism amongst troops during the war. There is evidence that widespread depression and alcoholism were taking place in the nation at that time as well. A vibrant temperance movement at home points to a real problem with alcoholism at home during the war.543

At the center of the desertion issue was the problematic appeal nationalism. Desertion raises questions about the strength, appeal, and embrace of nationalism in a fledgling republic where a large percentage of the working class are immigrants were struggling to re-conceptualize their identities coming from immigrant backgrounds. Ironically it was those with the weakest sense of nationalism, the immigrants and the poor who would be sent to war. Meanwhile, at home, there was an outpouring of patriotic fervor to foster national support for the war. In the twentieth century Woodrow Wilson, FDR, LBJ, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush continued Polk’s strategy of appealing to patriotism and national purpose to garner support for an imperialist venture.

The Americans’ support for the Mexican-American War lasted but a short period of time. This pattern continued into the twenty first century. In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, politicians and their supporters garnered support for the invasions, but maintaining it over a period of time came with great difficulty. In the U.S. Mexican War, by the time the public had turned against the war, Polk already had congressional support for the war’s prosecution which meant the public’s support was unnecessary. This hurt Winfield Scott politically more than Taylor. Although, he employed the same aggressive methods to quell desertion as Taylor he performed them while public opinion concerning the war had plummeted. Thus, he was a leader during an unpopular war.

Those who had been duped by the patriotism remembered the hypocrisy and horrors of the war long after they had passed. General Cushing met with 300 men who had served under him for a welcome dinner. The surviving men were said to have “hissed” at General Cushing as a demonstration of their distaste for his leadership.544 Ulysses S. Grant wrote about the war after his presidency explaining “Even if the annexation itself could be justified, the manner in which the subsequent war was forced upon Mexico cannot.”545 In March 1848, a critic described the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as “negotiated by an unauthorized agent,

with an unacknowledged government, submitted by an accidental President, to a dissatisfied Senate,”546

One of the consequences of the Mexican-American War was the Civil War. The Whig Party would be dissolved by 1856. Most of its members would join the newly formed Republican Party who supported a platform to contain slavery. Just as John Slidell had gone on a diplomatic mission to get Mexico’s land, he would represent the Confederacy in an attempt to get France’s recognition. However, he was not successful.547 Although desertion continued in the Civil War; in 1861, the military outlawed the raw hide lashing that had angered Riley and others.548 Winfield Scott designed the “Anaconda Plan” that was the base plan for Union victory in the war. Unfortunately, Scott would not live to see the plan enacted.

The problems that limited this study were numerous. First, I had to take a monolanguage approach which prevented an examination of Mexican deserters’ words and words of Mexicans who interacted with US deserters. Future works should examine Mexico’s deserters and offer a comparison or account of their interaction with US deserters. Due to language constrains, the study of Mexican leaders’ interpretation and handling of US deserters was limited. I relied on the handbills translated to English, but a translation obfuscated the subtlety, essence, and usage of the language. As a result I was limited in my ability to ask questions about the lives of soldiers who stayed into Mexico because eye witness testimony would come from Mexico’s archives written in Spanish.

The questions about nationalism and how and why patriotism wears off are still relevant today. In 2006, the USA Today reported that “At least 8,000 members of the all-volunteer U.S. military have deserted since the Iraq war began…”549 Perhaps investigating how the dubious cases for war coupled with empty promises concerning costs and surprise extensions on tours of duty could shed light onto the cause of desertion and discontent. Hopefully, the experience of deserters in this study comfort those serving overseas today

because they are not the first people in a US military uniform to be disillusioned after encountering empty promises and dissolving patriotism.
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