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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin Dougherty. *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. xi + 207 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-968-2.

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Published on H-CivWar (February, 2008)

Learning about War in Mexico

The fact that most of the great generals in the Civil War on both sides apprenticed for high command in the U.S.-Mexican War is well known, but little written about. Kevin Dougherty has stepped into that gap with this admirable effort.

"The reach of the Mexican War experience into the Civil War is undeniably powerful" Dougherty writes (p. viii). However, he is aware that the "reach" is not necessarily easy to document. It is often difficult to prove that a tactic or characteristic of a commander in the Civil War tracks directly to his Mexican War experience, was intrinsic to his character to begin with, or was learned somewhere else.

Dougherty makes a pioneering effort to sort it out. Picking thirteen commanders each from the Union and Confederate sides, he attempts to tie their behavior in the Civil War directly to their Mexican War experience. In some cases the parallels and carry-overs are persuasive and apt, and in some cases they are themselves something of a "reach."

West Pointer after West Pointer flocked to the Mexican War when it broke out in 1846. Most were young subalterns then–some of them fresh out of the academy–and when they went to Mexico, they in effect went to postgraduate school in how to wage–or not wage–war on a large scale. Serving under two great mentors, Generals Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor, they saw how those two commanders engineered their long uninterrupted string of victories against much larger Mexican armies and strikingly adverse odds.

Dougherty notes that all of these young subalterns saw how it was done, what worked and did not work. Many carried what they saw and learned into the Civil War, for better or for worse, when they themselves were suddenly elevated to high command over armies of unprecedented size a decade and a half later. Some applied what they had learned successfully. Some did not. Some profited from their Mexican War experience. Some did not.

One of those who did, Ulysses S. Grant, believed perhaps the most important legacy of the Mexican War was what these officers-cum-generals learned about one another. He told the journalist John Russell Young years later, "The Mexican War made the officers of the old regular armies more or less acquainted, and when we knew the name of the general opposing we knew enough about him to make our plans accordingly. What determined my attack on [Fort] Donelson was as much the knowledge I had gained of its commanders in Mexico as anything else."[1]

But again some used what they knew about one another to their advantage in the Civil War, some did not. Those who did more often than not succeeded. Those who did not more often than not failed.

Among the commanders Dougherty showcases are four of the most famous–Union generals George B. McClellan and Ulysses S. Grant and Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson, all of whom distinguished themselves as subalterns in the Mexican War.

McClellan for a time commanded all of the Union armies. The most notable lesson he carried over from his Mexican War experience was a fondness for sieges, rooted in an admiration of the one Winfield Scott clamped on Vera Cruz prior to his march up the National Road to Mexico City. This fondness, coupled with a natural conservatism in battle, did not serve McClellan well. In his Peninsula Campaign in the Civil War in 1862 he mounted a month-long siege of Yorktown against inferior Confederate numbers when he should have boldly attacked.

What Lee, who served on Scott's staff with McClellan, brought to the Civil War from his Mexican War experience was entirely different. From Scott, Lee learned

the enormous value of intelligent reconnaissance and the dramatic effect of a well-executed swift-striking flanking movement. In his storied career in the Civil War, Lee banked heavily on thorough reconnaissance. And his flanking movement at Chancellorsville against the Union army of Joseph Hooker is a classic of its kind, as telling as Scott's at Cerro Gordo.

In Mexico, Ulysses S. Grant, as a regimental supply officer, learned how to supply armies and twin logistics with maneuver to striking effect. From Scott he learned to shake free of ponderous multi-wagon supply trains when necessary and supply his armies off the land instead. It was a strategy he practiced in his victories before Vicksburg and passed on to his lieutenant, William Tecumseh Sherman, who applied it in his famed march from Atlanta to the sea in the final year of the Civil War.

Dougherty argues that what Jackson learned in the Mexican War had to be unlearned in the Civil War. A heroic young gunnery officer, Jackson learned to use artillery as an attack weapon in Mexico. But in the face of the Civil War's more lethal weaponry, that no longer worked. By then artillery had become largely a defensive weapon. There were lessons Jackson, a quick study, learned in the Mexican War that Dougherty could have better used. Like Lee, Jackson learned the priceless value of a swift-striking flanking movement and applied that lesson brilliantly in his electric Shenandoah Valley campaign, and in commanding the great flanking movement under Lee at Chancellorsville.

Among the other Union commanders whom Dougherty cites as having learned lessons in Mexico–and makes a good case for–are Navy Admiral Samuel Du Pont, and generals William T. Sherman, John Pope, Gordon Meade, Joseph Hooker, Henry Halleck, Henry Hunt, and George Thomas.

Dupont, Dougherty argues, was among the sea captains who conducted a limited naval blockade of Mexican ports, which he carried over, expanded, and used to effect in the Union blockade of Southern ports in the Civil War.

Sherman learned during the Mexican War how much he did not know and acted on that lesson in the Civil War. He was stationed in California and saw no fighting in the Mexican War. Lacking seasoning by fire, he wisely, unlike many of his fellow officers, opted for a lower rank at the beginning of the Civil War, knowing he was not fully ready for higher command.

Pope in Mexico saw and rather admired the hard-handed policy toward civilians that Taylor's rather lax discipline permitted, and found to his grief that it did not work when he tried to apply it to Virginians in the Civil War. It turned out to be the wrong lesson learned.

Meade watched Zachary Taylor fail to follow up and destroy the enemy after his hard and exhausting victory at Monterey in the Mexican War and embraced the example after his own exhausting victory at Gettysburg in the Civil War. This outraged President Lincoln just as Taylor's pulling back had enraged President James Polk a decade and a half earlier.

Hooker learned military management in Mexico and used it to great effect to reorganize the Union armies before Chancellorsville in 1863. But at Chancellorsville his army fell victim to what Lee and Jackson remembered and Hooker forgot about swift flanking movements.

Halleck also mastered military management in the Mexican War, a talent he applied as chief of staff–with somewhat mixed results–in support of Lincoln and later Grant in the Civil War.

Hunt served an artillery apprenticeship in the Mexican War and parlayed a talent for commanding massed artillery to great effect in the Union Army of the Potomac in the Civil War.

Thomas learned stoicism under fire as "Old Reliable" in the Mexican War and parlayed it into fame as the "Rock of Chickamauga" in the Civil War. But whether this had to do with anything he learned, rather than who he was, is debatable. Thomas had also seen that Taylor, an otherwise successful general, left too much to chance. Thomas would leave nothing to chance in the Civil War (even though it earned him the nickname "Old Slow Trot").

In two other of Dougherty's Union examples, the parallels are less clear. He argues that Philip Kearney learned his fearless, reckless approach to war in Mexico. But it can be argued that reckless and fearless was simply Kearney's nature–he was born that way. Dougherty argues that Winfield Scott learned and waged outdated limited war in Mexico and wrong-headedly wanted to wage it again in the Civil War with his Anaconda Plan of surrounding and squeezing the Confederacy into submission. Scott was one of the most brilliant generals in American history. It could be argued that Mexico or no Mexico Scott would have arrived at that strategy. It was indeed a plan similar to his that in the end won the war for the Union.

Dougherty's Confederate cases are also a mixture of the persuasive and not so persuasive. James Longstreet endured a heavy dose of costly offensive warfare in Mexico, and was seriously wounded in the charge at Chapultepec. Dougherty argues that it turned him into a strong

advocate of defensive warfare in the Civil War, famously employing it at Fredericksburg and unsuccessfully urging it on Lee at Gettysburg.

George Pickett, leading charges alongside Longstreet in Mexico, brought to the Civil War just the opposite impulse. Unwounded at Chapultepec, he became, unlike his friend, enamored of the heroic charge in which he could plant the flag on enemy works. His fate at Gettysburg was to lead perhaps the most famously disastrous charge of the Civil War.

Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, a West Pointer, learned overconfidence in his own military ability as a colonel of Mississippi Rifles under Zachary Taylor in the Mexican War. It became a liability for the Confederacy in the Civil War. But whether it was something learned in Mexico, as Dougherty argues, or was just his nature, is arguable.

Braxton Bragg learned to be a strict disciplinarian in Mexico and found it did not work with the volunteer Confederate armies in the Civil War. So he became one of the most noted failures in the War of Brothers.

Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, unlike most who fought in Mexico, was not a fan of flanking movements, believing they worked in the Mexican War only because of an inept enemy. Instead he carried his deeply instilled preference for the traditional massed frontal attack into the Civil War.

John Pemberton, serving as an aide to General William Jenkins Worth in Mexico, a commander noted in part for his inflexibility, borrowed that trait in his defense of Vicksburg against Grant in the Civil War.Because of his inflexibility, Dougherty believes, Pemberton "failed to shift his main effort from defending Vicksburg to defeating Grant when the situation required" (p. 172).

A. P. Hill, hot-headed and flash-tempered, criticized his fellow officers unsparingly as a lieutenant in the Mexican War and did the same thing as a lieutenant general in the Civil War. But whether that was learned in Mexico or was just the way Hill was is also debatable.

Gideon Pillow, a political general in the Mexican War, learned nothing from it and carried his ignorance into the Civil War as a Confederate general with disastrous results. John Slidell endured failed diplomacy in Mexico, and endured it again as the Confederate envoy to France in the Civil War. Why Dougherty includes them in his study is somewhat puzzling. Pillow, it seems, had congenital military ineptness having nothing to do with Mexico, and Slidell faced two hopeless missions.

But these caveats do not downgrade Dougherty's accomplishment. He claims the book's aim is merely to argue the importance and usefulness of the Mexican War in understanding the Civil War and show that different men took different lessons from one war into the other. He has done that very nicely.

Note

[1]. John Russell Young, *Around the World with General Grant*, ed. Michael Fellman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 391.

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Citation: John C. Waugh. Review of Dougherty, Kevin, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14188

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