

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 242

Published on 24 September 2009

H-Diplo Article Review Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Jonathan Winkler

Irving W. Levinson. "A New Paradigm for an Old Conflict: The Mexico-United States War." *The Journal of Military History* 73 (April 2009): 393-416. DOI: 10.1353/jmh.0.0256.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jmh.0.0256> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR242.pdf>

Review by **Timothy J. Henderson**, Auburn University Montgomery

Those who have read Irving Levinson's book, *Wars Within War*, will find nothing new in this article.¹ The article merely rehearses the same arguments, albeit, of course, in abbreviated form. Those arguments are summarized neatly at the end of the article. Levinson maintains that historians have misunderstood the U.S.-Mexican War because they have failed to take into account the complexity of the Mexican situation, which entailed a "civil war between Mexicans" which, in turn, was instrumental in accounting for U.S. military success. The United States, Levinson contends, brought an end to the war by allying itself with liberals in the Mexican government who desired U.S. aid in putting down the many peasant and Indian uprisings that erupted throughout the country even as the United States and Mexico fought. Despite his claim that the U.S. military triumph was greatly helped along by dissension within Mexico, Levinson is fairly unstinting in his admiration for General Winfield Scott, whom he credits with coupling sound military judgments with a brilliant campaign to win 'hearts and minds.' This is not an original insight.

Levinson's topic is unquestionably an important one both from academic and practical perspectives. In the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War the United States found itself in a rather odd predicament, occupying a country over which it had won a decisive military victory, but which was yet far from pacified. There were many on the U.S. side who urged the incorporation of all of Mexico into the American union and believed that this outcome was ardently desired by most Mexican elites, who saw it as the best was to

¹ Irving Levinson, *Wars Within Wars: Mexican Guerrillas, National Elites and the United States of America, 1846-1848* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2005).

maintain “a decent order of things.”² (Among those who held this view was Nicholas P. Trist, who negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on behalf of the United States. Given the importance of U.S. strategizing to Levinson’s case, it is surprising that Levinson did not cite Trist’s correspondence with Secretary of State James Buchanan.) In the end, the United States opted for the wiser course of arming the Mexican government and withdrawing its forces. Undoubtedly, then, there are vital lessons to be learned from the U.S. management of the war’s aftermath.

It is for this reason that one wishes Levinson, instead of merely repeating arguments he made four years ago, had taken the opportunity to expand on those arguments and tease out interesting lessons. Although he occasionally makes passing reference to other historical situations (particularly Spanish resistance to Napoleon), this is a topic that cries out for a fully comparative approach. Comparisons with other cases of U.S. military occupation would have been especially helpful, for the U.S.-Mexican War was followed by a number of other instances where U.S. efforts to bring peace through alliances with collaborative elites were less successful (Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, South Vietnam, and Iraq come to mind). Granted, this is a tall order for a short article, but a serious comparative approach would surely have made the article more useful to readers of a journal like *Military History*.

Levinson does venture a bit into the realm of the hypothetical, arguing that the Mexicans might, given “sufficient provocation,” have tenaciously resisted the U.S. occupation. He makes much of the clash between U.S. and Mexican forces that took place a couple of weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at Santa Cruz de Rosales, Chihuahua. In that engagement, U.S. forces emerged victorious, but only after contending with fierce Mexican resistance. This battle, according to Levinson, “held dire strategic implications for the Americans,” apparently because Chihuahua had few resources and because the Americans had anticipated no serious resistance from that quarter. (412) Levinson then speculates that if what occurred at Santa Cruz de Rosales had become generalized throughout Mexico it would have “yielded a force of 33,274 [Mexican] volunteers.” (412) Since he does not explore what motivated the Chihuahuans to resist the Americans at Santa Cruz, and given the enormous regional diversity of Mexico, the point of this speculation is unclear. What precisely might have constituted “sufficient provocation”?

This is indicative of the article’s key weakness. To his credit, Levinson practices a difficult blend of social, political, and military history, but he is weakest on the “social,” even though that part of the equation is essential to his argument. He notes that “thirty-five separate peasant revolts occurred in various parts of Mexico during the period from 1846 to 1848,” but he does not so much as broach the question of what these rebellions were

² Nicholas P. Trist to James Buchanan, Oct. 25, 1847, in William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860*, Vol. VIII--Mexico, 1831-1848 (Mid-Year) (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1937): 958.

H-Diplo Article Review

about. (409) He does note that *earlier* peasant and Indians rebellions—those taking place during the quarter century before 1846—took place because the peasants were imperiled when Mexican elites “sought to convert [communal lands] from subsistence to market-oriented production.” (396) Once again, in view of the great regional diversity of Mexico and the tremendous complexity of economic processes during the time span in question, this seems vastly oversimplified.

Levinson has done historians a valuable service by highlighting Mexico’s internal dynamics as an explanation for the war’s outcome. The turmoil within Mexico is frequently overlooked by historians, especially by military historians, who see the war as a “conflict fought solely between two sovereign nations.” His book, for all its imperfections, made an important contribution to the debate. This article might prove somewhat useful to those who do not wish to read Levinson’s short book in its entirety, but it contributes nothing new.

Timothy J. Henderson is Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Auburn, Montgomery. He specializes in the history of Latin America, with particular emphasis on nineteenth and twentieth century Mexico and U.S.-Latin American relations. His books include *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927* (Duke, 1998); *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (co-edited with Gilbert M. Joseph, Duke, 2002); *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and its War with the United States* (Hill & Wang, 2007); and *The Mexican Wars for Independence* (Hill & Wang, 2009). He is currently working on a history of Mexican immigration to the United States, which will be published by Blackwell Publishers.

Copyright © 2009 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.