



This idealized painting by H. Charles McBarron shows the appearance of regular U.S. soldiers of the Mexican War, where many of the leaders of the later War Between the States first “saw the elephant,” i.e., experienced combat. In the foreground are an infantry officer and a mounted dragoon; behind them is a column of infantry. All are wearing campaign dress uniforms. Inset at lower left shows a pivotal character in America’s conquest of the west, the “Butcher of the Alamo,” Mexican leader Santa Anna, the man Americans loved to hate. Several times president of Mexico, and several times sent into exile, the controversial dictator was never actually a general, though often erroneously referred to as such.

THE 'RECONQUISTA'

MEXICO'S DREAM OF 'RETAKING' THE SOUTHWEST

BY JOHN TIFFANY

Some Mexicans and Mexican-Americans want to see California, New Mexico and other parts of the United States given to Mexico. They call it the "reconquista," Spanish for "reconquest," and they view the millions of Mexican illegal aliens entering this country as their army of invaders to achieve that takeover. To an extent, they also have actual armed soldiers of the Mexican army, along with mercenaries from North Korea, Russia and other communist or former communist lands, and have already fired upon American Border Patrol officers and terrorized American ranchers. Shockingly, certain politicians in America are willing to sell out to the Mexicans. Here we consider the background to this disturbing development.

Mexico, of course, was once a Spanish colony, the Aztecs and numerous other tribes in that region having been conquered by the Spaniards—or, in many cases, having willingly sworn allegiance to the Spanish king in order to free themselves from Aztec tyranny. (However, it may be noted that in the northern reaches—the so-called Interior Provinces—of what was once called "Mexico," the natives had never been subdued by any outsiders, including the Aztecs.) When a number of Mexicans, inspired by America's example, revolted against Spain, they set up an independent government and assumed theoretical rulership of a vast area, including what is now known as the Southwestern United States.

America subsequently obtained the Southwest in various ways—mostly by conquest in the Mexican (or Mexican American) War, partly by purchase (the Gadsden Purchase) and partly by agreement (the annexation of Texas, at the time an independent republic. It should also be mentioned that the bear flag of the Republic of California was raised by American settlers at Sonoma on June 14, 1846.) This prompts the question as to how Spain and then Mexico came to "own" what is now the American Southwest, which, of course, was never under the con-

trol of the Aztec nation.

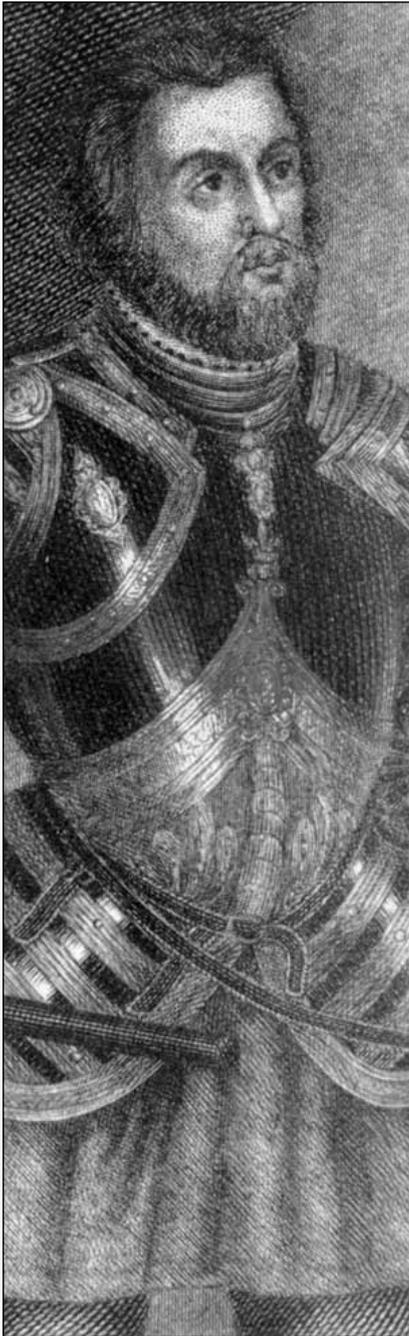
Mexico's claim to the Southwest stems from Pope Alexander VI's 15th-century Treaty of Tordesillas, which established a demarcation line to define the spheres of Spanish and Portuguese influence in the New World. The line ran due north and south through a point 300 miles west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands. All newly discovered lands lying east of this line supposedly belonged to Portugal, while all lands discovered to the west belonged to Spain. The people—Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts—living in these lands were not consulted. This treaty was modified in 1506 by a new demarcation line 1,110 miles west of the Azores. The new line ran longitudinally through the eastern hump of South America, and is the reason Brazilians speak Portuguese. This treaty gave Spain the controversial legitimacy to rule Mexico, and most of North and South America, beginning with Hernando Cortés's rape of the Aztec nation in 1521. Tordesillas allowed the Spanish and Portuguese to loot and enslave indigenous populations, in return for their promises to save the hemisphere's natives "for God." It was not realized at the time that Portugal would get a much smaller slice of the American pie than did Spain, since the Americas were still largely unexplored. While Spain wound up with a claim to the

Aztec and Inca empires, rich in gold and silver, Portugal got nothing more than some tropical rain forest with scattered primitive tribes.

Britain and various other countries, including Catholic France, were not happy about the pope's decision to divide the New World between Spain and Portugal and did not consider the treaty to have any legal value whatsoever. Even Portugal seems to have been dissatisfied, since it proceeded to carve out a much larger Brazil than the eastern Brazil it would have been entitled to under the treaty. Since the United States inherited its claim to the western lands from Britain, the Treaty of Tordesillas is logically a nullity as far as the U.S. government is (or should be) concerned. It should perhaps be noted that U.S. claims to the west really go as far back as colonial days, since many of the British colonial charters purported to grant to the colonies lands in America stretching all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1767, Russia had already taken over Alaska and was looking at lands to the south of it. King Carlos III of Spain became concerned about Russian intentions regarding California and decreed a program to build a series of forts or missions throughout California to ensure Spanish control of that land. The Spanish government forced the aboriginal Ameri-

HERNÁNDO CORTÉS: LIBERATOR?



Hernando Cortés is remembered for his conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521. Most Mexican tribes supported him as their liberator against the hated, cannibalistic, human-sacrificing Aztecs. Ironically, Mexico adopted Aztec symbology in its flag when it achieved independence from Spain, and those who wish to “take back” the American Southwest also use Aztec regalia.

can (so-called “Indian”) populations to build a series of 21 forts/missions for settler protection and agriculture. These missions were built between 1769 and 1823. Because of a series of revolutions that swept the Spanish empire in 1810, cash-starved Spain stopped salary payments to its civil servants throughout the Americas, and these colonists were left to their own devices. It is noteworthy that in 1810, there were less than 1,000 Spaniards throughout the entire American Southwest, some 500,000 square miles of wilderness, controlled only by the native Indians.¹

At one point the civilized Indian tribes of New Mexico, known as “Pueblo” Indians, who had been conquered by the Spanish, revolted and succeeded in driving the Spanish out of their lands. The Spanish government, however, mounted a “reconquista” to again subject this territory to their control, the first *reconquista* in American history. (An earlier *reconquista* found in the history books refers to the taking back of Spain itself from the Moors by the Christians, but of course that has little to do with our subject matter here.)

It took a combination of Criollos (ethnic Spaniards born in the New World), Indians associated with them and Mestizos (racially mixed people) to defeat Imperial Spain; but by 1821, after 38 years of struggle, they triumphed, and modern Mexico was born. However, the defeat of Spain changed little in what would someday be the Southwest United States. The vast wilderness, which was then northern Mexico, continued to be virtually ignored by a slumbering and distracted Mexican central government. From the time of Spain’s defeat by Mexico in 1821, through 1848, the year the Mexican-American War ended, Mexico endured 50 military plots, 22 governments, five constitutional conventions, three constitutions and 10 of the 11 different terms of leadership under that megalomaniacal president and military leader (he was never actually a general), Antonio López de Santa Anna Pérez de Lebrón, of Alamo notoriety.

Beginning with Texas in 1845, which became a sovereign country in 1836, and California, Nevada, Utah and parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Wyoming (all of which Mexico ceded to the United States in 1848), American settlers outnumbered Mexicans by at least five to one in all eight states except in Texas, where Americans outnumbered Mexicans 10 to one. One thing these settlers wanted was stable, representative government,

something Mexico had been unable to provide. They also wanted to have a government that spoke their own language and shared their culture. And so had begun the inevitable movement for independence from Mexico among American settlers. This led to the Battle of the Alamo and the Texan War for Independence, resulting in a sovereign nation of Texas. After nine years of this, Texas, by mutual consent, was annexed to the United States.

There can be little doubt that President Polk engineered the 1846-1848 war with Mexico in order to bring California and the other Southwestern states into the union. War was declared on May 13, 1846, based on the problems along the disputed Texas-Mexico border. Still, there is little question but that Mexico would have been unable to indefinitely hold on to her pre-1846 American territories even had the Mexican-U.S. War not taken place. Sooner or later, all seven of the other states would have followed Texas’s lead (as California was doing) and brought about similar results.

The Mexican War receives little attention in America’s classrooms, although its effects were far-reaching. David Saville Muzzey’s popular 1911 text *American History* explained the war to schoolchildren of the early 20th century, told why the United States seized California in 1846 and how the U.S. government ended the Texas-Mexico border dispute. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the war, was signed in February 1848. (“Guadalupe Hidalgo” is the former name of a town in Mexico, 2 1/2 miles north of Mexico City. It was to this town that the government of Mexico had fled as American troops took the capital city. Guadalupe Hidalgo was named partly for Our Lady of Guadalupe and partly for Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the well known Mexican priest and revolutionary.)

According to Muzzey, the annexation of Texas was a perfectly fair transaction. For nine years, since the victory of San Jacinto in 1836, Texas had been an independent republic, whose military reconquest Mexico had not the slightest chance of effecting. In fact, at the very moment of annexation, the Mexican government, at the suggestion of England, had agreed to recognize the independence of Texas, on condition that the republic should not join itself to the United States. The United States was not taking Mexican territory, then, in annexing Texas.

The new state had come into the union claiming the Rio Grande as her southern

and western boundary. By the terms of annexation, all boundary disputes with Mexico were referred by Texas to the government of the United States. President Polk sent John Slidell of Louisiana to Mexico in the autumn of 1845 to adjust any differences over the Texan claims. But though Slidell labored for months to get a hearing, two successive presidents of revolution-torn Mexico refused to recognize him, and he was dismissed from the country in August 1846.

The massing of Mexican troops on the southern bank of the Rio Grande, coupled with the refusal of the Mexican government to receive Slidell, led President Polk to order Gen. Zachary Taylor to move to the borders. Taylor marched to the Rio Grande and fortified a position on the northern bank. The Mexican and the American troops were thus facing each other across the river. When Taylor refused to retreat to the Nueces, the Mexican commander crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed a scouting force of Americans (April 1846). When the news of the attack reached Washington early in May, Polk sent a special message to Congress, concluding with these words:

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. . . . But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States [the Rio Grande], has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced and that the two nations are at war. As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights and the interests of our country.

The House and Senate, by very large majorities (174 to 14, and 40 to two), voted 50,000 men and \$10 million for the prosecution of the war. Meanwhile, Gen. Taylor had driven the Mexicans back to the south bank of the Rio Grande in the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. Six days after the vote of Congress sanctioning the war, he crossed the Rio Grande and occupied the Mexican frontier town of Matamoros, whence he proceeded during the summer and autumn of 1846 to capture the capitals of three Mexican provinces.

As soon as hostilities began, Commodore John Drake Sloat, in command of the



Map of the North American continent, circa 1820. In 1821 Mexico achieved independence from Spain. Note the undefined boundary between the United States and British Canada in the far west. The entire Southwest, including Texas, is shown as part of Mexico: California ("New California") and the Internal Provinces. The U.S. now owns California and most of the Internal Provinces. But many Mexicans and Chicanos want to separate these lands from the United States and either make them part of Mexico again or to set up a new nation consisting of northern Mexico and the "reconquered" Southwest.

U.S. squadron in the Pacific, was ordered to seize California, and Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny was sent to invade New Mexico. The occupation of California was practically undisputed. Mexico had only the faintest shadow of authority in the province, and the 6,000 white inhabitants made no objection to seeing the flag of the United States raised over their forts. Kearny started with 1,800 men from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in June, and on August 18 defeated the force of 4,000 Mexicans and Indians which disputed his occupation of Santa Fé. After garrisoning this important post he detached Col. Doliphan with 850 men to march through the northern provinces of Mexico and effect a juncture with Gen. Taylor at Monterey, while he himself with only 100 men continued his long journey of 1,500 miles to San Diego, California, where he joined Sloat's successor, Stockton.

After these decided victories and unin-

terrupted marches of Taylor, Kearny, Sloat, Stockton and Doniphan, the Mexican government was offered a fair chance to treat for peace, which it refused. Then President Polk decided, with the unanimous consent of his cabinet, to strike at the heart of Mexico. Gen. Winfield Scott, a hero of the War of 1812, was put in command of an army of about 12,000 men, to land at Vera Cruz and fight his way up the mountains to the capital city of Mexico. Santa Anna, who, by the rapid shift of revolutions, was again dictator in Mexico, heard of this plan to attack the capital and hastened north with 20,000 troops to surprise and destroy Taylor's army before Scott should have time to take Vera Cruz. But Taylor, with an army one-fourth the size of Santa Anna's, drove the Mexicans back in the hotly contested Battle of Buena Vista (Feb. 23, 1847), securing the Californian and New Mexican conquests. Santa Anna hastened southward to the

defense of Mexico City.

Scott took Vera Cruz in March and worked his way slowly but surely, against forces always superior to his own, up to the very gates of Mexico City by August 1847. Here he paused, by the president's orders, to allow the Mexicans another chance to accept the terms of peace the United States offered: the cession by Mexico of New Mexico and California in return for a large payment of money. The Mexican commissioners, however, insisted on having both banks of the Rio Grande and all of California up to the neighborhood of San Francisco, besides receiving damages for injuries inflicted by the American troops in their invasions. These claims were preposterous, coming from a conquered country, and there was nothing left for Scott to do but to resume military operations.

Santa Anna defended the capital with a force of 30,000 men, but the Mexicans proved no match for the American soldiers. Scott stormed the fortified hill of Chapultepec and advanced to the gates of the city. On September 13 his troops entered the Mexican capital and raised the Stars and Stripes over "the palace of the Montezumas."

From the beginning of the war Polk had been negotiating for peace. He had kept Slidell in Mexico long after the opening of hostilities and had sent Nicholas Trist as special peace commissioner to join Scott's army at Vera Cruz and to offer Mexico terms of peace at the earliest possible moment. He had allowed Santa Anna to return to Mexico from his exile in Cuba in the summer of 1846, because the wily and treacherous dictator held out false promises of effecting a reconciliation between Mexico and the United States. He had asked Congress for an appropriation of \$2 million for peace negotiations when Gen. Taylor was still near the Rio Grande, 10 days before Gen. Kearny had taken Santa Fé and the province of New Mexico, and before Gen. Scott's campaign had been thought of.

When the Mexican commissioners made advances for peace at the beginning of the year 1848, they were given terms almost as liberal as those offered them before Scott had stormed and occupied their capital. By the treaty concluded at Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico was required to cede its claim to California and New Mexico, as well as lands in between them and to the north, to the United States and to recognize the Rio Grande as the southern and western boundary of Texas. In



Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott in dress uniform during the Civil War. He was then over 80 years old and had been a general for 50 years. Scott was responsible for the defeat of Mexico.

return, the United States paid Mexico a gratuitous \$15 million cash and assumed some \$3,250,000 more in claims of American citizens on the Mexican government. Mexico was in debt to the Rothschild bankers at this time, and apparently most of the cash went to them. Considering the facts that California was scarcely under Mexican control at all and might have been taken at any moment by Great Britain, France or Russia; that New Mexico was still the almost undisturbed home of Indian tribes; that the land from the Nueces to the Rio Grande was almost a desert; that the American troops were in possession of the Mexican capital; and that the United States did not have to give a dollar to Mexico, the terms offered Mexico were extremely generous.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was ratified by the U.S. Senate on March 10, 1848. The last U.S. soldier had departed from Mexico by July 31. Polk was urged by many to annex the whole country of Mexico to the United States, but he wisely refused to consider such a proposal.

Mexicans were subsequently to note with pleasure that bad luck had followed upon imperialism, since the acquisitions of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by upsetting the balance between the "slave" states and the "free" states, precipitated, 13 years later, the American War Between the States or "Civil War."

Mexico had ceded Texas, California and the vast expanse of territory in between them, amounting to more than half the land area of the republic, adding half a million square miles of territory to the United States. Mexico's then-president, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, expressed, with the treaty, this hope:

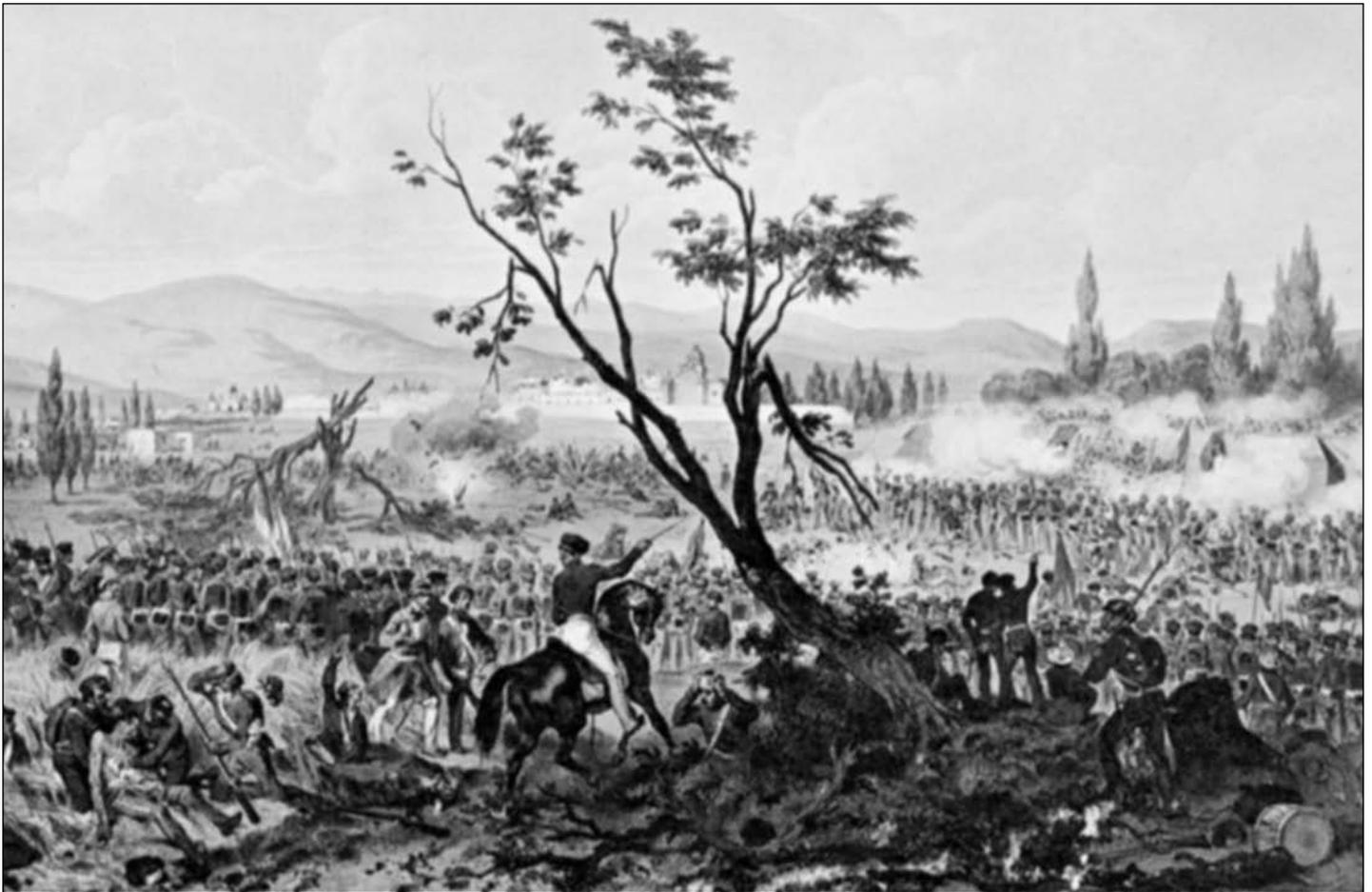
I desire nothing more ardently than that our treaty may prove the immutable basis of that constant harmony and good understanding that should prevail sincerely between two republics.

But the United States was not quite done acquiring land from Mexico. The Gadsden Purchase, one of the most curious real estate deals in which Uncle Sam has ever taken part, remained.

James Gadsden (1788-1858), whose name the purchase bears, was a grandson of Christopher Gadsden (1724-1805), a South Carolina Revolutionary soldier and statesman. James Gadsden soldiered for several years under Gen. Andrew Jackson, and it was he who seized the papers that led to the trial and execution of two British subjects in Spanish Florida in 1818, an incident that strained British-American diplomatic relations almost to the breaking point.

Gadsden was appointed by President Monroe as the commissioner in charge of placing the Seminole Indians on reservations. While living as a painter in Florida, he championed nullification and lost the patronage of President Jackson. He had long been interested in promoting railroads and upon his return to South Carolina in 1839 was chosen president of the South Carolina Railroad Company. His pet dream was to knit all railroads in Dixie into one system and then to connect it with a southern transcontinental railroad to the Pacific, to make the west commercially dependent on the southeast instead of the northeast.

After engineers advised Gadsden that the most direct and practicable route for the southern transcontinental railroad would be partially south of the U.S. boundary, he made plans to have the federal government acquire title to the necessary territory from Mexico. Through his friend



The Battle of Churubusco, as painted by Carl Nebel. It was after this battle that Gen. Scott sent a message to Gen. Santa Anna, saying that “too much blood has been shed in this unnatural war between the great republics of this continent.” A short armistice, however, only provided time for the Mexicans to pull their forces together to defend their capital.

and fellow empire dreamer, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis (later to be president of the Confederacy), Gadsden was appointed U.S. minister to Mexico by President Franklin Pierce with instructions to buy from Mexico enough territory to complete a railroad to California.

The territory desired by Gadsden and his group was then a sort of no-man’s-land, experiencing frequent Indian raids. The United States wanted to make certain boundary adjustments; Mexico needed money and wanted a settlement of her Indian claims against the United States; and Gadsden and his friends wanted a route for their railroad.

In 1852 Gadsden agreed to pay Mexico \$10 million for a strip of territory south of the Gila River, incorporating the Mesilla Valley and lying in what is now southwestern New Mexico and southern Arizona. (It is not known how the money was divided among the Mexican politicians.) The agreement was not ratified by the U.S. Senate until 1854.²

In return, the claims of Mexico for damages caused by marauding Indians

from north of the border, amounting to several million dollars, were abrogated. The Gadsden Purchase territory was an area of 45,535 square miles, almost as large as Pennsylvania. Naturally, the “reconquistadors” want to gain, for free, title to the Gadsden Purchase along with the lands conquered from Mexico, as well as the territory of Texas. ❖

FOOTNOTES

¹U.S. census of 1850.

²Some sources (such as the *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia*) claim that Santa Anna played a major role in the negotiations for the Gadsden Purchase. One source even went so far as to assert that the purchase being highly unpopular in Mexico, Santa Anna’s role caused him to lose even more of his then-dwindling popularity and finally to be forced from office and into exile again. However, this appears to be impossible. Santa Anna, who was kicked out of Mexico several times, went into exile in 1848 after losing the Mexican War. Not until 1853 was he recalled again, and named “president for life,” with the title of “Serene Highness,” according to the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Thus, since the purchase came

about in 1852, it seems unlikely Santa Anna could have been one of the negotiators.

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