

Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience

Richard Bruce Winders

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Winders, Richard Bruce (2008) "Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience," *Civil War Book Review*.
Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/10>

Review

Winders, Richard Bruce

Winter 2008

Dougherty, Kevin *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience*. University Press of Mississippi, \$50.00 hardcover ISBN 9781578069682

The Proving Ground for Civil War Leaders

Historians have wondered what effect the Mexican War may have had on participants who later went on to lead the great armies of the Civil War. Kevin Dougherty¹⁹⁸³ West Point graduate, former army officer, and history instructor at the University of Southern Mississippi^{is} the first author to explore the connection in a book length treatment. He has produced a volume that some will find superficial and others will find groundbreaking. In a sense, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience* is both.

The superficial characterization stems from the fact that the bulk of Dougherty's research comes from his mining secondary sources for accounts of Civil War generals' service in Mexico. These accounts were paired with events from the Civil War to demonstrate the existence of a connection with their respective past experiences in Mexico. These vignettes, presented as brief, concise nuggets of data that read like military briefing documents, comprise the body of the book. Readers new to Civil War literature will find the information new and exciting. More experienced readers will not, as they likely will be familiar with these accounts from having read the biographies from which the information came.

It is clear that the author has a firm grasp on the principles of military history. It is not as clear, though, that he possesses a deep knowledge of the Mexican War. Like many historians, it appears that Dougherty does not view the Mexican War as an event on par with the Civil War. To him, the title of Alfred Bill's 1969 book, *Rehearsal for Conflict*, is an apt description instead of a worn cliché. A review of the book's bibliography reveals that only a small number of the works actually pertain directly to the Mexican War; moreover, many of those cited are dated and some are even web sites. In a book that proposes to compare

two topics, it would be expected the author would have equal mastery of each and be aware of the current literature related to both fields. Although Dougherty bears the ultimate responsibility for this shortcoming, the manuscript's readers and the press should have raised this issue with him while the book was still in preparation. It goes right to the heart of the work's superficial nature.

How can such a work, if it contains flaws such as the ones stated, be groundbreaking? Dougherty took on the topic that others have neglected and attempted to document a tangible connection between Civil War leadership and Mexican War experience. He focused predominantly on Civil War generals who had served in Mexico. He identified who each officer served under in Mexico and looked for some observable behavior that was repeated during the Civil War. Although an anecdotal approach, Dougherty makes a case that there appears to be an identifiable connection between one's participation in the Mexican War and his wartime performance years later.

The generals analyzed include names that should be familiar: (Union) Jefferson Davis, Samuel Du Pont, Ulysses S. Grant, Henry Halleck, Joseph Hooker, Henry Hunt, Philip Kearney, George B. McClellan, Gorge G. Meade, John Pope, Winfield Scott, William T. Sherman, and George Thomas; (Confederate) Lewis Armistead, P. T. G. Beauregard, Braxton Bragg, Jefferson Davis, A. P. Hill, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, James Longstreet, John C. Pemberton, George Pickett, Gideon Pillow, John Slidell, and John Winder. The author includes two appendices, one listing all Union generals who had Mexican War experience and one listing all Confederate generals who had the same.

A few examples will serve to sum up the type of observation Dougherty makes relating to Mexican War experience and Civil War leadership. Grant's service as regimental quartermaster taught him the values of logistics. Lee, whose reconnaissance allowed Scott to turn Santa Anna's flank at Cerro Gordo, later tried the same strategy at places like Chancellorsville. McClellan's Peninsula Campaign had its origins in his admiration of Scott's capture of Vera Cruz. Kearney's impetuous nature, which cost him his arm in Mexico, cost him his life in Virginia. The Union's Jefferson Davis, who shot his superior dead on the stairs of a Louisville hotel, had witnessed a less bloody but equally insubordinate act in Mexico. The Confederacy's Jefferson Davis gained an unfounded sense of military expertise from his regiment's stand at Buena Vista that caused him to mismanage the South's war effort. While these and other assertions are not necessarily new, it is illustrative to have them presented

together in one volume.

The true value of Dougherty's work may become more apparent in the future. He has established a baseline on which others will certainly wish to build. He has brought the question of a link between the Mexican War and Civil War leadership to the surface. His answer is intriguing but still leaves room for others to investigate.

Richard Bruce Winders is a historian and curator at The Alamo.