

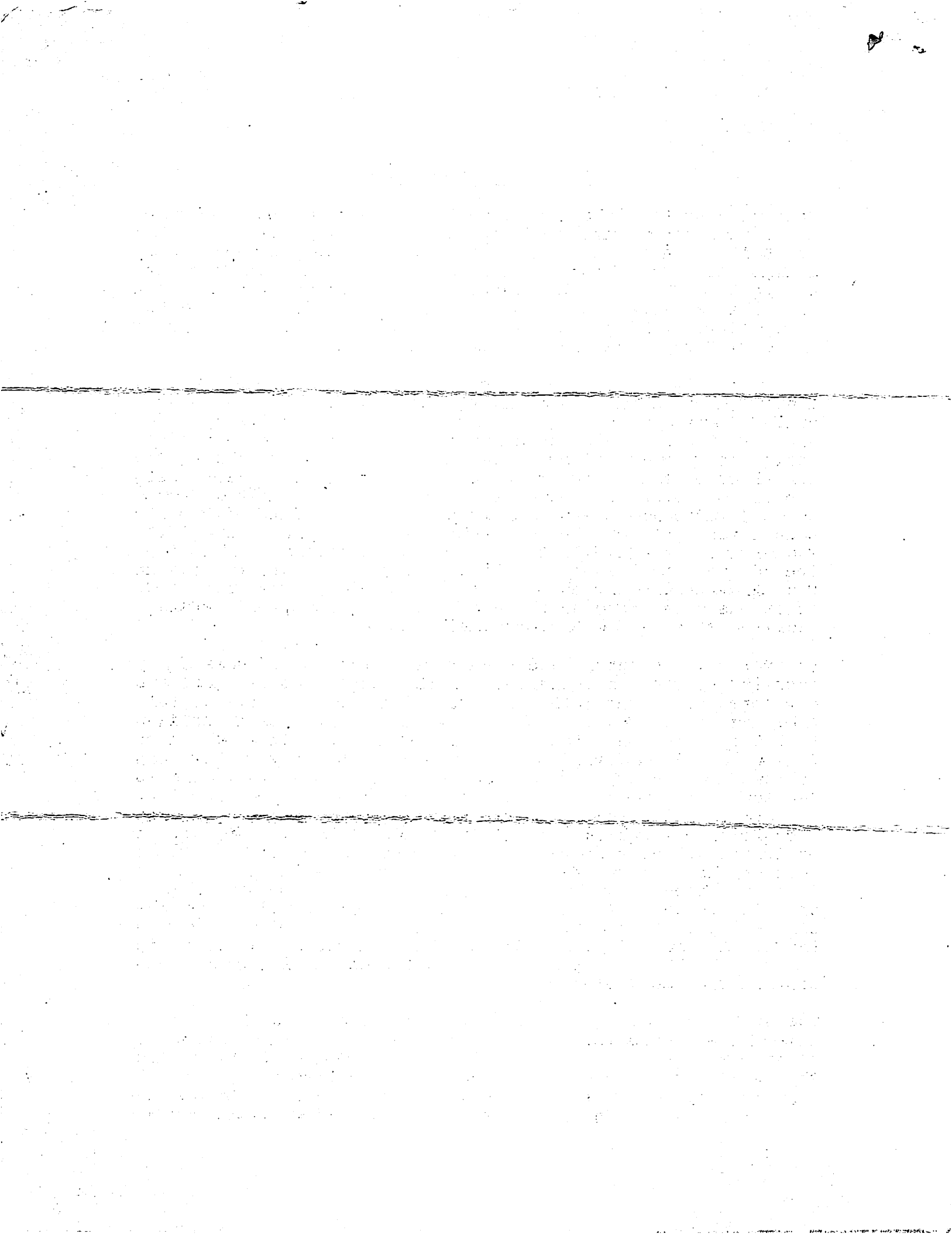
THE BATTLE OF PALO ALTO

Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site is the location of the first major encounter of the War of 1846 between Mexico and the United States. Though several acts of war between the two antagonists preceded the battle, the clash of troops at Palo Alto was part of 40 days of campaigning that ultimately led to American victories at Resaca de Guerrero and Buena Vista and to the occupation of Matamoros. Furthermore, the American victories convinced European nations to stay out of the war.

Although militarily indecisive, the Battle of Palo Alto bears historical and national significance for both countries. For the United States, the battle, in its broadest historical perspective, signaled the beginning of a war that would serve expansionist goals. As a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), the United States became sovereign over a large area of land, with exploitable economic resources stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, and over the people that resided within its boundaries. The end of the Mexican war also opened the American Southwest and the Pacific Coast to American settlement and in time led to the establishment of five states. Moreover, the Mexican Cession reopened the question of slavery in the territories, made relations worse between the North and the South, and eventually became a cause for the American Civil War.

For Mexico, the battle and the war meant the loss of sovereignty over its northern frontier, which its people had settled and developed since the 16th century. With the reversals at Palo Alto, Resaca de Guerrero, and Buena Vista, the Mexicans realized that they faced invasion of their fatherland on three different fronts: The first invasion, led by General Zachary Taylor, was followed by another, commanded by General Stephan Watts Kearney to New Mexico and California. Finally a major sea expedition left the United States under General Winfield Scott bound for Veracruz and ultimately overland to Mexico City. Reluctantly Mexican officials acknowledged defeat and negotiated for peace. For the rest of the century, Mexico struggled to regain its balance despite a second foreign invasion by France. By the Beginning of the 20th century, Mexico had begun to free itself from the consternation of the 19th century and the trauma of the war with the United States; however, the experience of the 19th century, in particular the War of 1846, has influenced Mexico's attitude toward the United States.

The Battle of Palo Alto was also consequential to the lives of many of the combatants. The excitement of victory brought fame to Zachary Taylor, who after the war became president of the United States. Although General Mariano Arista underwent a period of unpopularity as a result of his military reversals following the Battle of Palo Alto, he was eventually vindicated and later became



president of the Mexican Republic. The experiences that Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant gained at Palo Alto and subsequent battles guided him through the Civil War and eventually to the White House. Both armies produced a professional corps of officers which would participate in the leadership of their respective countries. In fact, the accomplishments of the graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point proved the value of academically trained soldiers and assured the academy's continued funding.

Furthermore, the Battle of Palo Alto resulted in a major contribution to the art of American warfare. Although the use of artillery as offensive weaponry was known to European tacticians, its utilization as such at Palo Alto appears to have been the first time it was tried by Americans. Prior to the Battle of Palo Alto, American military success on the battlefield depended on large numbers of cavalry and infantry maneuvers. However, at Palo Alto, General Taylor inadvertently discovered the advantages of using light and heavy artillery, and despite the temptation to order a bayonet charge across the battlefield, he allowed his artillery officers and "flying artillery" to carry the day. In addition, the effectiveness of the American use of explosive shells contrasted greatly with the Mexican solid shot.

Also of significance to the battle and the war was the role of developing technologies. The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma were the first military engagements to be reported by telegraph. During the Mexican War, the military used the telegraph for communications with Washington, and for the first time railroads and steamboats were extensively utilized for transportation of troops and war supplies. Also, U.S. Army surgeons introduced ether as an anesthetic, and combat photography made its advent. Samuel Colt's new revolver proved of value to the officers of the Mexican War and resulted in a War Department contract to Colt for additional revolvers. Because of the American occupation of Matamoros, a new city, Brownsville, developed as an important military and economic center.

For both nations, then, the events leading to the Battle of Palo Alto and the results of the War of 1846 shaped the beginning of an international relationship that would be marked by a certain mistrust and misunderstanding of one another. However, the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site represents more than a commemoration of a historic moment. It is at once, a point of departure and a point of arrival. As a point of departure, the Battle of Palo Alto represents a rupture of relationships between two neighboring countries that has not yet healed. As a point of arrival, the commemoration of the Battle of Palo Alto serves as a reminder that peace, unity, and brotherhood, not war, is the heritage for which the Americas must strive.