

Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War. By Michael Scott Van Wagenen. Public History in Historical Perspective. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. 329 pp. \$28.95.

The U.S.-Mexican War officially ended on February 2, 1848, when the two countries signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—a document that largely favored the United States. In the spoils of victory the U.S. received approximately half of Mexico's territory, an amount equal to over half a million square miles. The war and its implications drastically influenced the future of both nations. While it is still considered one of the most pivotal historic events in Mexican history, it remains one of the most overlooked episodes in the history of the United States. In *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War*, Michael Scott Van Wagenen evaluates how each country integrated the war into their collective memories. Drawing on newspapers, monographs, material culture, monuments, and oral histories, he assesses how and why the remembrance of this particular event has been altered throughout the one hundred and sixty years that have elapsed since its conclusion. Van Wagenen argues that economic, political, and social motives formed the memory of the war, so the way different generations interpreted it mostly depended on contemporary issues.

The book centers on the concept of collective memory. That is, a combination of individual, group, and public memories that societies utilize to manipulate the past “with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind,” often recalling an event in whatever way compliments current issues (Van Wagenen, 4). The U.S. and Mexico integrated the war into their collective memories in drastically different ways. The most distinct difference is noticeable in the funding of projects concerning its remembrance. In Mexico, there are multiple state-sponsored historic sites, statues, and memorials commemorating the event and the sacrifices made by its participants in ways that largely promote patriotism. Even the country's national anthem includes references to the incident, demonstrating its importance to the nation. Political movements utilized the war as a means to unite the country's citizens and promote nationalism, especially during governmental transitions.

Contrastingly, there is only one national historic site associated with the war in the United States, the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Park, which was not even declared a national landmark until over a century after the battle. The U.S. left the remainder of the war's memorialization up to private groups and individuals. In some ways, the government's lack of initiative in incorporating the war into the country's memory resulted in it being used for more diverse reasons. The memory of the war ranged from the economic gain associated with films and advertising to providing a foundation in the movement for minority rights.

One of the book's main strengths lies in its organization. The chapters are chronological and switch between the perspective of the U.S. and Mexico, showcasing how each nation remembered the war during the specified years. The clear distinctions between periods and viewpoints are particularly helpful considering how often and drastically shifts in memory occurred. The organization also gives readers a great sense of context, with Van Wagenen successfully describing how contemporary issues either overshadowed or amplified the war's memory. For example, the timing of the confrontation played an important role in how it would come to be remembered overall, especially within the first twenty-five years of its aftermath. Since it occurred a mere thirteen years before the Civil War, it is often overlooked in U.S. history and mostly referred to as the battleground where future Civil War military leaders gained their combat experience, with little respect paid to the details. In Mexico, the war took place during a

time of political chaos and paved the way for even more. The political and economic destruction caused by the conflict directly resulted in a totalitarian regime and eventually all-out civil war. This sort of context greatly aids in the explanation of why the U.S.-Mexican War remains so deeply ingrained in the memory of Mexico and overwhelmingly ignored in the United States.

This study is an important contribution to the historiography of the remembrance of the U.S.-Mexican War. Although others have explored the formation of the collective memory of the conflict in the past, *Remembering the Forgotten War* remains the only scholarly work on the subject that evaluates the entire period of time that has elapsed since the war's end. Its comparative approach takes a transnational perspective, which is also distinctive, as the majority of other memory studies about the conflict focus on a single nation. Van Wagenen's method combines these unilateral perspectives through the creation of a comprehensive volume that expands upon such works, including: Robert W. Johannsen's *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in American Imagination* and Jaime Javier Rodríguez's *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War: Narrative, Time, and Identity*.

Like all publications, the book also has its weaknesses. Van Wagenen uses several examples to demonstrate how both countries have remembered the war, from state-constructed memorials to films. While the amount of detail and number of cases speaks to how well-researched the book is, it becomes fairly overwhelming at times. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that every example cited actually had an impact on the way citizens of each country viewed the war. This is especially applicable on the American side since nearly all projects dealing with the war's memory were privately funded and sponsored. Despite these minor criticisms, *Remembering the Forgotten War* provides readers with a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the transformation of collective memories associated with the U.S.-Mexican War. It will enhance perspectives about modern relations between the two countries for a broad audience, appealing to both academics and the general public.

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