Conquering California

How America Took California From Mexico

Tippy Gnu
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Books by Tippy Gnu
INTRODUCTION

“When America sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems. They’re bringing guns. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some of them, I assume, are good people.”

~ Mexican El Presidente Don Juan Trompeta, 1845.

Okay, maybe there really wasn’t a Don Juan Trompeta. But if there had been, I’m sure he would have said something like that, about Mexico’s illegal immigration problem.

It happened during the first half of the 19th century. Illegal immigrants from America were pouring into Mexico.

At first Mexico welcomed us with open arms. They made it easy for us to become Mexican citizens. And they allowed us to work, and buy land, and participate in the growing economy.

How did we thank this country? In Texas we banded together and rebelled. And in 1836, we took Texas away from Mexico and made it an independent republic.

Mexico sensed that California was next, and began clamping down on illegal immigration. This is a story about how that worked out for Mexico. It’s a tale about how a ragtag band of illegal immigrants from the United States took up arms against their host.

It won’t be a pretty story. Because what you read here won’t bear much resemblance to what you may have read in public school history books, that tend to glorify our country and gloss over our atrocities and bumbling. But it’s a true tale, with all the ugliness and glory combined. The true tale you never read in public school.

This is how the West was really won. This is the true story about illegal immigrants from America, and the conquering of California.
PART 1:

THE

BEAR

FLAG

REVOLT
Chapter 1

ALTA CALIFORNIA

The Bear Flag Revolt roared through California in 1846. But to understand why all those Bears were so revolting, it helps to go back to when the Mexicans were revolting. That began in the year 1810.

They fought for 11 bloody years against Spain, and in 1821, finally won their independence. Mexico became a brand new country, stretching from the current Oregon border, all the way south to Central America.

That’s a mighty long spread. It’s about 2,700 miles, as the buzzard flies.

Their most northern territory was Alta California. “Alta”, by the way, means “Upper”. There was also a Baja California, and “Baja” means “Lower”. The separation point between the two Californias was right around where it’s at today, at the current international boundary, between San Diego and Tijuana.

At that time, Alta California covered a huge-assed amount of territory. It consisted of what are now the states of California, Nevada, Utah, much of Arizona, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. Yeah, it was even bigger than Texas. So take that, Texas.

But most of this humongous territory was unoccupied, except by Native Americans. The Mexican inhabitants were known as Californios. And almost all the Californios lived west of the Sierra Nevadas and Colorado River, in what is now the state of California.

Did Mexico appreciate owning this vast amount of real estate? Not hardly. Mexico’s capitol, Mexico City, was over 1,800 miles away from Alta California’s traditional capitol of Monterey. And the Mexican government was bogged down in all kinds of political intrigue. They didn’t have the time, attention span, or political will to bother themselves much with their faraway land up north.

Alta California was like a latchkey kid that had to fend for itself and survive independently, the best it could. This allowed it to evolve into a semi-autonomous region, where local rule prevailed over federal rule. Californios became frustrated with Mexico City. They even debated as to
whether they should remain with Mexico, seek independence, or allow Great Britain, France, or the United States to annex them.

Oh sure, sometimes the politicians down south would pay token attention to their lonely child up north. Like a parent who hollers from another room, the central government in Mexico City would issue edicts to Alta California. And like a passive-aggressive child who hollers back reassurances of cooperation, these edicts were acknowledged by Californios and supported with public proclamations.

But they only enforced the edicts they liked.

Finally, in 1842, the central government decided that Alta California was becoming too upstart and independent. So they appointed a tin god named Manuel Micheltorena to be the new governor. And they recruited a small army of thugs to go up there with him, and show those recalcitrant Californios a thing or two.

This army consisted of men who’d been convicted of crimes and given a choice of going to jail, or going up north to help the new governor. They were derisively referred to as “cholos”.

The cholos enabled Micheltorena to travel to Alta California with all the swagger and pride of a gangster. When he arrived and assumed the governorship, the only pay he gave the cholos was what they could rob from the citizens.

And so a reign of terror descended upon the Californios, as the cholos raped and pillaged and ravaged the countryside, all under the approval and supervision of the new governor.

By 1845, the Californios had enough. They formed a militia and fought back, and in the Battle of Providencia, forced Micheltorena and his thugs to flee back to Mexico City.

The victorious militia decided they weren’t going to accept anymore governors appointed by Mexico City. Instead, they replaced Micheltorena with two Californio governors they appointed themselves.

Pio Pico was to govern southern Alta California. He made his capitol The Town of Our Lady the Queen of Angels of the Porciuncula River. And if that sounds like a mouthful to you, then just call it Los Angeles. Or, even better, call it L.A.
Commandante General Jose Castro was to govern northern Alta California, with headquarters near Alta California’s traditional capitol of Monterey.

The naming of their own governors was a big event in Alta California. And Mexico City wisely shrugged their shoulders, gave in, and decided to support it.
Chapter 2

POLK SALAD

But there was another big event happening in 1845, of which Californios may have only been vaguely aware. And yet it would affect them profoundly. James K. Polk had become the 11th president of the United States.

Polk is one of the uncelebrated presidents of U.S. history. I mean, who talks about James K. Polk? His name sounds sort of like music you’d play with an accordion. Or a funny pattern for a clown outfit. Or a poisonous weed from the South that you can turn into a salad.

And yet in my opinion, he was one of our greatest presidents. Not for his moral leadership, which is debatable, but for the magnitude of what he accomplished. He only served one four-year term. But in those four eventful years, James K. Polk increased the size of the United States by more than a third.

Polk believed he was elected with a mandate to expand the size of our nation. And he intended to do so by admitting Texas into the Union, and by acquiring the northern territories of Mexico.

Of course, this raised tensions between the U.S. and Mexico, as Mexico still claimed Texas as its own, and had threatened war if it were to become a state of the United States. And Mexico wasn’t about to let go of any of its northern territories. Not even after Polk offered to pay for them.

This tension resulted in a lot of suspicion about all the illegal immigrants pouring into Alta California from America. The xenophobic folks in Mexico City decided that maybe their open border policy wasn’t such a great idea after all. And they decided it was time for immigration reform.
They didn’t have enough money to build a big-assed wall, and America sure as hell wasn’t going to pay for one. But they did have the ability to issue edicts.

So they issued one of their infamous edicts. Edicts that Californios liked to proclaim, but never follow. This edict was to deny Mexican citizenship to any new immigrants to California, and also deny land grants, sales, or even the rental of land to non-citizen immigrants already in California.

The edict worried and infuriated new arrivals from America. They had expected to quickly become Mexican citizens, and enjoy all the rights afforded any Californio. Now they were afraid they’d be driven back out of California, and be forced to fend for themselves amongst hostile Indians in the Nevada desert.

But not all Californios supported the edict. Governor Pio Pico did, in Los Angeles. He firmly believed in keeping Alta California out of the hands of Americans. But his jurisdiction in southern Alta California didn’t have many immigrants anyway, so the edict was nothing to make a big deal over.

Commandante General Jose Castro, in Monterey, was one of those who did not support the edict. There were many American immigrants in his jurisdiction of northern Alta California. And he was feeling the heat from them, as they remonstrated against the edict. Also, Castro kind of favored being annexed by the United States, unlike his anti-American co-governor in Los Angeles.

In March 1846, Castro issued a message reassuring all who had recently arrived in Alta California that they could stay, and would not be driven out. Thus began a long history of sanctuary cities for illegal immigrants, in California.

The problem for Castro was that the immigrants weren’t so sure they could trust him. Especially since there was a scent of war in the air.
Army Captain John C. Fremont seemed like the perfect man for a dirty job. A dangerous and dirty job that Polk had in mind. He was raffish and reckless. Daring and arrogant. He knew the West. And most importantly, he shared President Polk’s political views on westward expansion.

Fremont was an American explorer who had already headed two successful expeditions. In 1842 and 1843, he had explored the Oregon Trail, Great Basin, and parts of California.

And he had friends in low places. During his expedition of 1842, he met a mountain man and guide named Kit Carson. He hired Carson, and they got along so well, and Carson proved so helpful, that Fremont wanted to use him in all future expeditions.

Fremont was also well-connected politically. He was married to Jessie Benton, the daughter of the powerful Senator Thomas Hart Benton, of Missouri. Senator Benton was avidly in favor of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Benton’s dream was for the United States to take over the entire North American continent. Yep, that included Canada, Mexico, and all the Central American countries. Benton wanted it all.

Benton had arranged Fremont’s expeditions of 1842 and 1843. But now he and President Polk had a much more intriguing expedition in mind. It involved some unscrupulous black ops for the government, that required great secrecy.

In 1845 he arranged for his son-in-law to survey the central Rockies, Great Basin, and part of the Sierra Nevada. But Fremont was privately told that if war started with Mexico, he was to turn his scientific expedition into a military force and conquer California.
And he may have been told by his father-in-law, or maybe by the president himself, a few other things. Not specific things, but hint-hint inferred things. Things that require reading between the lines, taking initiative, and assuming all responsibility should everything go south.

The young explorer gladly accepted this assignment. He was eager to please his father-in-law, and anxious to prove himself in the line of duty.

Fremont began his 62-man expedition on June 1, 1845. But when he reached the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, near present-day Colorado Springs, where he was supposed to start surveying, he suddenly tossed away his official orders. He struck out across the vast no-man’s land of alpine, canyon, and desiccated desert, that separated the Rockies from the Pacific Ocean.

California was burning on his mind.

He split his party up. And on December 9, 1845, he arrived with just 17 men, at Sutter’s Fort in the Sacramento Valley. He claimed to be conducting a scientific survey. However, he began to persuade a motley mix of American settlers to form militias and prepare for a rebellion against Mexico. He promised that if war with Mexico started, his military force would protect the settlers.

Then Fremont headed for Monterey, which was the traditional capitol of Alta California, and the headquarters of Commandante General Jose Castro. There, he lied to the American Consul, Thomas O. Larkin, and Commandante Castro, claiming that he had merely come for supplies.

In February 1846, Fremont reunited with his other 45 men, near Mission San Jose, about 45 miles north of Monterey. Now his forces were an alarming 62-man strong, and Commandante Castro and other Mexican officials realized they’d been duped. And they wondered what the hell this American upstart was up to.

Castro had enough of this shit and ordered him to leave California.

Well that was a big mistake, as far as Fremont was concerned. Nobody tells the
Almighty Fremont to leave! So instead of going away, he and his crew of heavily armed surveyors headed south.

In early March 1846, they mounted Gavilan Peak (now Fremont Peak), to assess its military value. This peak commands the inland approach to Monterey. There, with astounding audacity, Fremont built a crude stockade and hoisted an American flag.

Castro responded to this insane provocation with a show of force, and a four-day Mexican standoff ensued. A Mexican standoff occurs when two parties square off, and neither party is able to proceed or retreat without putting itself in danger. So they must each hold their ground, while waiting for something to happen that would afford them a chance to end the confrontation.

And something finally did happen. U.S. Consul Larkin intervened. He told this crazy explorer that he supported Castro’s decision, and ordered Fremont out of the area.

Castro had a superior number of Mexican troops, so Fremont decided that maybe it was best to follow Larkin’s order.
Chapter 4

DRIVE-BY MASSACRES

He may have fumed about it, but he did as he was told by U.S. Consul Larkin. Fremont headed north for Oregon. But that was a long journey by horseback, and lots of things can happen on long journeys.

On March 30, 1846, his expedition reached the Lassen Ranch, in the upper Sacramento Valley. There, some American immigrants claimed that an encampment of Indians was preparing to attack white settlers.

This news offered just the kind of action Fremont and his men had been craving. They eagerly searched for the encampment. And on April 5, they encountered a large gathering of the Wintu tribe, near the current-day city of Redding, California.

Fremont ordered an advance on the camp.

The Wintu were pinned against the Sacramento River, and were unable to flee. They consisted mostly of women and children. They fought back as best as possible, but were no match for the well-armed advancing force.

Kit Carson was one of the attackers, and he described it as “perfect butchery”. Bucks, squaws, and papooses were cut down en masse by rifle fire. Many natives fled for the hills, or jumped in the river and tried to swim away. But they were chased down by Fremont’s men and tomahawked to death. Other members of the expedition stood on the river bank and took potshots at natives trying to swim to safety.

Estimates vary, but one eyewitness claimed that 600 to 700 natives were killed on land, and 200 or more died in the water, making the Sacramento River Massacre one of the bloodiest massacres of the West.

Fremont’s expedition continued into Oregon, killing Native Americans on sight, as they went. It was sort of like a modern-day, drive-by shooting rampage.

In the Oregon Territory, his forces met and murdered some of the Klamath people. But on May 9, 1846, they retaliated against Fremont, by killing several members of his expedition. Three days later Fremont
conducted the Klamath Lake Massacre to “set things square”, killing 14 members of a nearby village.

But that’s how massacre math was done in those days. You set things square by taking the number of deaths on your side, then squaring it, and squaring it again. And that’s how many you killed on their side.
Chapter 5
FREMONT’S RETURN

In the middle of all this excitement, a U.S. Marine appeared. Lieutenant Archibald H. Gillespie had been sent from Washington with a secret message for both U.S. Consul Larkin, and Captain Fremont. On May 9, the same day the Klamath tribe killed members of Fremont’s party, Gillespie finally caught up with the man he was pursuing, and delivered the message. This message conveyed to the explorer that war with Mexico was inevitable.

Fremont’s eyes lit up when he read this missive. He saw an opportunity to realize his father-in-law’s Manifest Destiny ambitions, and get in really good with his wife’s side of the family. He and Gillespie immediately returned to California.

Meanwhile, more winds of war were blowing. U.S. Consul Larkin had sent a request to Commodore John D. Sloat of the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Squadron, for a warship to protect U.S. citizens and interests in Alta California. Sloat responded by sending the USS Portsmouth, which arrived in Monterey on April 22, 1846.

Larkin and the Portsmouth captain, John Berrien Montgomery, learned of Fremont’s return to California. They figured the army Captain might need some support, so the Portsmouth was moved into San Francisco Bay in late-May, where it moored at Sausalito.

On May 24, 1846, Fremont arrived back at Lassen Ranch, in the upper Sacramento Valley, ready and hoping for war. There he learned about the presence of the USS Portsmouth.

He sent Lieutenant Gillespie to Sausalito to request supplies, including 8,000 percussion caps, 300 pounds of lead, one keg of powder, money, and
food. His official reason for making this request was the pretext of supplying his expedition for the trip back to St. Louis. Yeah, right.

On May 30, 1846, Fremont arrived near Sutter Buttes, about 45 miles north of Sutter’s Fort, and set up camp. He decided his first move should be to take Sutter’s Fort and raise the American flag. Sutter’s Fort was in New Helvetia, which is now known as Sacramento.

But first, there was more slaughtering to do. Local Native American groups were on the move, preparing for a harvest. But the paranoid Fremont imagined they were actually preparing for an imminent attack. So on May 31, he preemptively attacked the natives and killed several, in the Sutter Buttes Massacre.

Lieutenant Gillespie found the Portsmouth on June 7, and delivered Fremont’s request for supplies. These supplies were then taken by the ship’s launch, up the Sacramento River, to a site near Fremont’s camp at Sutter Buttes.
Chapter 6
THE INSTIGATION

If you want to foment discord, look for the fomentable and discordable. To find them, try posting a canard on Facebook. Before you know it you’ll have all kinds of nuts coming out of the woodwork, foaming at the mouth and supporting your lies.

But Fremont didn’t have a Facebook account. Or perhaps he’d lost his password. So he had to improvise.

One early-June day, mysterious unsigned letters were found in various public places frequented by illegal immigrants.

William B. Ide was an American settler who had just arrived in Alta California in October, 1845. He was a cantankerous dude, a bit unstable, and consumed with anxiety over Mexico’s new, draconian anti-immigration policy. This man was teetering right on the edge, and was a prime target of Fremont’s propaganda campaign.

On June 8, 1846, Ide came into possession of one of the unsigned written messages. It’s the only copy still in existence today, and reads:

“Notice is hereby given, that a large body of armed Spaniards on horseback, amounting to 250 men, have been seen on their way to the Sacramento Valley, destroying crops and burning houses, and driving off the cattle. Capt. Fremont invites every freeman in the valley to come to his camp at the Butts [sic], immediately; and he hopes to stay the enemy and put a stop . . .” The bottom of the message was torn off, probably by the trembling hands of Ide.
Ide and 33 other settlers felt alarmed. They quickly galloped to Fremont’s camp, at Sutter Buttes, expecting he might be their Lord and Savior with a plan to save their asses. But they felt disappointed when they found that Fremont had no specific plan. And they weren’t able to secure from him any definite promise of aid. Instead, Fremont behaved in a guarded manner. He seemed to be inciting them to revolt, but would not come out directly and say so.

Fremont had to be careful, because he risked court-martial for violating the Neutrality Act of 1794, that made it illegal for an American to wage war against another country at peace with the United States. News had not yet reached California that war had been declared a month earlier, so he was unsure about the legal ground he stood on. He wanted to avoid a court-martial.

However, he did stick his neck out far enough to conspire with the settlers to conduct a horse-thieving raid. Nothing beats the fun of stealing horses, so the settlers were all ears. Fremont told them about a herd of equines that were being moved by some Californios.

He also spoke of a vague rumor of unknown origin, and spread by hearsay, that Commandante General Castro intended to use the horses in a campaign to drive foreigners from California. This rumor left Ide and the other settlers feeling extremely alarmed.

They immediately decamped and went on the hunt, and on June 10 they found the horses. It was a herd of 170 Mexican government-owned caballos that were being moved from San Rafael and Sonoma to the Commandante General Jose Castro, in Santa Clara.

They captured the horses and delivered them to Fremont’s camp.

Now things were heating up. The settlers were in deep, having stolen the Commandante General’s horses. They were committed. They had crossed the Rubicon, and there was now no turning back.

And now that Fremont had a force of committed settlers on his side, who were not likely to desert, he decided it was time to strike. He decided to move south and take Sutter’s Fort. And while thanking the horse thieves for the fresh mounts, he might have implanted another idea into their heads.
But who knows whose idea it was at first? It certainly wasn’t anything Fremont was in a position to own up to. But somehow, someone came up with this plan:

Someone came up with the brilliant plan to seize the pueblo of Sonoma. Perhaps somebody with military experience coached them, and helped them reason that this would deny the Californios a rallying point north of San Francisco Bay. And by capturing the arms and military materiel stored at that garrison, they would delay any military response from the Californios, to the seizing of Sutter’s Fort.

Fremont was thick on flattery, and generously bestowed the title of “Field Lieutenant” to one of the settlers, named Ezekiel “Stuttering Zeke” Merritt. He praised this man as someone who never questioned him. And based on this, he appointed him leader of the settlers. But hell, how could ol’ Stuttering Zeke question him? He was never allowed enough speaking time to question anyone.

William Ide might have gently pointed out that Zeke’s speech impediment could make communication and coordination a little tricky. And Fremont might have acknowledged that that was downright smart of Ide to recognize such a thing. Because Fremont appointed Ide the co-leader.
Soon these 34 illegal immigrants, led by Stuttering Zeke and hothead Ide, set off for Sonoma.
Chapter 7

THE IMMIGRANTS ARE REVOLTING

Plaza at Sonoma, sketched in 1851.

In June, 1846, Army Captain John C. Fremont instigated 34 illegal American immigrants into attacking the pueblo of Sonoma. Mission Sonoma had been built 25 years earlier to counter the Russians at nearby Fort Ross. But now it was not the Russians who posed a threat, but the Americans.

Sonoma was now occupied by retired Mexican General Mariano Vallejo. He maintained an armory of military weapons...
and materiel at the Sonoma Barracks. The immigrants wanted that shit, and they came to get it.

Vallejo had built a large mansion on the mission grounds, and named it Casa Grande. He was a proud man, and a rich man, but also a very amiable man.

On the morning of June 14, 1846, the 34 settlers under the leadership of Ezekiel “Stuttering Zeke” Merritt and William Ide, surrounded Casa Grande. Zeke and a few others went to the door and knocked. The General, who was probably still in his bathrobe and holding a cup of coffee, answered.

There are many conflicting eyewitness accounts about what exactly transpired, but I imagine the conversation went something like this:

“G-g-g-oood m-m-morning G-G-G-General. I-I-I-I-m S-s-s-s-Stut-tut-tut-er-er-er-er Z-Z-Z-Zeke. Y-you-you-you are-are-are un-un-un-derrrr ar-ar-rest. W-W-W-We are-are-are re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-rel
The servant’s quarters are all that remain of Casa Grande.

But when word of this agreement reached the settlers outside, the hothead Ide rejected it as bullshit. Ide barged into the mansion and spoiled the drunken chinwag, by placing Vallejo and his family under arrest.

Most of the settlers agreed with Ide, and Stuttering Zeke had a difficult time articulating a counterargument. Besides, he was drunk. So there was no helping it. Vallejo, Leese, and the rest of the general’s family were taken prisoner.

The settlers were winging it at this point. They had never participated in a revolution before, so they just came up with ideas as they went along.

Their next big idea was to create a flag. William Todd, a cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln, designed it and did the art work. For cloth, the ladies at the garrison gave the rebels a new cotton sheet and some old red flannel from a petticoat. Todd painted a bear and star with linseed oil, red paint, and blackberry juice. Beneath the bear and star, he limned the words, California Republic, and a strip of red flannel was sown to the bottom.
Bear or pig? What do you see? This replica of the original Bear Flag is on display at the Sonoma State Historic Park. It was constructed in 1896, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Bear Flag Revolt. The original Bear Flag, constructed by Todd, was destroyed in the fire that followed the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906.

The paintings were crude, as Todd was not the greatest artist in the world. In fact the grizzly bear was so poorly drawn, some mistook it for a pig. And had that perception prevailed, this would have become known as the Pig Flag Revolt.

The bear symbolized strength and resistance. The lone star was in reference to the Lone Star Republic of Texas, and the Texan rebellion against the Mexican government 10 years earlier.

They raised this flag for the first time, on June 17, 1846.
Monument to the Bear Flag Revolt, at the Sonoma State Historic Park, Sonoma, California.

The rebels made the Sonoma Barracks their headquarters. And they changed the name of their revolt from the Popular Movement to the Bear Flag Revolt. They also elected military officers.
Henry L. Ford (no relation to the automobile magnate) was elected First Lieutenant of the company. Samuel Kelsey was elected Second Lieutenant. Grandville P. Swift and Samuel Gibson were elected Sergeants. These were the only elected officials of the new California Republic. No civil structure was ever established.

Ide then wrote and issued a proclamation to be distributed throughout northern California, declaring the establishment of this new republic, justifying the revolt, and inviting good citizens to join.

After the takeover of Sonoma on June 14, 1846, 70 more volunteers joined the rebels. By early-July, nearly 300 had joined the Bear Flag Revolt. The game was on. Alta California was going down.

These Mexican Army barracks at Sonoma became the headquarters of the Bear Flag Revolt.
Chapter 8
THE BATTLE OF OLMALPILI

The Bear Flag revolt had just begun, with the capture of Mission Sonoma. And the Bears quickly recognized they had a big problem on their hands. They possessed very little gunpowder, and realized they’d need a lot more to defend Mission Sonoma from an expected Mexican attack. You see, they remembered another mission. The Alamo. They knew what the Mexicans could do.

A cannon at Mission Sonoma. But not much use to the Bears, without gunpowder.

At first they sent their flag designer, William Todd, to try to secure gunpowder from the USS Portsmouth, anchored at Sausalito. Did I say “gunpowder”? No, no, I meant “gun doubter”. I mean I doubt guns can work very long without a certain special ingredient.
The Bears had to get clever. For legal reasons, Todd wasn’t supposed to actually say out loud that he wanted “gunpowder”. The plan was for him to say something mealy-mouthed, and then with a wink and a nod, hand a note to Captain Montgomery, containing the actual request.

But Todd must have had a short memory, because he forgot about this plan and blurted out to Captain Montgomery, the request for “gunpowder”. And of course Montgomery solemnly declined Todd’s request, stating that by law, the U.S. was neutral in this conflict.

Well that shot that plan all to hell, thanks to the idiot Todd. Now they had to find another way to procure the explosive chemical.

So on June 18, a procurement party of two men, named Thomas Cowie and George Fowler, were sent from Sonoma to Rancho Sotoyome (near current-day Healdsburg, California). Their mission was to pick up a cache of gunpowder from Moses Carson, who was the brother of Kit Carson.

They never came back.

On June 20, the Bears tried yet again. First Lieutenant Ford sent Sergeant Gibson with four men to Rancho Sotoyome. Gibson obtained the gunpowder. But on the way back, he and his men got into a gunfight with several Californios. They managed to capture one of them.

Perhaps they used waterboarding, or perhaps they just got him drunk. But from that prisoner they learned that Cowie and Fowler had been killed. They also learned that stupid ol’ William Todd and a companion had gotten themselves captured by Californio irregulars.

First a pig flag. Then the gunpowder remark. And now he’s a POW. Todd really wasn’t doing much to make this Bear Flag Revolt a success.

When Ford learned of this back in Sonoma, he realized that the Californios were beginning to resist. So he sent a note to Fremont, at Sutter’s Fort, requesting reinforcements. He also organized a party of 17 to 19 Bears, and went searching for William Todd and his companion.

Ford and his party found them near the Native American rancho of Olumpali. They were being held captive inside an adobe house. But as Ford’s men approached this adobe, 70 Californio militia men poured out. Gulp.

Ford’s men were way outnumbered, and they knew they were in for it. They positioned themselves in a grove of trees. The Californios then mounted their horses and charged on horseback. But fortunately for Ford’s
men, they had superior weapons that could fire at a longer range than the weapons of the Californios. They opened fire on the charging enemy, killing one Californio and wounding another, at long range.

When the Californios saw this amazing feat, they disengaged and fled.

During this battle, William Todd and his companion escaped the adobe and ran to the Bears, and were successfully rescued. This became known as the Battle of Olumpali, and was the only battle won by the bad news Bears during the Bear Flag Revolt.

They didn’t have internet in those days. But they did have boredom. And so word still managed to quickly spread about this battle, and the deaths of Cowie and Fowler. And this news raised the anxiety of American settlers. They began to fear that they would become targeted by the Californio militia, and so they moved into Sonoma for protection. And this increased the number of settlers in Sonoma to 200.

Stupid fools. Had they forgotten the Alamo?
Meanwhile, Fremont had taken Sutter’s Fort without any resistance. But instead of raising the American flag, a Bear Flag was raised. Fremont thought it safest to go along for awhile with the settlers’ ambition for independence, and tacitly support the fledgling California Republic. This would give his activities cover until he could be certain that war had been declared by the U.S. against Mexico.

On June 16, 1846, General Vallejo and the other prisoners from Sonoma were delivered to Sutter’s Fort.

Vallejo considered Fremont to be his friend, and expected to be paroled by him. But the sentiment among most of the settlers at the fort was to keep this man prisoner. Fremont sensed this, and wanted to remain in favor with the settlers. So he denied the parole. And he ordered Vallejo to be treated as a true prisoner, with no special privileges. After all, what are friends for?

Fremont put one of his own men, Edward Kern, in command of Sutter’s Fort, while placing John Sutter second in command. Which was kind of a slap in the face for poor ol’ John Sutter. Because there he was, second in command of his own fort. Hmm, some friend, that Fremont.
Chapter 10
MURDER AND DECEIT
AT MISSION SAN RAFAEL

It didn’t take long for Commandante General Jose Castro to learn of the taking of the government’s horses, the capture of Sonoma, and the imprisonment of Mexican officers at Sutter’s Fort. And all of this really chapped his hide. He quickly organized a group of 50-60 militia.

He put Captain Joaquin de la Torre in charge of this militia, with orders to recapture the Alamo. Oops, I mean Sonoma. Torre led his forces north to San Pablo, and then across a narrow, three mile strait of the San Francisco bay, to Point San Quentin. San Quentin was just a few miles from the former Mission San Rafael. And it was about 30 miles by road from the Bears’ headquarters at Mission Sonoma.

They arrived at San Quentin on June 23, 1846. On June 27, 100 more men arrived at San Pablo, and waited to be brought over by boat to join Torre. Things were looking ominous for the Bear Flaggers.

But Fremont learned about General Castro’s preparation for an attack on Sonoma about the same time that he received the note from Ford requesting reinforcements. Hmm, all of this was reminding him of some other place. Ah yes, the Alamo. So on June 23, the same day Torre landed at San Quentin, Fremont left Sutter’s Fort for Sonoma, with 90 men.

He also wrote a letter of resignation from the Army and sent it to his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton. It was to be submitted by Benton only if the government disavowed Fremont’s action. Yep, Fremont was a real genius at covering his tracks.

They arrived at Sonoma on June 25 and then quickly headed south to San Rafael, to make battle with Torre’s Californios. But when they arrived at San Rafael, the Californios had vanished. So they set up camp at the mission and sent out scouting parties.

On June 28, Fremont’s forces spotted a small boat coming across the bay. He sent Kit Carson and two others to intercept it. The boat dropped three men off at the shore. They were the twin brothers, Francisco and Ramon de Haro, and their uncle Jose de la Reyes Berreyesa. Their
intention was to travel on foot to Sonoma to inquire about the welfare of some of their relatives, who had been taken prisoner by the Bear Flaggers. They came in peace, and were unarmed. But all three were shot and killed by Kit Carson and his men.

This triple-murder became an issue in Fremont’s 1856 presidential campaign. Partisan newspapers told conflicting stories. The MSNBC Mouthpiece Mumbler blamed the candidate, while the FOX Folderol Fanfaronade exonerated him. Nonetheless, it tarnished Fremont’s image and contributed to his defeat.

Meanwhile, Captain de la Torre had his balls caught in a wringer. He had not expected Fremont to show up. And he realized he was now vastly outgunned by a superior fighting force. And now here he was, hiding from Fremont’s scouts, just a few miles away from Mission San Rafael. He was backed up against the bay, and had to figure out a way to retreat back across the water to San Pablo without being massacred, the way Fremont had massacred those Wintu Indians.

But Torre was good at thinking fast. He concocted a deceitful and potentially deadly ruse. He arranged for two letters to be intercepted, one by Fremont’s forces, and one by the Bear Flagger’s forces in Sonoma. These letters indicated that Torre planned to attack Sonoma on June 29.

As soon as Fremont saw the letter, he felt startled, and knew he had to make a quick decision. But unlike Torre's quick thinking, his quick thinking wasn’t very clever. In fact, it was nearly fatal. He absquatulated and headed posthaste back to Sonoma.

Unbeknownst to him, Sonoma had also intercepted a similar letter. They were waiting with cannons readied, guns cocked, and all men armed for bear. Or armed like the Bears they were. Because even in those days, Americans valued the right to arm Bears.

When they spotted Fremont’s men approaching, the jittery Bears almost mistook them for the enemy, and nearly opened fire. Fortunately,
Stuttering Zeke was in command, and was unable to complete the order to, “F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-i-r-r-r-e!” before someone recognized Fremont.

Fremont realized he’d been tricked. He ate a quick breakfast of two Egg McMuffins and small order of hash browns, then immediately hurried his men the 25 to 30 miles of trail back to San Rafael. But it was too late. Torre and his men had already escaped by boat across the bay to San Pablo.
Chapter 11
A REVOLTING END

It was time for Plan B, for the Californios. All of Commandante General Castro’s forces in San Pablo retreated to Santa Clara, about 50 miles south, at the southern end of San Francisco Bay. On June 30, 1846, they held a council of war, where they decided they needed to combine their strength with Governor Pio Pico’s forces. Then they could move north again and quash the Bear Flag Revolt.

On July 6, the army moved south again, to Mission San Juan Bautista, near Monterey, where General Castro was waiting. But the next day, somebody stopped thinking, and pondering, and mulling things over, and Plan B was dashed.

That someone who was thinking, pondering, and mulling things over, was Commodore John D. Sloat, of the U.S. Navy. He had received orders to seize San Francisco Bay and blockade California ports. But not until he was positive that war had begun. What a tricky order to follow! His superior officers knew how to cover their asses, by issuing such a vague order, and so Sloat had to figure out how to cover his own ass.

Sloat had been waiting in Monterey Bay since July 1 to obtain convincing proof of war.

He felt hesitant, but he finally decided it was better to err on the side of war, than do nothing and allow an opportune moment to slip by. He made this decision after several days of thinking and pondering and mulling over Fremont’s bold actions. He erroneously concluded that Fremont must have been acting on orders from Washington. Hell, he had to have been. After all, no normal military officer would have the audacity to do all the things Fremont was doing, without orders. Right? Hmm.

Sloat gave the go-ahead. And early in the morning of July 7, the frigate USS Savannah and the two sloops USS Cyane and USS Levant of the United States Navy, captured Monterey without firing a shot. And they raised the U.S. flag. Commodore Sloat had a proclamation in Monterey posted in English and Spanish, stating, “. . . henceforth California will be a portion of the United States.”
On July 9, Sloat’s forces raised the American flag in Yerba Buena (current-day San Francisco).

Around that same time, Navy Lieutenant Joseph Revere was sent to Sonoma from the USS Portsmouth, which had been berthed at Sausalito. And on July 9, he had the Bear Flag lowered in Sonoma, and replaced by the U.S. flag. Soon after, the same flag replacement occurred at Sutter’s Fort.

So just like that, without a sputter, fizzle, or whimpering protest, the Bear Flag Revolt and California Republic came to an abrupt end.

One can only wonder how history would have played out, had the Bear Flaggers been better organized, and more competent and capable at conducting a revolution. Suppose they’d had a strong, intelligent leader within their own ranks, who thought for himself rather than relying upon the vulpine brain of the calculating Fremont?

And suppose that leader had found a way to unite with Californios, for independence? Would they have capitulated so quickly to the ambitions of the U.S. government? Or would they have resisted, and would California have remained an independent republic to this day?
We can only speculate. But as it stands, the California Republic lasted a mere 25 days, from June 14 to July 9, 1846.

And with the end of the Bear Flag Revolt came a new beginning. The beginning of the California Campaign of the Mexican-American War, to capture the remainder of California from Mexico. The task wouldn’t be easy. There would be blood.
PART 2:

THE CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN
Chapter 12
THE CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN BEGINS

By mid-July, 1846, enough news and information had reached American forces in California to leave them feeling confident that a war with Mexico had begun. However, official notice of the U.S. war declaration with Mexico did not reach them until August 12, 1846. They should have used email.

Commodore Sloat was 65-years-old and tired of all this shit. The old fart wasn’t feeling well, and he just wanted a desk job. So on July 23, he transferred command of the Pacific Squadron to Commodore Robert Stockton who, at age 50, was younger and more eager for action.

It was a smart move for Sloat, as he ended up living 21 more years.

The young and yare Stockton commanded up to 650 marines and sailors. He got busy right away, and ordered Fremont to secure immigrant volunteers to assist with the occupation of northern Alta California.

It’s hard to say how big the pool of immigrants was, for Fremont to draw from, because the Mexican census had a citizenship question that left illegal immigrants feeling wary about answering honestly. Okay, maybe not. I just made that up. But some estimate this pool to be about 800 fighting-age males. And of these, Fremont managed to enlist 160 volunteers.

In addition, Fremont also commanded the California Battalion, consisting of his 60-man expeditionary force and 150 Bear Flaggers. Thus, Fremont offered a militia of 380 men, for the disposal of Stockton.

The American marines, sailors, and militia easily took over control of cities, ports, and pueblos in northern California, including Sonoma, New Helvetia (current-day Sacramento), Yerba Buena (current-day San Francisco), and Monterey. They were even able to occupy some southern Alta California pueblos and ports. And all while only rarely firing a shot.
Chapter 13
THE OCCUPATION OF LOS ANGELES

But southern Alta California still concerned Commodore Stockton. 8,000 settlers lived there, and most were Mexican. There were very few immigrants in that region. Most of the Californios lived in the Pueblo of Los Angeles, which was the capitol of southern Alta California, under Governor Pio Pico.

A section of Los Angeles as it appeared in 1847, in all its bucolic glory, to artist William Rich Hutton.

Pico and the citizens of Los Angeles strongly favored keeping California out of U.S. hands. They didn’t like us gringos. Therefore, Stockton figured he might have to use military force to capture the pueblo, in order to complete the conquest of California.

Stockton ordered Fremont to San Diego, to prepare to move northward to Los Angeles, if needed. He then landed 360 men in San Pedro, about 25 miles south of the pueblo. And that’s all it took to scare the hell out of the Mexicans. Commandante General Castro and Governor Pio Pico got cold feet, and fled to the Mexican state of Sonora.
Therefore, on August 13, 1846, Stockton’s army entered Los Angeles unopposed. And boy was he happy. He figured he had the world by the tail, with all his recent success. His increased self-confidence drugged his brain, and put to sleep much of the natural worry and caution that good military officers are advised to maintain.

In his hubris, he left U.S. Marine Captain Archibald Gillespie in charge, with a small garrison of 36 men. Think about it. Just 36 men, to rule over thousands of upset Mexicans.

This was the same Gillespie, then a Lieutenant, who in May, had found Fremont in Oregon, and delivered the message from Washington that war was imminent. He may have been a good messenger, but putting this man in charge of a town like Los Angeles proved to be a mistake. Gillespie’s head was too big, and his garrison was too small.

Stockton left town, trusting Gillespie could handle the trivial matter of keeping order in this conquered pueblo. But he didn’t count on all this new authority going to Gillespie’s head. The captain realized that here he was, with a new, higher rank, and in charge of an entire town! And as far as he was concerned nobody had better dare challenge his authority.

Gillespie began behaving like a tyrant. He imposed martial law, which left the locals very angry. Then he and his garrison began browbeating and bullying the citizens. And they were a proud people, these citizens, who shared Governor Pico’s sentiments about U.S. occupation.

There was no way in hell they were going to stand for such disrespect coming from a pendejo like Gillespie.
Chapter 14

THE SIEGE OF LOS ANGELES

Captain Gillespie thought he could push the citizens of Los Angeles around. He saw Mexicans as an inferior race, and held contempt for them for giving up the fight so quickly.

But he didn’t count on the fact that these were rough-hewn folks, who didn’t stand for much shit. Hell, they were pioneers on the California frontier, and were no strangers to hardship and trouble.

Also, they had Captain Jose Maria Flores to help them out.

Captain Flores was a Mexican patriot. He had served under Commandante General Castro. He knew how to fight, and wanted to do whatever he could to keep Alta California in the hands of Mexico.

Those who want to bully others should keep guys like Flores in mind. Remember, you can only go so far while pushing people around, before the crowds part and a heavyweight stands before you, prepared to knock your block off.

On September 23, 1846, the Siege of Los Angeles began, when a firefight erupted between 20 or so Californios, and the occupying Americans. This struck a spark that ignited the Angelenos.

The next day, Captain Flores took advantage of the fervor, and organized several hundred Californios. They besieged Gillespie’s forces, and forced them to retreat to a high point, now known as Fort Hill. Soon, 600 indignant citizens had joined Flores’ forces, and they completely surrounded the improvised fort.

Gillespie’s situation grew desperate. His men had no water, and they were so outnumbered they had no chance of holding off such an overwhelming mob of pissed off people.

On September 29, Flores issued an ultimatum. Surrender within 24 hours, or face the consequences. Which would likely be a massacre.

On September 30, Captain Gillespie surrendered. He signed articles of capitulation, and then he and his troops came down from Fort Hill. And Flores was respectful and gracious. He allowed them to march out of town
with all the honors of war. The defeated troops retreated south to San Pedro, where they boarded a ship and sailed away.

Flores then began reclaiming Alta California. Within days, his forces took back Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo to the north, and the territory to the south of Los Angeles, up to, but not including San Diego. That pueblo remained in American hands.

But the war was back on.

Flores’ early successes were impressive, but a sensible military analyst might consider them to be Pyrrhic victories. His forces were stretched thin. And he had only 200 men, and few arms and ammunition. It would be very difficult for him to defend this territory.
Chapter 15
THE BATTLE OF
THE OLD WOMAN’S GUN

The U.S. military quickly responded, by sending an intimidating force of 420 Americans. This included 203 United States Marines, and an assortment of sailors and Bear Flaggers, under the command of U.S. Navy Captain William Mervine. They landed at San Pedro, just south of Los Angeles, on October 6, 1846.

But immediately upon landing, an unfortunate event occurred, when a cabin boy was killed by friendly fire. Perhaps an omen? But with such a large force, what else could possibly go wrong?

Flores, who by now was General Flores, couldn’t spare many men to counter the invaders. But he managed to dispatch 50 mounted Californio lancers, under Captain Jose Antonio Carrillo. Plus, one lone cannon.

Their lone, 4-pound brass cannon (meaning, it fired 4-pound cannonballs) had been a ceremonial cannon, fired on special occasions in the Los Angeles Plaza. When American forces initially entered Los Angeles, it had been hastily buried on the property of an old woman. Hence, it became known as the Old Woman’s Gun. When the Siege of Los Angeles began, the Californios unearthed it and deployed it for battle.

On October 7, Captain Mervine’s infantry began marching north from San Pedro, over Manuel Dominguez’ 75,000 acre, Rancho San Pedro. And while they marched, they were harassed by the enemy from the hillsides around them. Perhaps another omen?

They stopped at some abandoned adobe buildings on Dominguez’ rancho and made camp for the night. But they didn’t get much sleep. An advance detachment of Flores’ troops kept plinking at them from a distance, sending yet more omens.

The next morning they began to advance again, with bleary eyes and weary feet. And I wouldn’t doubt they were mad as hell at the Californios, for disturbing their sleep so much. They soon came to the Dominguez Hills.
And it was here that Carrillo’s meager forces, at great peril to themselves, and against all odds, bravely confronted this mammoth American battalion.

Carrillo had his lancers run their horses back and forth across the top of the Dominguez Hills, stirring up a vast, billowing dust cloud. This made it appear that there were many more troops than just 50 lancers.

Then his forces opened fire upon the Americans, with their lone, brass cannon. The Old Woman’s Gun. They’d fire from a hidden position in some brush, then withdraw it and quickly transport it to another hidden position. They’d fire again, and withdraw again, rapidly changing positions. This made it appear that they had much more than just one cannon at their disposal.

This is an old military trick, when outnumbered and outgunned, and is sometimes surprisingly effective.

The problem for the Americans was that they were ill-prepared for combat like this. They brought no horses, wagons, or artillery with them. They could not send mounted scouts up the hills to determine just how many troops they were actually facing. And they had no wagons to hide behind, or artillery to take out the cannon (or, cannons?) that continued to fire at them.

And they were caught out in the open like sitting ducks. It was a shooting gallery, for the Mexicans.

After an hour of being shot at from various, unpredictable positions, four U.S. Marines had been killed, and 12 others had been wounded. Meanwhile, there were zero casualties on the Mexican side.

Captain Mervine had enough. He and his battered forces got the hell out of there. They beat a retreat back to San Pedro, and within five hours had boarded their ships berthed in San Pedro Bay. They brought their 12 wounded Marines with them, as no man is to be left behind, but ten died from their injuries within a day. All-in-all, 14 U.S. Marines and one cabin boy were lost in this military humiliation.

Actually, accounts vary from four to 14 deaths. By Captain Mervine’s own account, seven died, including one death from disease. However battlefield commanders tended to undercount their losses, to save face. So I go with the high estimate of 14, plus one cabin boy.
The Battle of the Old Woman’s Gun remains one of the few battles in history lost by the United States Marine Corps.

It was now apparent that the cakewalk was over. From here on, the conquest of California would be hard fought by both sides.
Chapter 16

KEARNY’S JOURNEY

After losing the Battle of the Old Woman’s Gun, things were looking bleak for the U.S. military. But that’s okay, the cavalry was coming. U.S. Army General Stephen Kearny had recently conquered New Mexico, and was now on his way to California with a mighty force of 300 dragoons.

Kearny was in charge of the Army of the West. In June, 1846, he led this army out of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and down the Santa Fe Trail. In August and September, he entered Las Vegas and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and took this territory for the United States. He then headed west for Alta California.

On October 6, 1846, in Socorro, New Mexico, Kearny met Kit Carson. Carson had been tasked with carrying messages to Washington about the state of hostilities in California. Carson assured Kearny that California had been secured and the situation was well under control. And a very fine officer whom he knew personally, named Captain Gillespie, was keeping the peace in Los Angeles.

I guess Carson failed to watch CNN at any of the motels he stayed at, after leaving California.

With this reassuring fake news, Kearny sent 200 of his precious dragoons back to Santa Fe to aid with the occupation there. He also sent Carson’s message east with a different courier, and asked Kit to guide him to California.

Now Kearny only had 100 dragoons. And their mounts were worn out after having already traveled over a thousand miles. But Kearny encountered a herd of mules being driven to Santa Fe, and he seized on the
opportunity by purchasing 100 of them. These new mules replaced the worn-out mounts.

The only downside to this transaction was that these mules were untrained, and kind of difficult for his dragoons to handle. And we can assume they were rather stubborn.

Finally, in late-November 1846, Kearny and his tired men crossed the Colorado River. They headed toward San Diego, over the Colorado desert, and over the coastal range of mountains. And that’s when he encountered the deposed tyrant from Los Angeles, Major Archibald Gillespie, with a force of 30 men.

Yes, “Major” Gillespie, now. Apparently in the Marine Corps, this is the rank they promote you to when you’re a major asshole.

Major Gillespie had been tasked with the hangdog duty of informing General Kearny about the Siege of Los Angeles, and how he had lost control of the southern California occupation. On top of that, Gillespie also informed the dismayed general that a large fighting force of Mexicans was just a few miles away.
General Flores had found out about this General Kearny. So he had sent Governor Pio Pico’s brother, Mexican Army General Andres Pico, out to find him. And General Pico commanded a force of 150 highly skilled Californio lancers.

These lancers were now camped in the San Pasqual valley, just six miles away from Kearny and Gillespie, and just 30 miles northeast of Kearny’s final destination. Which was the pueblo of San Diego.

It was December 6, 1846, and a terrific battle was brewing.

Pico was unaware of Kearny’s presence, and vulnerable to surprise attack. But Kearny wanted to assess Pico’s strength, so he sent out a scouting party. The party approached close to Pico’s camp, and then stupidly stirred up some noise. This alerted some of Pico’s lancers. They gave chase, and during this pursuit some fool within the party lost his blanket marked “U.S.”, along with his dragoon jacket.

From this blanket and jacket, Pico was able to surmise that the scouting party was part of a much larger force that was coming against him. In other words, the scouts sent by Kearny did more to inform Pico, than to inform Kearny.

Pico felt worried. He did not know that Kearny had left most of his dragoons in New Mexico. And it seemed foolhardy to face a force as large as he imagined Kearny’s to be. He decided it would be best to vamoose. Escape. Get the hell out of there.

The day had faded, and the tenebrous fingers of twilight were creeping over the San Pasqual valley. It had been raining, and a cold dampness that felt like death, filled the air.
As Pico’s lancers were pulling up stakes to decamp, the scouting party returned in the dark of night to Kearny, and sheepishly issued their report. *Well, goddamn, fuck-it-all-to-hell*, Kearny must have thought. Now he’d lost the element of surprise.

But Kit Carson and Gillespie had been reassuring Kearny that the Californios were cowards. And like many white Americans, they all thought of themselves as superior to the Spanish-blooded race. So Kearny figured that his seasoned veterans could easily whip Pico’s forces anyway, surprise or no surprise.

Kearny worried that Pico was going to try to block him from reaching San Diego. Which wasn’t true. At that moment, Pico was actually trying to get the hell out of Kearny’s way.

With this worriment, combined with racial hubris, Kearny made one of the stupidest decisions in U.S. military history. He impulsively decided upon an immediate attack.

It had been pouring rain all day. Their firearms and gunpowder had been drenched, rendering them useless. Worse than that, nobody bothered to check their firearms, in their haste to prepare for battle. Had they done so, the attack would have undoubtedly been called off. But instead, Kearny sent his men into battle virtually unarmed.

An oval-shaped moon hung halfway up the sky, and the midnight air was cold and wet. Pico’s men were still in camp, in the process of leaving. Kearny’s men rode their mules up a ridge, about a mile or so from their camp, below. The general boldly pointed his saber, and ordered his men to surround the camp and take as many prisoners as possible.

They descended in a column down a rocky path, and were soon immersed in low clouds and fog. Things started to get confusing, in the misty moonlight. It was a literal fog of war. Kearny ordered a trot. But one of his officers at the front, whose name was Captain Johnston, misheard. He raised his saber and shouted “Charge!”

Kearny is quoted as having exclaimed, “Oh heavens! I did not mean that!” Yeah, right. I’ll bet it was more like, “Holy shit! I didn’t say ‘charge’, goddamnit!”

The men on mules were more than a thousand yards away from Pico’s camp when they began galloping helter-skelter toward the lancers. Captain Johnston rode straight up on some of Pico’s men, and they opened fire,
killing him instantly. The Californios had few guns, but they had apparently taken better care of their gunpowder than had Kearny’s dragoons.

Pico’s men grabbed their lances and horses and fled down the San Pasqual valley. An officer named Captain Moore ordered another charge, and off the unarmed dragoons galloped, pursuing the armed, retreating lancers.

The mules under Captain Moore’s dragoons were untrained, and some in poor condition. They all galloped at a different pace. Soon Moore’s men were stretched out in a thin, scraggly line, in their pursuit.

Suddenly the lancers wheeled about. They realized how separated from each other their pursuers had become. And in the gray moonlight, they noticed how ungainly they rode, upon their untrained mules. And besides, they had pride. It felt humiliating to allow men on mules chase them down.

They were highly skilled horsemen, these lancers. And now was time to put their skills to use. They began surrounding isolated soldiers. They swung their reatas, and lassoed them off their mules. And then they stabbed them to death with their metal-tipped, willow lances.

Among those killed was Captain Moore.
Whenever dragoons tried to defend themselves using their firearms, all they heard was a click. They realized that with their wet gunpowder they were defenseless, and could do nothing but attempt to flee. And so the pursuers became the pursued, while being systematically hunted down in the glimmering fog, lassoed, and skewered.

Some of the lancers recognized the hated Gillespie, and they enveloped him and stabbed him repeatedly. They drove a lance into his chest, just above his heart, piercing his lung.

General Kearny was not immune. He took a lance wound to his back. This desperate fray lasted just 15 minutes. But during this time, the lancers slaughtered 17 to 30 of Kearny’s men (accounts vary), with many others wounded.

Kearny and his soldiers fought back hard with all they had. Which was just rifle butts and sabers. But it was enough to allow Kearny, Gillespie, and the remaining survivors to retreat to a low hill, now known as Mule Hill.

Pico promptly surrounded them. And in the ensuing hours before dawn, he could have moved in and massacred them before they had a chance to dry their gunpowder. To this day it’s unclear why he did not. But it could
be that he sensed the overall cause of the Californios was lost, and he was pondering the possibility of amnesty.

Kearny was blocked for several days by Pico’s lancers, and could not break through. But Kit Carson managed to slip through Pico’s lines, and headed to San Diego to alert Commodore Stockton.

Stockton quickly dispatched a force of 200 marines and sailors, who dispersed the Californios in short order. They then gave Kearny escort, helping him to finally limp into San Diego on December 12, 1846.

The Battle of San Pasqual was the bloodiest battle of the California Campaign. Both sides have claimed victory in this clash, and historians still haven’t agreed as to which side actually won.

An American historian might assert that Kearny won, in that he managed to reach San Diego with most of his men. Even if some resembled pincushions.

But a Mexican historian might argue that Pico won, in that he put Kearny at his mercy, and could have wiped him out. And he managed to stall Kearny’s advance, and inflict significant casualties on Kearny’s dragoons. And most importantly, he demonstrated to racists like Kearny, Gillespie, and Kit Carson, that Californios were neither inferior, nor cowards, and were not to be trifled with.

Hell, they beat the U.S. Cavalry. And with sticks for weapons.
Chapter 18
THE BATTLE OF RIO SAN GABRIEL

After the Battle of San Pasqual, General Kearny spent several weeks in San Diego, licking his wounds.

Then he decided it was time to retake Los Angeles. But could he? General Jose Maria Flores seemed invincible. Against all odds, he had defeated a force much larger than his, at the Battle of the Old Woman's Gun. There’s no doubt Americans felt a little apprehensive about facing Flores again.

But on December 28, Kearny and Commodore Stockton decided to give it a try. However, unlike in the Battle of the Old Woman’s Gun, this time they brought along horses, wagons, and most importantly, six cannons, to take care of that gun. They led a 600-man force on a 120-mile march toward Los Angeles.

General Flores awaited with 300 men and two cannons, while dug in on a 50-foot high bluff above the San Gabriel River. His position was at a key ford of the river, with the intent to block an approach on Los Angeles from the south. It was about 10 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, in the current-day city of Pico Rivera.

On January 8, 1847, they clashed in the Battle of Rio San Gabriel. And Flores proved to be not quite so invincible after all. He had two cannons now, but the six American cannons quickly silenced them.

Flores’ men bravely charged the Americans, but they only had makeshift ammunition, and little gunpowder. They were easily repulsed.

Then Kearny’s men charged, with overwhelming numbers. Flores’ men could not hold out, and withdrew in retreat. The battle lasted just 90 minutes.

Stockton and Kearny’s forces pursued, and on January 10, 1847, encountered Flores’ Californio militia at a place called La Mesa. This is near where the city of Vernon now stands, and is about 4 miles south of Los Angeles.
Here, the Battle of La Mesa, the last battle of the Siege of Los Angeles, was fought. Within 15 minutes, Flores’ forces were defeated by the overwhelming firepower of American artillery.

Most of his men had had enough. They deserted the battlefield and went home. Flores held a final council, where he transferred command to General Andres Pico. He released all his prisoners, and then fled to Mexico.

The Siege of Los Angeles was over, and within a few days the pueblo was reoccupied.
Three days after the Battle of La Mesa, on January 13, 1847, General Andres Pico and Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont approached each other alone, in the Cahuenga Pass. This is the present day site of Universal City, and Universal Studios, in the Hollywood Hills. And this was a very apt place, because the scene could have been straight out of a Hollywood movie.

A few weeks earlier, in Santa Barbara, a Californio woman named Bernarda Ruiz de Rodriguez had all the audacity to ask for ten minutes of Fremont’s time. He went ahead and granted it.

Those ten minutes stretched to two hours. She used every diplomatic skill at her disposal, and urged Fremont to negotiate a generous peace. She held his hand and asked that he agree to pardon Pico, release prisoners, guarantee equal rights for all Californians, and respect property rights.

Fremont felt moved. He was initially suspicious, but finally concluded that her intentions were good. He agreed to keep her wishes in mind, should the opportunity for a peace treaty arise.

Bernarda accompanied Fremont as he continued his march south toward Los Angeles, while reclaiming territory for the United States. On January 12 they came near the camp of General Andres Pico and his formidable lancers, at the Cahuenga Pass. Tensions rose. It seemed a new battle was looming.

Bernarda then left Fremont and traveled alone to Pico’s camp. She told him of the peace agreement that she and Fremont had been discussing. It sounded interesting to Pico, and he agreed to meet with his adversary.
The next day, January 13, 1847, Pico and Fremont approached each other alone, man-to-man. And without firing a shot, they agreed to the peace treaty that Bernarda had been pushing.

The treaty was put to paper, with the first seven articles written almost exactly the way Bernarda had suggested. Fremont and Pico signed it, ending all hostilities and bringing a lasting peace to Alta California.

The Treaty of Cahuenga was also influential in the drafting of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 12, 1848, which ended the Mexican-American War.

A generous peace was guaranteed for both sides. Everyone could return to business as usual. Except that now, Alta California belonged to the United States.

For the U.S. government, the conquest of California was finally complete.
On January 24, 1848, gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill, and wouldn’t you know? A bunch of damned migrants and immigrants wanted it. Migrants from eastern states, and immigrants from all over the world, poured into California during the ‘49er Gold Rush.

The 300,000 new, gold-grubbing arrivals to this U.S. possession allowed California to skip territorial status and directly become a state. So once again, newcomers changed the course of California history. And just like that, even before we became a state, we were getting too friggin' crowded.

A constitutional convention took place in Monterey in 1849, in order to establish the boundaries, laws, and government structure of the proposed state. And in order to wear funny hats, go to strip joints, and do other things delegates don’t talk about after returning home.

A debate ensued over the boundaries. Big Staters were greedy. They argued for keeping the boundaries of California as they were under Mexican rule. They hated to hear Texans brag all the time, and wanted a state big enough to shut them up.

But Small Staters were practical. They argued that a state this enormous would be too difficult to administer. They sought an eastern boundary at the 116th meridian, which would have included two-thirds of current-day Nevada, and would have sliced due south to the Mexican border, near San Diego, but would have cut off most of the southern deserts.

A weird "compromise" was hammered out that made California even smaller, and created the state's current boundaries. These boundaries exclude Nevada, but encompass the southern deserts west of the Colorado River. And, most importantly, they provide access to the abundant waters of the Colorado. Californians wanted lawns.
The remainder of Alta California became the lands of the Utah and New Mexico Territories. These territories were later subdivided into smaller territories and states.

The California constitution also banned slavery, and sadly, this led to another weird compromise. The Compromise of 1850.

The proposed admission of California as a free state prompted fiery debate in Congress between abolitionists and pro-slavery Southerners. This debate became so heated it nearly devolved into civil war. But Senator Henry Clay came to the rescue, and proposed a compromise that averted war. At least for the time being.

The Compromise of 1850 allowed California’s admission into the Union as a free state. It also allowed any new state, whether north or south of the Mason-Dixon line, to decide for itself if it would permit slavery. It included the highly controversial Fugitive Slave Act. And it cut the borders of Texas down to its current boundaries.

The Compromise of 1850 was the last major achievement of Henry Clay, before he died in 1852. And it allowed California to become our 31st state, on September 9, 1850.

**The Bear Flag**

The original Bear Flag, fabricated in Sonoma, was destroyed in the fires that followed the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. But a replica had been created in 1896 for the 50th anniversary of the Bear Flag Revolt, and today it’s displayed in the museum at the Sonoma Mission State Historic Park.
This photograph of William Todd’s original Bear Flag, was taken in 1890. 16 years later, the flag was destroyed in the fiery aftermath of the Great San Francisco Earthquake.

In 1911, the Bear Flag was adopted as California’s official state flag. Only this time a better artist was employed. The bear looked much more like a bear than a pig. And it was bigger and more centered on the flag.

And the interesting words, *California Republic*, still appeared below the ursine symbol. Today California sports the fifth largest economy in the world, so it could really be its own republic. And I’m sure there are many red states that wouldn’t mind if we seceded.

Maybe with just a little more illegal immigration, we can pull it off.
Chapter 21

THE CONQUERED AFTER CONQUEST

General Mariano Vallejo

While in prison in Sutter’s Fort, Vallejo contracted malaria and his weight dropped to 96 lbs. He was released on August 2, 1846, and returned to his Casa Grande home in Sonoma, where he recovered.

Vallejo had long believed that California would be better off under United States rule, and believed the Bear Flaggers had made a mistake by declaring an independent republic. He felt embittered toward the Bear Flaggers for taking him prisoner. But after the United States defeated Mexico, he persuaded wealthy Californios to accept American rule.

He became an influential delegate to the state’s Constitutional Convention in 1849, and was elected as a State Senator in 1850. He also donated land for the construction of a new capitol building, which was built in the eponymously named city of Vallejo. The state capitol was later moved three more times, to Sacramento, then Benicia (which neighbors Vallejo and is named after Vallejo’s wife), and then permanently back to Sacramento.

Mariano Vallejo died on January 18, 1890, at age 82.

Commandante General Jose Castro

Jose Castro returned briefly to California, where he sold his adobe house at Mission San Juan Bautista to a surviving member of the Donner
Party. In 1853 he left for Mexico again, and was appointed governor and military commander of Baja California.

In February 1860, Castro was assassinated by a bandit. He was 52 years old.

**Governor Pio Pico**

Pio Pico returned to California as a full-fledged American citizen, after the end of the Mexican-American War. He became one of the wealthiest cattlemen in California. But he had a bad addiction to gambling, and this and other factors led him to lose most of his wealth. Pio Pico died in 1894, at the age of 93.

**General Andres Pico**

General Andres Pico, the brother of Pio Pico, was pardoned by the Treaty of Cahuenga. He later became a California Assemblyman and State Senator.

As an Assemblyman, he authored a bill to partition California into two states, north and south. In 1859, the bill passed both houses of the state legislature and was signed by the governor.

However the U.S. Congress never voted on the bill. The majority in Congress feared that a state of Southern California would be a slave state, and might secede, should Civil War break out. This was due to a strong presence of settlers from the South in southern California, who favored slavery and secession. And there were many discontented Californios in southern California, who also favored secession.

There have been dozens of subsequent attempts to partition the state, but Pico’s was the closest any came to succeeding.

Andres Pico died in 1876, at age 65.
James K. Polk had promised he would only be a one-term president, when he was elected in 1844. Sound familiar? Every presidential candidate seems to promise this. Yet he’s one of the few who kept that promise, opting not to run for re-election in 1848.

He’d entered office full of energy, and eager to fulfill his mandate of Western expansion. But apparently, expanding the size of the United States is not as easy as it may seem. Those four grueling years in office exhausted his health, and he left weak and frail.

He contracted cholera just three months after leaving office, and in his already weakened state, succumbed to the disease on June 15, 1849. He was 53.

U.S. Consul Thomas O. Larkin

Thomas O. Larkin had been the first, and only, U.S. Consul to Alta California. After the war ended he was free to buy land in California. And buy he did. Real estate was practically worth its weight in gold, in the Golden State at that time, and Larkin made a fortune from his land speculations. By the late 1850’s he was possibly the richest man in America.

But he didn’t have long to enjoy his good fortune. On October 27, 1858, he contracted typhoid fever, and died at age 56.

Major Archibald H. Gillespie

Archibald H. Gillespie survived his lance wounds suffered at the Battle of San Pasqual. But he remained a major asshole, and thus never rose
beyond the rank of major. He resigned from the Marine Corps in 1854, at age 42. He died on August 16, 1873, at the age of 60, in San Francisco.

Commodore Robert F. Stockton

In 1849, Charles Weber laid out a town located at a supply point for gold miners, on the San Joaquin River. He named it Stockton, after Commodore Stockton. Today, with a population of around 300,000, Stockton is California’s 13th largest city.

Commodore Stockton resigned from the Navy in May 1850. In 1851, he was elected U.S. Senator from New Jersey, and as a senator he sponsored a bill to abolish flogging as a Navy punishment. He was a delegate to the Peace Conference of 1861, that unsuccessfully attempted to avert Civil War. He died in 1866, at age 71.

General Stephen W. Kearny

Kearny was welcomed back to Washington D.C. as a hero of the Mexican-American War. He was appointed military governor of Vera Cruz and Mexico City, during the post-war occupation of Mexico.

In September 1848, President Polk promoted him to Major General, over the angry objections of John Fremont’s powerful father-in-law, Senator Thomas Benton. But Benton had no need to feel upset. The month after Kearny’s promotion, in October 1848, Kearny contracted yellow fever and died at the age of 54.

Kit Carson

Kit Carson was romanticized and popularized by John Fremont, in Fremont’s writings of his Western exploits. Mentions of massacres and
murders were glossed over, or spun to make Carson look like a great Western hero.

During the Civil War, Carson led a regiment of Hispanic volunteers on the side of the Union, in the Battle of Valverde. This battle took place in Confederate Arizona (now part of New Mexico). His regiment performed well, but the Union general in charge employed poor tactics, and the Confederates won.

After the Confederate threat to New Mexico was finally eliminated, Carson led forces that suppressed the Navajo, Mescalero Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche peoples, by destroying their food sources.

Kit Carson died in Fort Lyon, Colorado from an aortic aneurysm, on May 23, 1868. He was 58.

**John C. Fremont**

After the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga, Commodore Stockton quickly appointed Fremont military governor of California. But then orders arrived from Washington that gave General Kearny the authority to appoint a governor, rather than Stockton.

Kearny changed the governorship appointment to Colonel Richard B. Mason. But Fremont hated Mason, and got into a pissing match with him, refusing to obey his orders, and challenging him to a duel.

Kearny responded to Fremont’s contumacious behavior by ordering him to accompany him on Kearny’s return march back east.

On August 22, 1847, Kearny and Fremont arrived at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. There Kearny had Fremont arrested and court-martialed for a variety of military offenses, including mutiny and disobeying orders.

On January 31, 1848, Fremont was acquitted of mutiny. But he was convicted of disobedience toward a superior officer, and of military misconduct. He was sentenced to a dishonorable discharge.
But by this time, Fremont was very popular in the United States. The press and public hailed him as a hero of the American West. The press followed his court-martial closely, and news of the verdict made headlines everywhere.

The verdict sparked popular outrage. President Polk approved of the verdict, but he feared the public sentiment. So he quickly commuted Fremont’s sentence and reinstated him into the Army. But he did not give Fremont a full pardon.

Fremont felt incensed that he had not received a full pardon and soon after, resigned from the Army in protest and returned to California.

There, Fremont became a multimillionaire in the Gold Rush, and also became one of California’s first two U.S. Senators.

His hero status continued, and it propelled him to the Republican Party’s nomination to president of the United States, in 1856. This made him the first Republican nominee for president, as the GOP had only recently been formed, in 1854. But he lost to Democrat James Buchanan.

During the Civil War, President Lincoln appointed Fremont to command the Department of the West, which was headquartered in Missouri. Fremont became the first in the American command to recognize and promote the fighting abilities of Ulysses S. Grant. But the headstrong Fremont got into a dispute with Lincoln and defied orders from the Commander-in-Chief, by trying to emancipate Missouri’s slaves. Lincoln fired him on November 2, 1861.

Fremont went on to dabble in speculative investments, and went broke during the financial Panic of 1873.

He was appointed Governor of the Arizona Territory in 1878, but showed little interest in the job, and resigned in 1881. He ended up living with his wife as a poor pensioner in Staten Island, New York. At age 77 he contracted peritonitis, dying on July 13, 1890.
Fremont was the instigator behind California’s Bear Flag Revolt, and made the conquest of California easier than it would have otherwise been, for the U.S. military.

He was a man of contradictions:

He was audacious, aristocratic, and charismatic. But he was also a cruel man, of low cunning, and capable of double-crossing his friends.

He murdered Native Americans, but treated surrendering Californios with generosity. He lived a life of celebrated adventure, but secretly colored it with deception, blood, and terror.

And he died on the East coast, a hero of the American West.

John C. Fremont, 1813-1890.
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