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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Michael Scott Van Wagenen. *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.–Mexican War.*** Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. 330 pp., 30 b&w illus. ISBN 978-1-55849-930-0 (cloth, \$80.00; paperback, \$28.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Douglas Murphy**, National Park Service

The fact that there are distinct differences in the way that citizens of the United States and Mexico recall the conflict between their two countries has long been a sort of elephant in the room. Observers seem eager to point out that it is there but rarely appear motivated to explain how it managed to squeeze through the doorway. Over the past thirty years, it has become a tradition for authors to point out that Americans “generally give scant attention to the sordid but successful adventure”¹ that transferred half of Mexico’s territory to the United States while at the same time noting that “the bitterness of the loss has not been erased from Mexican memory.”² The cause of this divergence is generally left unstated, though readers are frequently left with the vague impressions that Mexicans have nurtured a grudge for decades and Americans have simply elected to sweep an unseemly chapter in their history under the rug.

Michael Van Wagenen has dared to venture into this room and finally asks how the elephant got there. He reviews more than 160 years of United States and Mexican history and a diversity of source materials in an effort to determine how memories of that war have evolved since 1846 and the implications of those recollections for each nation and in terms of the relations between the countries.

He reveals two very different approaches to memory. Mexico carefully crafted an official memory of the conflict, not as an expression of anger against the United States, but as part of an effort to set aside the shame of defeat and create national unity and support of the central

¹ Lester Langley, *Mexamerica: Two Countries, One Future* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 281.

² Jeffrey Davidow, *The Bear and the Porcupine: The U.S. and Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2007), 14.

state. At the heart of this effort the “Niños Heroes”—six young military cadets who died in defense of their country— evolved into martyrs who “inspired pride in the indomitable Mexican spirit and forwarded ...domestic and international goals” (138). By contrast, recollection of the war in the United States has always been a much more diffuse enterprise, with communities and individuals taking the lead in devising memorials and monuments to local heroes or connections. Many of the initial efforts to mark the war were swept away by the Civil War, which had a much larger and more direct impact on American lives. Many Mexican War veterans also served the Confederacy, and when the Union was restored, there was little effort to honor the men who had later turned against their country. By the twentieth century, only a few staunch descendants of the players in the grand drama of 1846-1848 continued to develop monuments and memorials, often to glorify themselves at the exclusion of others.

The author finds pitfalls in both routes to memory. In the United States, where the federal government has generally avoided the memory-making business, heritage groups and Chicano groups often find themselves at odds over interpretations of the war while the mass of population cares little at all. In Mexico, the effort to establish an official memory has been equally problematic. Efforts to wean generations of citizens on the legend of the Niños Heroes, for example, have occasionally backfired, with protesters co-opting the story to justify resistance to the government and its policies. The mythology of the Boy Heroes also occasionally conflicts with relations with the United States. In one of the more interesting themes of the book Van Wagenen describes how the Mexican government has struggled, occasionally in vain, to use the war to promote nationalist rather than anti-*Yanqui* sentiment. Likewise he recounts the complex dance that U.S. officials must undertake in order to respond to Mexico’s memory of the war and the complex array of memories on the home front.

The book delves into broad array of topics from U.S. town names and the Mexican national anthem in the nineteenth century to efforts to develop bi-national cooperation on documentaries and historic sites in the late twentieth century. Other topics include veteran’s pensions, Santa Anna’s captured leg, living history programs and battle reenactments, and even films about deserters and cannibalism. The reader comes away with a clear impression that the war has never been forgotten at all, but molded, misinterpreted, and distorted to serve many different ideologies and causes.

Despite this extensive coverage, the book also occasionally leaves the reader wanting more. In several instances, the author describes how certain groups recalled the war, sets forth a handful of examples, then suggests that this sentiment was shared by a much larger segment of the population. The conclusions are likely true, but because of the dearth of surveys or polls that would provide statistical support, it would be helpful to see additional citations and demonstrations that corroborate these assertions. Also absent is a discussion of formal education in the United States. While there is an interesting analysis of the ways in which Mexican authorities have utilized textbooks to portray the North American intervention and to inculcate children, there is no equivalent look at the United States. Anyone who has ever interacted with the American general public on the topic of the war with Mexico has frequently heard the lament, ‘they never taught that in school.’ Van Wagenen states with conviction that many Americans draw their limited, often-erroneous knowledge of the U.S.-

Mexican War from television programs like *Davy Crockett* and *The Simpsons*. Unfortunately he does not delve into the U.S. education system or explain why the conflict continues to receive scant attention in elementary and high school classrooms.

These omissions do not undermine the overall value of this work. The book still provides an important explanation of how two societies developed very different memories of a shared conflict. Although other readers will have differing ideas on what should have been added or left out, they will at least come away with an understanding of how the elephant entered the room and even gain some insight about where it might go from here.

Douglas Murphy is Chief of Operations at Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park. He received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His publications on the U.S.-Mexican War include "The March to Monterrey (Tennessee) and the View From Chapultepec (Wisconsin), The Mexican War and U.S. Town Names," *Military History of the West*, Fall 2010, and "Dogs of Destiny, Hounds From Hell, American Soldiers and Canines in the Mexican War," *Military History of the West*, Spring 1996. His book *War Comes to the Rio Grande: The Opening Campaign of the Mexican War* will be published by Texas A&M University Press in 2014.

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