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The Taos Mutiny of 1855
Will Gorenfeld

On 27 November 1854, bugler Aaron Stevens of Company F in the First Regiment of the U.S. Dragoons apologized to his sister Lydia Pierce for not writing any sooner, explaining he had been on patrol since April. Calling himself “d__m saucy [sic]” and thinking of marrying “a Spanish Lady,” the twenty-four-year-old Stevens was in good spirits. He boasted that his company “had two fights with the Patches . . . this year and had 9 men killed & 10 wounded . . . and as luck would have it I have got off safe so far, but they might get me yet.” Within a few months of writing to his sister, the free-spirited Stevens and several other men in his company would mutiny in the dusty plaza of Taos, New Mexico Territory.²

The Taos mutiny of 1855 was the final chapter in a series of embarrassing incidents that revealed the ineptitude of some army officers and led to a cover-up attempt by the high command. Following the mutiny, an army court-martial sentenced Stevens and three other enlisted men to death after finding them guilty of attempting to murder their commanding officer. They escaped execution because Pres. Franklin Pierce and Sec. of War Jefferson Davis commuted their death sentences to hard labor and ordered subsequent
court-martial proceedings against two of the officers present at the mutiny. When all was said and done, the army would censure Stevens’s company commander for being intoxicated and disrespectful at a court-martial, arrange for the transfer of all the enlisted men in Company F to other companies, subject the company’s first lieutenant and the squadron’s commanding officer to courts-martial, and effectively banish the commanding officer from New Mexico Territory for good measure.

The mutiny offers a unique example of the many problems besetting the U.S. Army after the U.S.-Mexico War. In northern New Mexico, enlisted men fought officers and officers turned against one another. The mutiny sheds light on the character and behavior of the mediocre cast of officers who were serving in what was once regarded as an elite regiment.

For thirteen years (1833–1846), the First Dragoons crisscrossed the Great Plains, exploring uncharted regions, discovering new trails, meeting Indians in numerous councils, settling disputes between tribes, and protecting the tribes from unauthorized encroachments by whites. Under the command of Col. Stephen W. Kearny, this relatively small body of highly regarded soldiers and insightful officers was able to conduct missions and attain its goals without resorting to violence.3 In the words of historian Durwood Ball, “These dragoon expeditions were graphic demonstrations of United States power . . . and helped to open American roads into the West.”4 Then, on 29 December 1845, Pres. James K. Polk signed a measure admitting the former Republic of Texas into the Union as a state, setting into motion forces that predictably led to a war with Mexico and the forcible acquisition of vast new territories. The U.S.-Mexico War had a devastating effect on the First Dragoons and particularly Company F.

Colonel Kearny’s marches across the Plains and his tough diplomacy with a variety of tribes earned him and the First Dragoons both fame and the gratitude of frontier settlers.5 Although the skills of a crack mounted regiment developed slowly and the cost in lost men and horses was high, dragoon officers and sergeants learned how to train and lead their men effectively. The dragoon expeditions between 1839 and 1848 testify to their achievement. A dragoon corporal stationed at Fort Leavenworth wrote in 1847:

In the Army, we know not at which moment our services may be required and although we may be at this post today, yet we may be about some fifty miles by the morrow. Such has been the case with me during the past winter. I have been ordered to take charge of a party to go among the Indians, and in one quarter of an hour have been in my saddle, and on my journey, fully armed and equipped. Such is a
Dragoon’s life, he must have always, all his accoutrements ready, and in the proper place, so that whether we are ordered night or day, it makes no difference in the dispatch. I have been called upon at 10 O Clock at night and traveled without moment’s rest the distance of one hundred and forty miles.

At the end of the U.S.-Mexico War, Sgt. Frank Clarke, writing home, proclaimed that the proud First was “the best disciplined Regiment in the U.S. Service.”

Before the war, Kearny made an effort to have the First Dragoons staffed with some of the army’s best officers and to cull the misfits. Graduates from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point typically received assignments to a service branch based on their class standing: the top graduates obtained commissions in the engineers, while those below them went to ordnance, artillery, dragoons, and infantry (in descending order). By the early 1840s, many cadets at West Point had begun to regard the U.S. Dragoons as a corps d’élite within the U.S. Army and wanted to participate in its great adventures out on the western Plains. More than other regiments, the elite First Dragoons tended to attract recruits who were educated, including a few who came from well-to-do families.

During the war with Mexico, Gen. Winfield Scott honored Company F of the First Dragoons by selecting it as his personal escort. On 20 August 1847, the Americans defeated the Mexican army at the Battle of Churubusco. The company was ordered to attack Mexican soldiers fleeing down a causeway into Mexico City. Reporter George Kendall of the New Orleans (La.) Picayune viewed the resulting charge of Company F as “one of the most brilliant and decisive feats which has occurred in the war.” Widely celebrated by the press, this singular event brought a measure of glory to those who participated in the charge.

After the U.S.-Mexico War, Capt. Philip Thompson resumed command of Company F. Thompson had graduated from West Point in 1835, ranked thirty-sixth in a class of fifty-six. During the war, he was an adjutant for Col. Alexander W. Doniphan’s regiment of Missouri Volunteers and participated in the invasion of the state of Chihuahua. In return for his valuable assistance to Doniphan at the Battle of Sacramento, Thompson received a brevet promotion to the rank of major. Tragically, he was also fighting a lifelong and ultimately losing battle with alcohol, which had prevented Kearny from granting him important assignments.

Leaving Mexico on 16 July 1848, Thompson arrived at Jefferson Barracks in Missouri on 8 August, where Company F’s short-term “for the war”
enlisted men were on their second enlistment, and many had combat experience in the late war.

Troopers identified with their own tightly knit group. Military historian Don Rickey observes that most soldiers took pride in their company and tended “to look on the company as their home and family, a feeling especially important to younger, homeless men, and to the old professional privates who re-enlisted in the same units time after time.”12 The U.S.-Mexico War, however, resulted in the death, transfer, or resignation of a significant number of the dragoons’ original cast of officers. By 1855 all the U.S.-Mexico War–era staff officers (colonels Stephen Kearny and Richard Mason, Lt. Col. Clifton Wharton, and Maj. Nathan Boone) and many field-grade officers (captains and lieutenants) were gone. With the exception of Maj. Benjamin Lloyd Beall, the replacements, especially at the staff level, were not as capable as their predecessors and destroyed what was once a showpiece regiment.

Buck and Gag Him

A vast gulf in status separated officers from the enlisted ranks. While officers considered themselves privileged by virtue of their station, typical enlisted men of this era were uneducated, poor, and foreign-born. During the 1850s, for example, two-thirds of enlisted men in the regular army had been born outside the United States, and in 1855, seventeen of the fifty-six men in Company F bore either German or Irish surnames.13 Many officers were aloof and scorned their troops. One dragoon trooper wrote, “A soldier is a dog to them, a mere nothing, and woe betide the enlisted man who shows the least idea of their worthlessness.”14 Most regular army officers showed a degree of respect and concern for their men, however. A U.S.-Mexico War dragoon summarized it best: “Our officers were all graduates of West Point, and at the worst were gentlemen of intelligence and education, often harsh and tyrannical, yet they took pride in having their men well clothed and fed, making them contented and reconciled to their lot.”15

Imperious and brutal behavior by military authorities was nevertheless all too common during the antebellum period. The men in the ranks had good reason to fear those who commanded them. Army discipline of the era tended to be swift, and court-martial sentences were draconian. The mores of the era licensed many forms of harsh punishment, such as fifty lashes for
desertion. In the field, officers sometimes inflicted punishment without seeking a court-martial.

In 1852, for example, Capt. James Carleton of the First Dragoons forced three drunken enlisted men to walk back to camp while tied behind wagons. One of the men fell, was dragged for a mile and a half, and later died from injuries suffered during this ordeal. Dragoon sergeant James Bennett described how an enlisted man who said he could go no farther on a march was struck down by the sword of his commanding officer and left to die. He also noted another officer who, without any justification, seriously injured an enlisted man with his sword. A dragoon in Utah Territory reported an incident in which a lieutenant, for no apparent reason, knocked an enlisted man senseless with the butt of an army revolver and then remarked, “One less dough boy.” Lt. Cave Couts, a dragoon officer, voiced his disgust for an artillery officer who forced a prisoner to walk from Chihuahua to Santa Fe while handcuffed and chained to a caisson by an iron band around his waist. Captain Thompson, the commander of Company F, was known to lose his temper when drunk and physically abuse enlisted men. As a veteran of service in the Seventh U.S. Infantry wrote, “Company commanders would inflict all kinds of punishment that was not prescribed by regulations, bucking and gagging, carrying large timbers before the guard house, knocking them down with the butt of their muskets, maiming them by sabre cuts and in some instances shooting them.”

During the U.S.-Mexico War, draconian treatment by officers led volunteer troops to mutiny frequently. The arrogant and inept Gen. Caleb Cushing caused a mutiny by making irresponsible demands of his volunteers. Stevens, who played a role in the Taos mutiny, enlisted in Cushing’s regiment and certainly witnessed the mistreatment of enlisted men in Mexico.

Company F was part of a squadron under the command of Maj. George Blake. Blake had grown up comfortably in an upper-middle-class family in Philadelphia. His British-born father, George E. Blake, a prominent publisher of parlor music, had political connections in the Democratic Party that allowed George’s older brother, Jacob Edmund Blake, to gain admission into West Point in 1833 and receive a lieutenant's commission in the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. These same connections enabled the younger Blake to secure an officer’s commission without attending West Point. In 1836 he obtained a presidential appointment as a lieutenant in the newly formed Second Dragoons. He fought with this regiment during the Second Seminole War and was one of the first U.S. soldiers to set foot within the walls of the Mexican port city of Vera Cruz. With Blake at the helm, the hard-riding Second Dragoons served as the vanguard of General Scott’s
army when it invaded the valley of Mexico. Superiors praised Blake for his heroism during the war.22

The future seemed bright for Blake when, on 23 July 1850, he obtained a promotion to the rank of major in the First Dragoons. Although his men regarded him as a strict disciplinarian and martinet who distanced himself from the ranks, the major showed a cordial and gracious side to members of the upper echelons of society. When New Mexico territorial governor David Meriwether and U.S. Attorney W. W. H. Davis arrived in Taos one evening, for example, Blake greeted them with a superb meal at his quarters in town
and then escorted them to a nearby fandango.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1852, less than a year after arriving in New Mexico, Major Blake and Company F traveled north to the San Luis Valley for the purpose of building a new post named Fort Massachusetts. Sergeant Clarke noted that the fort was “built of Logs & is very prettily situated in a valley between two Mountains. Game is very plentiful in the vicinity.” But the winters were especially severe: two to three feet of snow lay on the ground from October to March, and temperatures reached twelve below zero degrees Fahrenheit.\textsuperscript{24}

Instead of training, the men in the ranks labored long and hard to build the post before the onset of winter. Blake refused to grant them any time off. Most men soon came to resent his severe command and disparaging remarks. The army command later criticized his “fault-finding and carping manner” for sowing “discontent and insubordination” among the troops he commanded.\textsuperscript{25} Blake, for example, once encouraged trooper John Cooper to desert so that the major would have the “pleasure of seeing [him] receive fifty lashes” after his capture. Cooper was not alone. The army later charged Blake with seemingly inducing the desertions of Sgt. James McLean and bugler Francis Clark from Fort Massachusetts in early 1853.\textsuperscript{26}

Lt. Robert Johnston of Company F asserted that Major Blake “rarely or ever gave any man, non-com officer, [or] private a pass without speaking to him in such a manner as would dissatisfy any man.” The company’s acting assistant surgeon, Edmund Barry, observed: “I have heard among the officers and men, that the men were overworked at Massachusetts. I have known Maj. Blake to refuse passes frequently to deserving men which I conceived to be owing to partial spite and spleen, and I have known him to drive men who had been drinking a little, out of town with much harshness.” Barry concluded, “The company in general hated Major Blake and I suppose the reason was because he kept them all the time at work and allowed very few privileges.” Even as he challenged troopers who were in town on passes, Blake himself frequently left the post for unauthorized forays into Taos and
did not record his own unexcused absences in the post returns. Later, when he commanded at Cantonment Burgwin, he was still absent more than 20 percent of the time.27

Blake’s cowardice also hurt his reputation among the troops. If he served bravely in Florida and Mexico, he lost any bravado when he arrived in New Mexico Territory. James Bennett, an enlisted trooper, questioned the major’s nerve. While campaigning against the Navajos, the major would have had “a grave dug in his tent to protect him from night attacks by the Indians.”28

Insp. Gen. Joseph K. Mansfield visited the post from 18 August to 22 August 1853 and found that the troops had had very little drill instruction because of their continual work on the fort. The company’s year of “constant labour” gained the approbation of the inspector general, who said that the “whole command is entitled to great credit for the work they have done in so short a time.” Although Mansfield noted that the men had not been paid for five months, he seemingly overlooked the fire burning down below, concluding that the men were well disciplined.29

In late 1853, the army discovered that there was insufficient winter forage for the horses and ordered Company F to move down to the slightly warmer climate of Cantonment Burgwin, located just over ten miles to the west of Taos. The overworked troopers now labored to pack supplies and equipment for the move to Cantonment Burgwin. They must have been glad to avoid spending another winter at the fort, but like so many things in army life, it made no sense to leave a fort that they had recently worked so hard to build.30

Matters came to an explosive head at Fort Massachusetts on 25 October 1853. A few days prior to their departure, about half the garrison, likely fueled by the combined effects of whiskey, frustration, and fury against Blake, rioted on the parade grounds. A shaken Blake allegedly hid in his quarters and made no effort to stop the drunkenness and insubordination.31 No one was apparently harmed in the riot, nor were there any general courts-martial afterward. Those in command may have seen the uprising as a way for the troops to vent their pent-up frustration and let the matter lie.

Things did not improve for Company F after its move to Cantonment Burgwin. On the morning of 30 March 1854, Lt. John Davidson, commanding Company I with reinforcements supplied from Company F, carried orders to locate a fugitive band of Jicarilla Apaches and prevent them from fleeing westward across the Rio Grande. He disobeyed these orders by attacking the Jicarilla camp near Cieneguilla. The Jicarillas were ready for the assault and soon had Davidson and his men surrounded in a basin below the village. With casualties mounting and ammunition running low, Davidson rashly ordered, “Mount and save yourself.”32 The troops broke out and climbed to
the top of a nearby ridgeline. The Jicarillas maintained their counterattack, striking effectively at the flanks of the exhausted and wounded troops as they attempted to escape along the ridgeline.

In terms of casualties, Cieneguilla was the worst defeat ever suffered by the First Dragoons. Twenty-four dragoons were killed and another twenty-three wounded. A disproportionate number of the casualties came from Company F: everyone in its sixteen-man detachment, largely recruits, was killed or wounded at Cieneguilla.33 Continuing to lead the life of a gentleman in Taos, Blake was not at Cantonment Burgwin when reports arrived that the Jicarillas had seriously mauled Davidson’s patrol. In November 1853, Davidson sought to file court-martial charges against Blake for his unexcused absences from Fort Massachusetts and mistreatment of the command. Gen. John Garland sent these proposed charges to be reviewed by General Scott. In March 1854, in an effort to gain Blake’s support in order to prevent him from being court-martialed for disobedience of orders at Cieneguilla, Davidson withdrew the charges against Blake. Little did he know that his charges would come to the attention of Secretary of War Davis.34 Davidson would eventually dismiss the charges. Regarding the disastrous defeat of Blake’s men at Cieneguilla in 1854, Lt. David Bell of the Second Dragoons wrote to a colleague, “If he [Davidson] had been under the command of almost any officer other than Blake he would have been tried for disobedience of orders.”35

After the defeat at Cieneguilla, Company F remained in the field through the fall of 1854 and fought a second skirmish with the Jicarillas. Although the hard campaigning of 1854 had worn down the troops in Company F as well as their clothing, equipment, and mounts, the army command planned to send the company back into the field in 1855 for a renewed campaign against the Utes and Jicarillas. On the morning of 9 March 1855, Thompson led a fifty-five-man detachment out of Cantonment Burgwin for a planned rendezvous with Col. Thomas T. Fauntleroy’s column, which was marching south from Fort Massachusetts.36

After riding about a mile north of Cantonment Burgwin, Captain Thompson halted at Ceran St. Vrain’s mill and distillery in Talpa to procure cornmeal for the horses and whiskey for the company. Major Blake, Lieutenant Johnston, and the commissary sergeant went ahead to Taos to conduct company business. Bugler Stevens recalled how Blake rode by the mill hurriedly on his way to town and brusquely told him to “get out of the way.” Meanwhile, some troopers passed around the jugs, took a few swallows, and filled canteens with the brew.37

Attorney Davis noted that the “town of Don Fernando de Taos, the county seat, is situated in a beautiful valley . . . mountain locked upon every side.”38
Taos, like most towns in the West, offered a range of vices to miners, ranchers, farmers, and American soldiers. In 1850 Major Beall, then the commanding officer of the military post at Taos and hardly a teetotaler, made the town saloon and billiard hall off-limits for enlisted men and convinced the army to station the troops several miles to the west of town.\textsuperscript{39} By 1855, however, the army had relaxed the restrictions on visiting the Taos saloons.

After leaving the mill, the company reached the Taos Plaza at about eleven in the morning. Thompson ordered the men to gather additional supplies for the campaign. Leaving half the detachment on the south side of the plaza, the captain crossed to Peter Joseph’s crowded store on the northwestern side of the plaza, where, in the company of some enlisted men, he started drinking.\textsuperscript{40}

**Oh What an Eruption Soon Occurred**

Acting assistant surgeon Barry testified after the mutiny, “I am well aware that there was such a feeling in the Company against Maj. Blake. It was like gun powder—it required but a spark to explode it.”\textsuperscript{41} The events in the Taos Plaza supplied the spark.

When Lieutenant Johnston came to town before the arrival of the troops, he met Christopher “Kit” Carson, the famous scout and mountain man. Johnston told him that a number of men in Company F had started drinking that morning and that he would have bypassed Taos had he been in command. According to storekeeper Peter Joseph, several Company F soldiers were drunk when they entered town and became hostile toward the Hispanic residents. One trooper attempted to dash his horse through a group of New Mexicans and ride up the steps of Joseph’s store, but the horse stumbled and fell, throwing its rider.\textsuperscript{42}

As tensions between intoxicated troopers and Hispanic townspeople mounted, Captain Thompson granted Johnston permission to order the pack train out of town. He then instructed 1st Sgt. Thomas Fitzsimmons to prepare the troop for departure. Bugler Stevens sounded the crisp notes for assembly, followed by the bugle call “To horse.” After gathering, the troopers mounted their horses, forming an extended line across the plaza. Lieutenant Johnston later reported that Thompson at this time appeared to be calm and “purposely polite.”\textsuperscript{43}

Judge Perry E. Brochus, an associate justice for the Territory of New Mexico, heard taunts and shouts emanating from the plaza while he was passing en route to the Taos courthouse. Sensing trouble, the judge headed for the plaza, where he quickly sensed “a suppressed spirit of mutiny in the
majority of the soldiers.” He found Major Blake seated at a desk in Joseph’s store writing reports, oblivious to the commotion outside. The major assured the judge that he would quickly put a stop to the rowdiness and headed for the door.

Stepping into the plaza, Blake saw several drunken dragoons riding their horses wildly to and fro and brawling with Hispanic bystanders while noncommissioned officers were attempting to disarm those engaged in the fracas. The bulk of the troop seemed peaceably inclined, laughing at the disorderly antics of their drunken comrades and staying out of the fray. The drunken behavior of the soldiers also amused a crowd of civilian bystanders, who roared with laughter. Some soldiers later claimed that the humor of the vecinos (New Mexican residents) had infuriated them all the more.

Blake ordered Thompson to take the detachment out of town as quickly as possible. Jeremiah Sullivan, a three-year veteran who had been seriously wounded less than a year before at Cieneguilla, was lying on the ground, too intoxicated to mount, much less to ride. Captain Thompson ordered his first sergeant to lift the “d—d rascal” onto his horse and tie him to the saddle.

Because of Captain Thompson’s alcoholism, Fitzsimmons—a tough and capable twenty-six-year-old veteran from Westmeath, Ireland—often ran Company F. Assisted by corporals James Vanderlen and Robert Walsh, Fitzsimmons hauled Sullivan onto his saddle, but the intoxicated man rolled off and fell to the ground. The trio hoisted him again, but the confused and drunken Sullivan remained unsteady and resisted their efforts. Sergeant Fitzsimmons warned Sullivan that he had better make less trouble, to which Sullivan replied, “You son of a bitch, you are always down upon me.” Fitzsimmons claimed that Sullivan then punched and kicked him, and he fought back by striking Sullivan in the face with his fist. Blake was standing nearby, and when he admonished the sergeant for his rough treatment of the drunken trooper, Fitzsimmons replied that he was simply defending himself. Blake claimed that Sullivan had never struck the sergeant. Appalled by the sergeant’s lie, Blake ordered Thompson to arrest Fitzsimmons. The unsteady Thompson, believing he needed Fitzsimmons’s help leading the troop out of town and in the campaign, refused to comply with this order. “Very well,” said the major as he walked over to Fitzsimmons, “you are placed under arrest.” The furious sergeant took off his saber belt and slammed it to the ground.

Thompson, however, called back Fitzsimmons and ordered him to tie Sullivan to his saddle. Sensing a loss of control and the growing danger of a riot, Blake repeatedly ordered Thompson to march his troop out of town. Thompson replied that he could not depart without Sullivan. “Never mind that man [Sullivan], I will have care taken of him,” responded Blake. “No,”
insisted Thompson, “I must bring all the men with me that I brought in.”
Blake barked, “I order you to take your company out of town immediately,
or if you do not I will, I will march the company out myself.” Thompson
then asked whether the major found him unfit for duty, and Blake assured
him that he did not.49

The arrogant major soon touched off a riot when he walked toward the
front of the assembled troop and turned to address the men and take com-
mand. The troop’s anger bubbled to the surface, with the heavy influence
of whiskey no doubt removing the inhibitions of some. An intoxicated Pvt.
John Cooper rode up to Fitzsimmons and demanded to know what that
“damned son of a bitch Blake [was] doing there.” The small but powerfully
built Cooper, once a farmer in Kentucky, had reenlisted in November 1851
and thereafter formed a strong dislike for Major Blake. He exclaimed that the
men in the company were tired of being “driven like niggers” and that it was
time for Blake to give the company some rest. Cooper, whom Fitzsimmons
had already disarmed, continued to disparage the major before riding up to
him. Recognizing Cooper as one of the men at Fort Massachusetts whom
he had encouraged to desert, Blake stated, “this is the son of a bitch . . . I
have been looking for.” Sergeant Fitzsimmons later recounted, “They then
clinched each other by the body and commenced to scuffle and try to throw
each other down.” Major Blake seized Cooper by the collar with one hand
and punched him two or three times. Cooper grabbed Blake’s collar, pulled
the major’s hair, bit him, and struck him with his fist.50

Trooper Joseph Fox, a fiery, freckle-faced Irishman who had enlisted in
April 1852, yelled to Cooper, “Kill the God damned long nosed son of a bitch”
and “cut his throat.” Pvt. John Krebler allegedly furnished Cooper with a
knife and told him to “cut the throat of the son of a bitch.” The company
was filled with well-armed, combat-tested veterans who detested the major
and wanted to see him get a sound thrashing, but they did not intend to kill
him. Even still, when someone gave Blake a pistol, he tossed it away, fearing
they would kill him if he used it.50

Another soldier pleaded with some men to follow him into the fight.
Fitzsimmons, however, warned the men to remain in ranks, and most did
not join the fray. At first neither Thompson nor any of the noncommissioned
officers came to Blake’s aid. Only Lieutenant Johnston meekly attempted to
come forward to help the major. When Johnston started to draw his saber,
the powerfully built Corporal Vanderlen caught him by the shoulder and
warned him sternly that the men would likely kill him. Johnston sheepishly
retreated to the left flank of the troop, commanding the men to remain in the
ranks. He would later claim that he had successfully kept the men in place,
but in fact several men disregarded his commands and joined the fight. Most likely, Johnston had rightfully feared for his personal safety and stayed back until the riot had cooled.52

According to one writer, Kit Carson feared nothing and responded to danger “with a preternatural swiftness.” A dragoon sergeant once described him as being “ever ready to sacrifice his all for a friend in need.” But on this day, Carson peered cautiously around a corner, saw that nobody was rushing to assist the fallen and battered Blake (including Captain Thompson and Lieutenant Johnston), calculated the odds, and decided not to fight the furious soldiers alone. Rather, from a safe distance, Carson begged the men to stop beating Blake. When they did not stop the attack, Carson departed. He later testified, “I saw that they were too many for me, that I had no business there, that I could do no good and left.”53

Only one person was willing to risk helping Blake: his trusted servant, Ramon Baca. Trying to save his patron, Baca rushed into the fight and kicked Cooper in the neck. Cooper released his hold and called out for his comrades to “kill the son of a bitch.” Four soldiers approached and struck Baca twice with the knuckle guard of a saber and the butt of a carbine, rendering him unconscious.54

Judge Brocchus’s servant entered his chambers and stated breathlessly that the soldiers were about to kill Major Blake. The pugnacious judge, never one to avoid a fight, rushed into the fray.55 Arriving at the edge of the plaza, he saw Blake rolling on the ground and fighting with a “stout athletic soldier” while Captain Thompson looked on in what the judge described as a “state of total inertness, manifestly paralyzed in his energies.” Thompson was standing close to the brawl but doing absolutely nothing to stop it. No mutineer apparently made the slightest effort to harm Thompson even though he stood in the eye of the storm.56

As they struggled on the dusty ground, Blake grabbed a saber from Thompson’s scabbard and struck Cooper three times with the flat of the blade. Sergeant Fitzsimmons testified that his sense of duty now overcame his anger at Blake. With the newly minted corporal Vanderlen following close behind, Fitzsimmons rushed forward carrying a pistol to break up the fight. He reportedly heard someone yell, “Look out sergeant or you’ll get hit or hurt.” The pistol was knocked from his hand, and soon the sergeant was fending off the blows of trooper Fox’s saber with his forearm. As Private Johnston rode up toward Blake carrying a pistol, Fitzsimmons yelled for him to get back into the ranks, and Johnston turned around.57

Vanderlen and Fitzsimmons, who had suffered some minor cuts, later testified that they pulled Cooper off of Major Blake and tossed the assailant
out of the plaza. When Cooper got up and drew a knife, Fitzsimmons allegedly told the trooper to put it away. Cooper muttered some curses and started walking back to the company. A trooper named John Steele then grabbed Blake’s handkerchief and pulled Blake back down to the ground. Thompson later said that he grabbed Steele by the hand and struck him several times with the flat of his saber, forcing Steele to release his hold on the major. Thompson’s account is suspect because Blake had already taken his saber, and Thompson was probably too inebriated to lend a hand.

Judge Brocchus—who in his testimony never mentioned seeing Thompson, Fitzsimmons, or Vanderlen attempting to rescue Blake, much less Johnston keeping troops from participating in the riot—waded into the middle of the donnybrook and “seized Major Blake around the waist and by this act of persuasion and the application of some little force induced him to withdraw from the scene of action to the portal of Peter Joseph[s]” store. At this point, Deputy Marshal Ezra A. Depew, Carson, and some bystanders gathered the courage to help break up the fight. Johnston drew his saber again and boldly threatened to “cut down any man who attempted to attack the major.” Dazed and confused, beaten and bruised, his uniform caked in dirt and blood, Major Blake rose slowly to his feet and identified the three troopers who had attacked him. Deputy Depew, aided by the noncommissioned officers, escorted them to the town jail.

For the moment, a fragile peace returned to the plaza. Severely bloodied and battered about his hands and face, Major Blake was confused, angry, stunned, and, in the words of Judge Brocchus, “evidently in very high blood and laboring under a sense of outrage and wrong.” The judge tenderly placed his arms around the injured Blake and helped him up to the front porch of Joseph’s store. Blake immediately began to assail Thompson and Johnston for not coming to his assistance, claiming that these two men wanted to see him killed. As the major was brushing himself off, several parties nearby heard him grumble, “I can whip or thrash any man in this Company from right to left. Either with gun, pistol or saber and now if there is any one of you thinks yourself fit step out here and I will show you whether you can call old Blake a coward or such.” Lieutenant Johnston believed that Blake had taunted the men by calling out “any son of a bitch or damned scoundrel.”

During the riot, Stevens watched the belligerent behavior of the men from the center of the troop while holding the reins of his own horse and those of Lieutenant Johnston and Captain Thompson. As he walked with the horses toward Thompson and Johnston, he distinctly heard Blake’s challenge from the porch. Blake’s rudeness toward him at St. Vrain’s mill earlier that day and
the major’s past mistreatment of the troops were still fresh in his mind. The sight of three of his comrades being hauled off to jail, together with Blake’s bold challenge, must have made Stevens recall his experience in the Massachusetts regiment during the late war, when he witnessed the oppression of General Cushing and other high-handed officers. He could not contain himself any longer. Throwing down the reins of the three horses, Stevens drew his heavy Colt Dragoon revolver from the saddle holster and replied loudly to Blake, “You can’t back out the Company that way. I’m one of the worst men in it and I’ll accept your challenge either with gun, pistol or saber.” Blake did not apparently hear this statement as he hobbled away. But Lieutenant Johnston and Corporal Vanderlen did hear it, and they quickly gained control of the pistol before telling Stevens to take his horse and go back to the ranks.62

Blake’s challenge to the entire company horrified Judge Brocchus, who feared that Blake’s reckless remarks would rekindle their anger and lead to greater bloodshed. In his view, the majority of soldiers were “in a state of most lawless and fearful excitement, so much so, that I believe every heart amongst the civilians in the Plaza was quivering with fear.” Unaware of Stevens’s fuming acceptance of Blake’s challenge, Brocchus testified that the youthful bugler was “standing apparently in a very orderly and subordinate manner with the reins of one or two horses swinging on his arm and a burnished Sharp’s carbine in his hand.” The judge mistakenly thought that Stevens held no sympathy for the rioters, and Brocchus proposed to the major “to make him Stevens an instrument to go to work among the other troops & persuade them into subordination.” Believing him to be “disposed to return order and decorum among the other troops,” the judge walked over to Stevens and asked him to apologize to the major on behalf of the troop.63

Stevens accompanied Judge Brocchus to the porch where Stevens offered Blake an apology. Brocchus testified at Blake’s court-martial that “Maj. Blake replied addressing himself to [Stevens] with earnestness of manner and intensity of feeling. ‘You have behaved very badly’ and he may have specified some allegations against him, but I do not remember. The prisoner [Stevens] with an air of servility began to explain in an apologetic manner. Maj. Blake seemed, however, unwilling to listen and turning away remarked to me, ‘Judge, I leave the matter with you.’” He said that Blake’s tone of voice was “empathetic and reproachful.”64

Stevens, angered by the major’s rude manner and mistreatment of the company, dropped the reins of his horse and stormed back to his place in the ranks of the dragoons. The judge, however, undaunted in his efforts as
peacemaker, approached Stevens again and urged him to offer a formal apology to the major. The two men returned to the porch where the major was standing. The judge observed that Stevens did not use “words ordinarily significant of apology, whether from ignorance of what words to employ or reluctance to apologize I am not able to say.” Major Blake, in turn, responded with additional insults, declaring “that he and many of the company had behaved very badly and that for his part he was not afraid of him or the whole company.”

These statements by Blake, who was notorious for his ill-advised asperity among troops even in the best circumstances, enraged Stevens. Born to the same socioeconomic class as the major, the proud bugler replied, “God damn you. I’m as good as you are and will blow your God d—d heart out.” Raising his Model 1851 Sharps carbine, he stepped back, cocked the hammer, and was about to point the weapon at Blake’s breast when two sets of arms came out of nowhere and knocked the carbine barrel away. The strong arms belonged to Kit Carson and Judge Brocchus. Carson wrested the gun from Stevens’s grasp and Deputy Depew marched him to jail.

The exceedingly intoxicated Sullivan was still unable to mount his horse, and Blake arranged to have him tossed into jail to sober up. With tranquility somewhat restored, Johnston led the company out of Taos. The next day, military officials took custody of the prisoners and on 13 March 1855 placed them in the guardhouse at Fort Massachusetts to await trial.

From 19 March to 23 March, Company F—minus Steele, Cooper, Fox, and Stevens sitting in the Taos jail, the banged-up Major Blake, and the intoxicated Captain Thompson—participated in a series of skirmishes with Utes and Jicarilla Apaches in the southern Rockies. On 20 April, it joined two companies of volunteer troops commanded by Lt. Col. Ceran St. Vrain in a skirmish near Raton Mountain. The campaign of Colonel Fauntleroy ended soon thereafter. When Company F returned to quarters at Fort Massachusetts, Blake implicated eight of the enlisted men, who had fought bravely in this campaign, as participants in the mutiny, and they faced a general court-martial.

Courts-Martial of the Enlisted Personnel

One day after the mutiny, Captain Thompson, possibly fearing he would be held responsible, wrote to Colonel Fauntleroy requesting a court of inquiry. The colonel, who was about to lead an Indian campaign, did not attend immediately to Thompson’s request. On 11 April, the battered Major Blake wrote his report on the mutiny.
Farrier Edward O’Meara as well as troopers William Gray, James Johnston, Adam Williams, Daniel McFarland, Henry Jacobs, John White, and John Harper were eventually placed in confinement for their part in the mutiny. A few others were stripped of a month’s pay. A far worse fate awaited Stevens, Cooper, Fox, and Steele. The army charged them with mutiny under the Ninth Article of War and sought the death penalty. Their court-martial hearings began in Taos on 21 May 1855. Fauntleroy headed the court-martial panel of eight officers after returning from his successful expedition against the Utes and Jicarillas.

Although President Pierce and Secretary of War Davis would later conclude that Blake had provoked the riot, there was no suggestion in the court-martial proceedings that his actions were a major cause of the mutiny. For the moment, the entire blame would fall on the enlisted men. As the presiding judge advocate general, Capt. Isaac Bowen prosecuted their cases.

Unfairness often marred court-martial hearings against enlisted men: the jurors were officers, and the judge advocate needed only a two-thirds majority to gain a guilty verdict. A soldier from the period observed that courts-martial of enlisted personnel were inherently unfair “as the testimony of enlisted men is without weight when given against an officer.”

Assist. Surg. John Byrne, the judge advocate general in the Thompson court of inquiry, expressed the typical attitude of officers toward the testimony of enlisted men: “[T]here is such bitterness of feeling and party bias and so little is the testimony of soldiers ever to be relied upon where their passions are excited that I did not think it worth while to call more of them on the stand, than those who were examined as witnesses.”

The U.S. Supreme Court did not recognize the right of indigents to appointed counsel in criminal cases until 1932 in the Scottsboro case. Military personnel appearing before a general court-martial did not receive the right to defense counsel until 1950. Military law of the 1850s provided no such right. Instead, the Articles of War granted the judge advocate general the unique role of acting not only as prosecutor, recorder, and adviser to the court but also as defense counsel to the accused. If the accused was without counsel and ignorant of his rights, the judge advocate was supposed to assist him in the preparation of a defense.

The four prisoners—Stevens, Fox, Cooper, and Steele—were tried separately over five days. Although he was a witness for the prosecution, Johnston sat as a member of several court-martial panels. Judge Advocate General Bowen neglected to advise the prisoners to try to have Johnston removed for prejudice. Further, Bowen failed to recommend that they argue provocation...
by Blake and call witnesses to support this defense. Ultimately, the prisoners mounted a defense without counsel. Stevens testified:

I did not join in the attack on Maj. Blake but was some distance from him.—I used my influence with and succeeded in keeping two or three from joining those who were on the Major. When he spoke to me & after Judge Brocchus advised me I was willing to apologize if I had done anything wrong and told the Maj so—but he turned away with a swear which made me very angry and I made some exclamations and I did things for which I am sorry.78

The accused men’s cross-examination of the prosecution’s witnesses was pro forma at best. In the end, Bowen had no problem securing four convictions.

Just as the court-martial panels were quickly deciding the fates of the four enlisted men, Thompson’s court of inquiry was convening a block away.79 Thompson made an effort to gather evidence not found in the thin record then being compiled at the courts-martial. Numerous witnesses testified about the growing anger toward Major Blake between 1853 and 1855. Sergeant Fitzsimmons argued that the riot would not have occurred if Blake had either stayed out of town or allowed him to follow Captain Thompson’s order to lead the company from Taos.80 Sgt. Hugh Cameron and Corporal Vanderlen declared their belief that Blake had been intoxicated and that he had caused the riot when he arrested Fitzsimmons and attempted to exercise command of the company.81

Pursuant to the Sixty-Fifth Article of War, Gen. John Garland transmitted the findings of the court-martial panel on 25 June 1855 for review by the president.82 On 9 August 1855, President Pierce, a trained lawyer and a politically appointed general in the late war with Mexico, along with Secretary of War Davis, a former regimental adjutant of the First Dragoons, reviewed the transcripts.83 The wealth of mitigating evidence in Thompson’s court of inquiry transcript, in contrast to the brief court-martial records, surely influenced both Pierce and Davis. The court of inquiry was primarily convened to shroud Thompson’s role in the mutiny and thereby protect his career. Intentionally or not, the testimony at Thompson’s court of inquiry had the palliative effect of granting the four condemned men due process of law. President Pierce commuted the death sentences of all four men and resentenced them to three years of hard labor under ball and chain.84 In a unique turn of events, the president ordered that Blake and Johnston face courts-martial. Pierce also commanded that Company F be broken up and its men sent to other companies.85
The Fate of the Participants

Even before President Pierce reviewed the Taos mutiny records, Thompson faced a court-martial panel. On 6 July 1855, the tribunal found him guilty of being boisterous, intoxicated, and unruly during its hearing, and on 4 September, President Pierce ordered him cashiered from the service. Filibusterer William Walker quickly recruited this drunken but talented officer to serve as his adjutant during his abortive expedition to Nicaragua. On 1 May 1857, following the Second Battle of Rivas, Walker’s entire force surrendered to Cdr. C. H. Davis of the U.S. Navy and boarded ships that took them back to the United States. Thompson reportedly died of dysentery while at sea on 24 June 1857.

In August 1855, the War Department issued General Orders No. 12, which concluded that Blake should be prosecuted for causing the riot: “It appears that no proper discipline had been previously maintained in the Company, and that the major of the regiment, under whose command they had been serving, was greatly responsible for that utter want of discipline which would have cost him his life in this mutiny, if he had not been rescued by civil authority; and that part of the violence he suffered, in the riot, was invited by his challenging the company to fight him man by man.” On 21 September 1855, army headquarters ordered Blake to report to Fort Union, forcing him to serve far from the comforts of Taos. In December the major faced an array of court-martial charges and was placed under house arrest. At the beleaguered major’s hearing, his two advocates had a number of charges summarily dismissed because they exceeded the two-year statute of limitations. Most officers in the frontier army interpreted such dismissals as conclusive proof of guilt.

The remaining charges garnered a lengthy hearing. On 12 June 1856, the panel found Blake guilty of dereliction of duty for failing to arrest the disobedient Thompson, acquitted him on the remaining charges, and sentenced him to suspension without pay for a year. A few weeks later, General Garland, acting under the authority of the 112th Article of War, intervened by remitting the one-year suspension and restoring Blake to active duty. Soon thereafter, Blake accompanied First Dragoon officers on their march to California. The army accused Lieutenant Johnston of violating the Eighth Article of War by failing to do his utmost to rescue Blake and suppress the Taos mutiny. His court-martial commenced on 6 February 1856, and after a three-day hearing, the court acquitted him, much to the consternation of General Garland. On 25 April 1861, Johnston resigned his commission in the federal army and became the colonel of the Second Virginia Cavalry. After suffering a slap on
the hand for his role in the mutiny, Blake gained the rank of brevet brigadier general in 1865 for gallant service in the Civil War. 

In the fall of 1855, the army scattered the enlisted men of Company F in other companies stationed in New Mexico Territory. Former first sergeant Fitzsimmons lost his stripes and found himself in Company K. Possibly in response to his bad behavior and dishonesty, Fitzsimmons was beaten up so badly in October 1855 that he had to stay at the Fort Union hospital. He nevertheless reenlisted and at the end of the Civil War was serving as a sergeant with Company A of the First Cavalry. The army transferred Edward O’Meara, who was placed in custody following the riot, to Company B. When he was honorably discharged in 1867, he had gained four hash marks on his sleeves for four terms of enlistment that included combat with the regiment in the Civil War. Along with the former sergeant Fitzsimmons, mutineer William Gray was court-martialed in 1856 for attacking the sergeant of the guard. He stayed in the service and at the start of the war was also serving with Company K, which was then stationed at Fort Tejon, California. 

Capt. Richard S. Ewell of the First Dragoons escorted Steele, Cooper, Fox, and Stevens in irons to Fort Leavenworth in the fall of 1855. Trooper

ILL. 3. GEORGE BLAKE, WARRENTON, VIRGINIA, 1863
Blake is seated on a chair second from the left, with Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton and his staff.
(Photograph courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Digital Collection, digital image no. cwp 4440708)
Fox, who was initially condemned to death at the court-martial of 1855 before the president commuted the sentence to three years of hard labor, served his time in custody and by 1863 was in the ranks of Company K fighting at a little town called Gettysburg. The resourceful Stevens escaped from custody on 2 January 1856 and fought in Bleeding Kansas. On 16 October 1859, Stevens accompanied John Brown and his recruits in the capture of the Harpers Ferry Arsenal. Brown’s raid ended when Robert E. Lee’s detachment of marines forced their way into the enginehouse stronghold and captured Brown and the surviving men. This time no presidential pardon was forthcoming, and on 16 March 1860, Stevens died on the gallows.

Conclusion

Although the president and secretary of war charged Blake and Johnston with dereliction of duty for provoking the riot, General Garland and Colonel Fauntleroy, both of whom contributed to the mutiny, escaped a court-martial. The president and secretary of war were surely aware that Garland and Fauntleroy had allowed a trio of inferior officers to continue pushing Company F to its limits and had taken no steps to check their misconduct. Garland went so far as to restore Blake to active duty even though the court-martial panel had suspended him for a year. These two commanders had exacerbated the suffering of the company by insisting that it participate and bleed in yet another campaign.

The press did not report the Company F mutinies until 1859, when Stevens surfaced after his capture during Brown’s abortive raid on Harpers Ferry. Stevens spoke freely to reporters, who wrote widely and inaccurately about his mutinous past experiences in the army. Historians of the antebellum military have overlooked the two mutinies, as have biographers of Kit Carson—even though he played a role in helping restore order at Taos. The only work that mentions the Fort Massachusetts riot and Blake’s aberrant behavior is an article by Lawrence Murphy in Arizona and the West.
Murphy does not discuss the Taos riot. A few books on John Brown include a sentence or two on the role of Stevens in the Taos mutiny.  

Troops sometimes refused to obey commands, deserted en masse, or took out their collective anger against civilians or noncommissioned officers—though not against officers.  

What sets the Taos mutiny (and possibly the Fort Massachusetts mutiny) apart was that more than a dozen men raged against and ultimately attacked their commanding officer. Without someone like Major Blake, whose behavior went beyond the pale, two of our military’s most unique though little-known events would probably have never happened. The history of our professional military offers no other example of two mass uprisings by the same troop. Still, the question remains whether army mutinies in the West were truly unusual or if they were simply not widely reported or acknowledged.  

Notes

1. Stevens to Pierce, 27 November 1854, letter in collection of author.
2. The Taos mutiny of 1855 took place in the same location as the Taos uprising of 1846. The earlier event was an armed rebellion by Hispanics and Native Americans against the occupation of their homeland by U.S. troops during the U.S.-Mexico War.
5. See, for example, St. Louis (Mo.) Republican, 30 November 1859.
8. A number of enlistees published accounts of their experiences as dragoons. They include Pvt. James Hildreth, who was in the original Company B and described its first year (1833–1834) in Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains (New York: Wiley & Long, 1836); and Sgt. Percival Green Lowe, who chronicled his enlistment in Five Years a Dragoon (‘49 to ’54) and Other Adventures on the Great Plains (Kansas City, Mo.: F. Hudson Publishing Co., 1906). Pvt. (later brevet brigadier general) Samuel E. Chamberlain mainly told the truth in his rollicking, occasionally exaggerated account of his adventures in Company E during the U.S.-Mexico War in My Confession (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936). Frank Clarke became regimental sergeant major of the First Dragoons, and he also served in Company F in New Mexico. For his letters, see Clarke, Above a Common Soldier. Private, sometimes sergeant, James A. Bennett (who enlisted as James Bronson) served in New Mexico variously with


11. Because he received the honorary rank of major for bravery in the U.S.-Mexico War, Philip Thompson is sometimes listed in documents by this higher rank. To avoid confusion, he shall be referred to by his official rank of captain. See Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy, at West Point, N.Y., from March 16, 1802, to January 1, 1850, comp. George W. Cullum (New York: J. F. Trow, 1850), s.v. “Philip Thompson,” 200–201.


18. Bennett, Forts and Forays, 80–82, 104 (quote).


20. For mutinies by volunteer troops in Mexico, see K. Jack Bauer, The Mexican War, 1846–1848 (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 208; and James M. McCaffrey, Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846–1848, American Social Experience Series (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 113–19. The Camp Vergara mutiny occurred on 18 October 1847 when Caleb Cushing ordered that one of the Massachusetts companies replace its volunteer clothing with new light blue and white-trimmed uniforms that conformed to federal regulations. The volunteers, who were proudly independent, balked at this request. On a practical level, they simply did not wish to pay the cost of replacement uniforms. They also believed their grey uniforms were still in good condition and more distinctive than the conventional new uniforms. Cushing, having recently been promoted to the rank of brigadier general, foolishly pushed the issue. He had sixty-five of the men declared “incorrigibly mutinous and insubordinate” and confined them in the gloomy and dank castle of San Juan de Ulúa. The troops pushed back, devising ways to resist Cushing’s arbitrary authority. In an effort to intimidate his insubordinate men, for example, the general had constructed a couple of wooden stocks and a punishment horse in his encampment. His men promptly carried off these punitive devices and destroyed them. For weeks afterward, the ranks poked fun at their commander by posting advertisements in the camp seeking the return of the runaway horse. See McCaffrey, Army of Manifest Destiny, 114; General Order No. 22, 15 October 1847, U.S. Army Headquarters, Vera Cruz, Mexico, printed in Milwaukee (Wis.) Sentinel and Gazette, 10 November 1847; George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, eds., Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846–1848, Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Combatants (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 380; and Ron Field, Mexican-American War, 1846–48 (Herndon, Va.: Brassey’s, 1997), 101.

21. Jacob Edmund Blake’s career was cut short when, after the Battle of Palo Alto, Texas, he accidentally shot himself with his horse pistol and died. See “Jacob Edmund Blake”


23. General Court-Martial Department Orders No. 11, 6 December 1855, General Court-Martial of George Blake, 21 January 1856, file no. HH660 [hereafter Blake Court-Martial, HH660], USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; Testimony of Deputy Marshal E. A. Depew, p. 70, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo: New Mexico and Her People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 326. Davis was a law student from Pennsylvania who was studying at Harvard when the war with Mexico began. Like Aaron Stevens, he volunteered for service with the First Massachusetts Infantry. As captain of Company I, he was Stevens’s commanding officer during the war. In the Civil War, he would again volunteer and rise to the rank of brevet brigadier general. See Heitman, “William Wirt Hart Davis,” *Historical Register*, 1:361.


30. Ronald K. Wetherington, “Cantonment Burgwin: The Archaeological and Documentary Record,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 81 (Fall 2006): 398. In 1856 Sec. of War Jefferson Davis wrote, “Frequent construction and abandonment of posts... involves the employment of all the troops for long periods at constant labor, alike injurious to military instruction and the contentment of the soldier. His compensation at such times is far inferior to that of the common laborer on the frontier, and the prospect of abandoning the position soon after he has made it comparatively comfortable leaves him without an adequate inducement for the sacrifice he is called on to make. A laborer without pay or promise of improvement in his condition, a soldier without the forms and excitement of military life, it is hardly to be wondered at that this state of things should lead to desertion.” Jefferson Davis, “Annual Report of the


32. Testimonies of Trooper Peter Weldon and Sergeant Strawbridge, pp. 103, 109, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

33. Muster Roll for Company F, First Dragoons, 30 April 1854, MRRAO, Entry 53, RG 94, NA.


35. Testimony of Maj. George A. H. Blake, Court of Inquiry into the Conduct of Lt. John W. Davidson, 9 February 1856, file no. HH751, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Lt. David Bell to Lt. Robert Williams, 27 December 1854, M1072, RG 393, NA.


37. Testimonies of Fitzimmons, Barry, and Stevens, pp. 4, 43, 51 (quote), Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.


39. Special Order No. 1, Don Fernando de Taos Garrison, 12 January 1850, r. 3, M1102, RG 393, NA.

40. Orders No. 27, 6 December 1855, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, General Court-Martial of Lt. Robert Johnston, 6 February 1856, file no. HH624 [hereafter Robert Johnston Court-Martial, HH624], USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimonies of Carson and Peter Joseph, pp. 18–19, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

41. Testimony of Acting Assistant Surgeon Barry, p. 43, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

42. Orders No. 27, 6 December 1855, Robert Johnston Court-Martial, HH624, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimonies of Carson and Peter Joseph, pp. 19–20, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.


44. Testimony of Judge Perry E. Brocchus, p. 109, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-
In 1851 Judge Brocchus was appointed by Pres. Millard Fillmore as an associate justice in the Territory of Utah Supreme Court. His open hostility to the Mormon religion led to his quick departure from the territory. In 1854 the president reappointed him as associate justice of the New Mexico Territorial Supreme Court. See Arie W. Poldervaart, Black-Robed Justice: A History of the Administration of Justice in New Mexico from the American Occupation in 1846 until Statehood in 1912 (Santa Fe: Historical Society of New Mexico, 1948), 70–77, 100.

See p. 107, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. For an account of the soldiers’ reactions, see Thompson to Garland, 10 March 1855, ff. 1218, r. 4, M1120, RG 393, NA.

Poldervaart, Black-Robed Justice, 108; Special Orders No. 43, 21 May 1855, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, Santa Fe, General Court-Martial of Enlisted Men (Joseph Fox, John Cooper, and Aaron D. Stevens), 14 May 1855, file no. HH497 [hereafter Enlisted Men Court-Martial, HH497], USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. In the following notes, the General Court-Martial of Enlisted Men, HH497, is sometimes cited by the individual court-martial hearings of Fox, Cooper, or Stevens. Testimony of 1st Sgt. Thomas Fitzsimmons, pp. 5–6, Enlisted Men Court-Martial, USAGC-M, RG 153, NA.

Testimony of Barry, p. 42, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimony of Fitzsimmons, pp. 42–43, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. Sgt. Thomas Fitzsimmons had a reputation for veracity. Carson claimed that others knew Fitzsimmons to be a “bad character.” Deputy Marshal Ezra A. Depew testified that Fitzsimmons was “a man generally of a bad and notorious character. I would not believe him under any circumstances whatever.” Sergeant Major Barr said, “I would not believe him under oath,” while Lance Corp. Francis Albert asserted, “I think he is not truthful, I have known him to carry false reports to his company officer.” See Testimonies of Carson, Depew, Barr, and Albert, pp. 70, 80, 82, 118, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

Testimony of Barry, p. 42, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimony of Smith, p. 84, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

Testimony of Johnston, p. 44, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

John Cooper enlisted in Galisteo, New Mexico Territory, on 28 November 1851. He had brown hair and fair skin and stood five feet six and a half inches tall. See John Cooper, entry no. 466, p. 40, vols. 49–50 (1851), Army Enlistment Records, Entry 91, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780–1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. [hereafter AER, Entry 91, RG 94, NA]; Testimonies of Smith and Johnston, pp. 44, 84, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimonies of Johnston and Fitzsimmons, pp. 8–9 (quote), 57, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

Testimony of Broccbus, p. 36, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. George Blake recalled, “If in the conflict with the men, I had not thrown away a pistol, handed to me by one of the men present, when, by the first law of
nature, I would have been entirely justifiable in using it, but which I did not use in
the melee, lest I might kill or otherwise injure some innocent man, who was doing
his duty in his efforts to quell the riot . . . then I am guilty [of] causing a mutiny.”
See Defence of Major George A. H. Blake: First Regiment of Dragoons, U. S. A.;
Before a General Court Martial Convened in Santa Fe, New Mexico, January 21st,
1856 (Santa Fe: Santa Fe [N.Mex.] Gazette, 1856), p. 6. Trooper Joseph A. Fox, who
stood five feet seven inches tall, had been trained as a surveyor before enlisting in
Baltimore, Maryland. See Joseph A. Fox enlistment record (in author’s possession);
and Testimony of Peter Joseph, p. 22, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M,
Entry 15, RG 153, NA. A court-martial panel acquitted Krebler on 28 May 1855. See
Special Orders No. 58, General Court-Martial of James Johnston, 28 May 1855, file
no. HH518 [hereafter James Johnston Court-Martial, HH518], USAGC-M, Entry 15,
RG 153, NA.

52. Testimonies of William M. Ashurst and James Vanderlen, pp. 8, 15, Robert Johnston
Court-Martial, HH162, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

53. See Hampton Sides, Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Con-
quest of the American West, 2d ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 63 (first quote);
Bennett, Forts and Forays, 52 (second quote); and Testimony of Carson, p. 61, Blake
Court Martial, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

54. Testimony of Ramon Baca, pp. 92–93, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M,
Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

55. The elegantly attired Judge Perry E. Brocchus feared no one, including Brigham
Young, whom he once verbally attacked while serving as territorial judge in Salt Lake.
He was also adept at using his fists. On several occasions Judge Brocchus engaged in
brawls with various members of the bar. See Poldervaart, Black-Robed Justice, 77–78.

56. Testimony of Brocchus, p. 102, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15,
RG 153, NA.

57. On 22 May 1855, a court-martial panel acquitted James Johnston of the charge of mu-
tiny. See James Johnston Court-Martial, HH518, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA;
Testimony of Fitzsimmons, p. 19, General Court-Martial of John Cooper, HH497,
USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; Testimony of Fitzsimmons, p. 28, General Court-
Martial of Joseph Fox, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimony of
Fitzsimmons, p. 10, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

58. Testimony of Fitzsimmons, pp. 88–89, Cooper Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M,
Entry 15, RG 153, NA. See also Testimony of Fitzsimmons, pp. 9–10, Thompson
Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

59. Testimonies of Brocchus and Robert Johnston, pp. 33, 102, Blake Court-Martial,
HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. Depew served with the First Dragoons
from 1844 to 1849, participating in the capture of Santa Fe and the Battle of Santa
Cruz de Rosales. Ezra Depew, entry no. 38, p. 62, vol. 44 (1844), AER, RG 94, NA.

60. Testimony of Brocchus, p. 11, Enlisted Men Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry
15, RG 153, NA. According to Acting Assistant Surgeon Barry, Blake was “covered with
blood and dust” and appeared “badly used up,” with a contusion on the left side of
his head, swollen eyes, a bloody nose, a sprained right thumb, bite marks on his left
hand, bruises on his body, and a badly sprained ankle. The doctor concluded that
these injuries rendered Blake physically out of commission for three to four weeks.
Testimony of Barry, pp. 73–74, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15,
61. Testimony of Fitzsimmons, p. 10, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimony of Fitzsimmons, p. 6, General Court-Martial of Aaron D. Stevens, file no. HH497 [hereafter Stevens Court-Martial, HH497], USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. Acting Assistant Surgeon Barry expressed his belief that Blake should not have been held accountable for what he said because he had been seriously battered in the fight and was confused and excited. See Testimonies of Barry and Robert Johnston, pp. 32, 74, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.


64. Testimony of Brocchus, p. 103, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

65. Testimony of Blake, Johnston, and Brocchus, pp. 4, 6, 13, Stevens Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. For more on the attitudes of officers toward enlisted men, see Langley, *To Utah with the Dragoons*, 123.

66. Testimony of Capt. Philip Thompson, p. 10, Stevens Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and Testimony of Peter Joseph, p. 21, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. Was Stevens’s carbine loaded? In the confusion of the moment, nobody bothered to inspect the weapon. Sergeant Fitzsimmons testified at the army’s court of inquiry that the company did not carry its carbines loaded when it entered Taos. In 1853 the Army Ordnance Department had shipped a newly purchased batch of Sharps Model 1851 breech-loading carbines to the Department of New Mexico. Fifteen of these weapons were sent to be field-tested with Company F. The fact that Thompson placed one of these weapons in the hands of Stevens strongly suggests that the captain regarded him as a reliable soldier. Bugler Cook stole one of these precious carbines when he deserted the company. Sergeant Fitzsimmons and Captain Thompson testified at Stevens’s court-martial that they distinctly noticed the cleaning device for the weapon—a bristly fiber brush attached to a leather thong—in the barrel. Soldiers jammed these brushes down barrels to prevent dirt and dust from entering their weapons when they marched out on patrol. The criteria for a crime as specified under the Ninth Article of War is satisfied when a soldier threatens and points a weapon, loaded or not, at an officer. Stevens later carried a Sharps carbine when he was a member of John Brown’s band. See Testimony of Fitzsimmons, p. 53, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and “Articles of War” in U.S. War Department, *Regulations for the Army of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857), 2.


68. *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, 28 May 1855; *St. Louis (Mo.) Republican*, 23 May 1855; and Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 147–48.

69. Philip Thompson to Thomas T. Fauntleroy, 10 March 1855, ff. 1214, t. 4, M1220, RG 393, NA.
Blake wrote: “I have the honor to report that on the 8th of March I was attacked in Taos by some men of F Company of 1st Dragoons, knocked down and much bruised, so much so that I was confined to the house for several days, my hands were so much injured that I was unable to write, or use them for some time, which, together with a desire to get some facts from the men of the company in regard to those who attacked me, prevented me from making an earlier report of the affair, and I would respectfully ask the indulgence of the General commanding for my silence. I have forwarded, through Co. T. T. Fauntleroy commanding Northern District, charges against five of the principal men engaged, and who are now in confinement at Fort Massachusetts, my impression is that there are others yet at large, so far, I have not been able to collect satisfactory evidence against them. Should I succeed in doing so, charges shall be forwarded against them at the earliest moment.” George Blake to John Garland, 11 April 1855, ff. 165, M1120, RG 393, NA.

Muster roll, Company F, First Dragoons, 30 April 1855, MRRAO, Entry 53, RG 94, NA.

Bowen graduated from West Point in 1842 and was assigned to the First Artillery. In 1850 he became a captain in the Commissary Department. See Heitman, “Isaac Bowen,” Historical Register, 1:233.

Langley, To Utah with the Dragoons, 105. At the court-martial of Lt. James Carleton in 1842, Lt. Col. Richard Mason of the First Dragoons was asked whether he had stated to friends that, when serving on a court-martial panel, he “would never vote to break an officer upon the testimony of a soldier.” Mason answered, “I know I have frequently spoken upon the little credibility that I have frequently given to soldier’s evidence, but whether I have used the words there stated I cannot say, perhaps in conversing about matters and things of this sort, I may have used them. As we frequently say in loose conversation things that pass out of our mind and are forgotten.” Court-Martial of Lt. James Carleton, First Dragoons, Fort Gibson, Cherokee Nation, 19 December 1842, convened pursuant to Orders No. 21, 5 December 1842, Headquarters, 2d Military Department, in Adjutant General Order No. 24, 20 March 1843, p. 18, file no. DD213, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.


Articles 27 and 38 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Sections 827 and 838 of Chapter 47, Title 10, United States Code). The effective assistance of counsel to the accused is a fundamental right in criminal cases. See Gideon v. Wainwright, 372 U.S. 335 (1963); and Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45 (1932).


Testimony of Stevens, pp. 13–14, Stevens Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

Thompson to Lt. William Magruder, 10 March 1855, ff. 126, M1120, RG 393, NA.

Testimony of Fitzsimmons, pp. 48–49, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

Testimony of Cameron and Vanderlen, p. 54, Thompson Inquiry, HH496, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.
82. Garland to Col. Lorenzo Thomas, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, 25 June 1855, p. 37, Enlisted Men Court-Martial, HH497, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

83. Heitman, “Jefferson Davis,” Historical Register, 1:338. The secretary of war undoubtedly shared the view of many First Dragoon officers that Fauntleroy—a politically appointed officer from another regiment who had reportedly never “fired a shot or even been in an enemy’s country, much to the annoyance of many older & I regret to say better qualified officers”—did not deserve the colonelcy of this once-proud regiment. Blake, like Fauntleroy, was a political appointee who had served in another regiment yet gained a major’s commission in the First Dragoons. See Clarke, Above a Common Soldier, 38; and Heitman, “George Alexander Hamilton Blake,” Historical Register, 1:223.

84. Ironically, President Pierce’s attorney general was none other than Stevens’s inept and dictatorial commanding officer in Mexico, Caleb Cushing.

85. General Orders No. 12, 9 August 1855, Office of the Adjutant General, original in collection of author.

86. Heitman, “Philip Thompson,” Historical Register, 2:357.

87. New York Times, 29 June 1857. A later news story states that Thompson reached the United States on the St. Mary’s and died a few months later in New Orleans. See New York Times, 10 January 1892.

88. General Orders No. 12, 9 August 1855, Office of the Adjutant General, original in collection of author.

89. General Orders No. 25, 26 September 1855, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA; and George Stammerjohan, Fort Tejon State Historical Park, “A Short Interpretative History” (Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1993), 140.

90. Charges were brought against Major Blake on 6 December 1855, per General Orders No. 27, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA. In contrast to the other accused parties in the court-martial proceedings, Blake obtained the aid of counsel. He was ably assisted by John Grayson and Joab Houghton. Grayson, who graduated from West Point in 1826, was a major in the commissary service who became a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. General Kearny appointed Houghton as presiding judge for the newly conquered territory. Although he lacked legal knowledge, Houghton remained a territorial judge until his removal from office in 1869. See Foldervaart, Black-Robed Justice, 21–35.


92. General Orders No. 6, 12 June 1856, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

93. Special Order No. 96, 28 July 1856, Special Orders of the Department of New Mexico, 19 July 1851 to 6 August 1861, Selected Documents and Special Orders, Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821–1920, Record Group 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; and Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette, 23 October 1856.

94. Voicing his opinion that Johnston and the noncommissioned officers had not adequately performed their duty to suppress the mutiny, General Garland disagreed
with this decision and sent the matter back to the panel for reconsideration. The court did not modify its decision. Order No. 2, 11 February 1856, Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, Robert Johnston Court-Martial, HH624, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

95. Heitman, "Robert Johnston," Historical Register, 1:578.

96. Blake returned to serve with his regiment, resigning from the army in 1870. He lived for another fourteen years. Heitman, "George Alexander Hamilton Blake," Historical Register, 1:223.

97. General Orders No. 6, 12 June 1856; and Testimony of Smith, p. 83, Blake Court-Martial, HH660, USAGC-M, Entry 15, RG 153, NA.

98. Muster roll for Company A, First Cavalry, 28 February 1865, original in collection of author.


104. Not a word on the Taos mutiny appears in classic histories of the antebellum army, such as Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue; Coffman, The Old Army; Ball, Army Regulars; and Averam B. Bender, The March of Empire (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968). Although Kit Carson attempted to suppress the mutiny and ultimately played an important role in saving Major Blake’s life, the countless Carson biographies make no mention of his involvement. See, for example, Edwin L. Sabin, Kit Carson Days, 1809–1868: Adventures in the Path of Empire (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

For one work that does mention the Taos mutiny, see Donald C. Pfanz, Richard S. Ewell: A Soldier’s Life (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 541 n. 42. Based on a conversation he had with George Stammerjohan, retired historian for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, historian Donald C. Pfanz states that Capt. Richard Ewell of the First Dragoons escorted the four convicted mutineers to Fort Leavenworth. In a telephone conversation with the author on 18 October 2009, Mr. Stammerjohan explained how he found court-martial reports on the mutiny at the National Archives and was able to piece together much of the
relevant story. He also provided source material to John Ramsay of Los Alamos, New Mexico, who has written a monograph on the mutiny for the Taos Historical Society. The author wishes to express his gratitude to both of these individuals for their assistance in researching material for this article.


107. Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 208. James E. Farmer, who served with the Regiment of the Mounted Rifles, wrote, “Discipline was very severe in those days and I heard many of the enlisted men [in Capt. George McLane’s company] say that if opportunity offered itself they would spare one shot for some of the officers, for whom they had a grievance.” Captain McLane was killed during a skirmish with Navajos on 13 October 1860. See Farmer, *My Life with the Army in the West*, 35; and Heitman, “George McLane,” *Historical Register*, 1:674.


109. Strangely, neither the post returns nor the letters received by the headquarters of the Ninth Military District in 1853 contain any mention of the Fort Massachusetts mutiny. See r. 4, M1102, RG 393, NA.