Rio Grande Valley for a decade as Juan Cortina staged raids from Rio Grande City to Brownsville. Federal troops and Texas Rangers found Cortina impossible to capture; the elusive Tejano succeeded in antagonizing his pursuers, including an expedition led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee. In retaliation, the Texas Rangers cracked down on the Tejano insurgency by unleashing a reign of terror against Mexicans. All along the Rio Grande and up to central Texas, the Rangers burned ranches and farms and shot Tejanos believed to be Cortinistas or Cortina sympathizers. Heintzelman reported “The whole country from Brownsville to Rio Grande City, 120 miles and back to the Arroyo Colorado, has been laid waste.” Fighting the Cortinistas with the Texas Rangers were members of the Knights of the Golden Circle, whose goal was the destruction of the Union and the perpetuation of slavery.  

Cortina rode away from the Texas border and into Mexico once the Mexican military began cooperating with the U.S. military in his capture. Chaotic conditions prevailed in Mexico. The country was wracked by civil war and then by foreign intervention and occupation by France. Emperor Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph ruled Mexico until he was executed in 1867. Juan Cortina had sympathized with Mexico’s conservatives in the War of the Reform, but in 1860 he joined the liberal army supporting President Benito Juárez. Cortina quickly rose through the military ranks, becoming Juárez’s military commander. Campaigning against the French, Cortina helped defend Tamaulipas and settled there, serving as its military governor and as mayor of Matamoros. However, Cortina turned against republican leaders in Mexico and went over to Maximilian’s side. Cortina soon lapsed into banditry as his political fortunes collapsed.

Cattle raids by Cortinistas ravaged the Rio Grande Valley. In 1876, under pressure from the United States, the Mexican government arrested Cortina for transporting stolen cattle and imprisoned him in Mexico City. He was branded a bandit and a cattle thief, and, because he was a Union sympathizer during the American Civil War, efforts were delayed to gain a pardon for Cortina from the state of Texas. Cortina escaped from prison, but as he made his way to the Texas-Mexico border, Mexican forces captured him. The Tejano was court-martialed and ordered executed. However, Mexico’s president Porfirio Díaz intervened and ordered that “the Robin Hood of the Rio Grande,” now an old man plagued by rheumatism, be kept under house arrest for the remainder of his life. On October 30, 1894, Juan Cortina died at his residence at Azcapotzalco, Mexico. His death was noted by only a few newspapers on either side of the border. Cortina nevertheless left a powerful legacy for decades in South Texas. Great numbers of Tejanos joined him in common cause against Anglo-Texans who stole their land and hated all Mexicans.

The secession movement took power in the Deep South and began occupying federal military installations, soon triggering a civil war in the United States. In the Southwest, Mexican Americans mobilized to fight for both the North and the South. Nearly ten thousand Mexican Americans fought in the American Civil War in both the Union and the Confederate armies. Anglos questioned the loyalty and fighting spirit of the Mexican American soldiers and officers despite their numerous acts of courage and sacrifices.

MEXICAN AMERICANS IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In 1861, as civil war loomed, Mexican Americans in California, New Mexico, and Texas responded to President Lincoln’s call for seventy-five thousand volunteers. The loyalty of the state of California to the Union cause was in doubt. Forty percent of the recently established Anglo population had origins in the South or were sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Other Anglos were Democrats from the Midwest or Northeast who disliked both abolitionists and blacks. Notwithstanding, Californians believed strongly in popular sovereignty and wanted the Pacific states to remain neutral regarding the slavery issue.

On May 17, 1861, the state legislature of California unanimously passed a resolution declaring the state's loyalty to the Union and its readiness to defend the United States. Volunteers in the state replaced regular Army soldiers. Native Californians firmly supported the Union. They had rallied to the Republican cause in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln became the party's nominee. In 1863, the United States government established four companies that made up the first battalion of the Native Cavalry of California. The companies were made up mostly of Californios but included California and Yaqui Indians, Sonorans, and Germans recruited by Mexican American officers such as Captain José Ramón Pico of Company A, who traveled throughout the state calling for Spanish-speaking volunteers. Pico advanced the cause of the Union. Passing through San Jose on a recruiting mission, Captain Pico addressed an assembly of Mexican Americans. To inspire them to join the Union cause, Pico proclaimed:
Sons of California! Our country calls and we must obey. This unholy rebellion of the Southern States must be crushed; they must come back to the Union, and pay obedience to the Stars and Stripes. United we will by force of circumstances become the first and mightiest republic on earth.50

Mexican Americans in San Juan Bautista, San Francisco, and elsewhere also answered Pico's call and enlisted, so that by September the Mexican American officer had formed a full company of cavalry soldiers. Antonio María de la Guerra of Santa Barbara formed other companies from the volunteers recruited by José Antonio Sánchez in Monterey and Watsonville. One hundred and sixty-three Spanish-speaking recruits from Los Angeles joined the Union army. Serving as brigadier general of the First Brigade of the California militia, Mexican War veteran Andres Pico was commissioned major of the First Battalion of the Native Cavalry, but due to sickness he declined the commission. Major Salvador Vallejo of Napa replaced Pico as the First Battalion's commander.51

The California Unionists regretted that they were not sent east to serve. Instead, the 470 Mexican Americans who made up the four companies of the First Battalion of the Native Cavalry, with the rest of the California volunteers, served throughout California and in the New Mexico and Arizona Territory, where they helped to defeat a Confederate Invasion. In May, the First Battalion of Native Cavalry was assigned to patrol the Colorado River region of southern Arizona and east to Texas. The men guarded telegraph lines, settlements, and travelers and captured Army deserters. The later assignment took Captain Pico and his men into Sonora, Mexico. In April 1866, the First Battalion returned to California and was mustered out.52

Because of the continued Indian raids in northern California and the deployment of Union army units for duty in the East, a mounted company of native Californians joined the California Mountainers Battalion and the Sixth California Infantry. These units were engaged in brutal military campaigns against California Indians to secure the area for Anglos, some of whom had been murdering Indians and stealing their lands. The fighting against the Indians, many of the California tribes already on the verge of extinction, did not stop until the surrender of the South that ended the Civil War.55

The Confederacy's plan of campaign in the Southwest involved capturing the strategically important gold fields of Colorado and California, as well as the valuable Santa Fe Trail. In July 1861, three hundred Texans, led by Lieutenant Colonel John R. Baylor, took the southern New Mexico settlement of Mesilla and proclaimed the area the Confederate Territory of Arizona. Baylor's forces were later reinforced by three Texas regiments led by General Henry H. Sibley in preparation for an invasion of New Mexico. New Mexico was to serve as a springboard for securing the gold fields of Colorado and California for the Confederate States of America. In early February 1862, the Confederates launched an attack on Fort Craig, located south of Socorro, New Mexico. The Confederates planned to capture supplies at the fort and then move north and take Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and the military supply depot at Fort Union and then seize Colorado, Utah, and California.54

Washington officials at first expressed little interest in the military problems of the New Mexico Territory. The Territory's non-Indian population numbered about ninety-five thousand and was made up mostly of Mexicans who only thirteen years earlier had been citizens of Mexico. Washington dismissed the Mexicans as troublesome citizens who contributed nothing to the United States and whose need for protection from Indian depredations was costly and burdensome. The United States nevertheless asked the New Mexico Territorial Governor to raise units of volunteers to serve for three years. The racist regular army officers and soldiers believed the native New Mexicans were by nature cowardly and doubted their fighting ability.55 That the Spanish-speaking New Mexicans made good soldiers was soon proven in the face of enemy fire.

In July of 1861, the First New Mexico Infantry was organized in response to the invasion of the southern New Mexican territory by Baylor's Texas Confederate forces. The enlistments of New Mexicans increased through appeals to their patriotism, the offer of bounties and higher pay, and, for some, an end to their peonage. However, it was the news of the arrival of the much-hated Texas forces that had captured Fort Fillmore and occupied Mesilla that spurred more New Mexicans to enlist. New Mexico Governor Henry Connelly exploited the threat of the Texan invasion. Declaring a state of emergency, the governor visited towns and addressed crowds of native New Mexicans. He played on their long-time hatred of Texans as he called for volunteers to oppose the Confederate invasion. Connelly exhorted: "Do you want them to take away your lands? Didn't your fathers repulse the invaders ... ? Were not these enemies not [sic] taken in chains to Mexico? You are a fighting race. Fight for your rights and repel the invaders."56

As in California, New Mexicans awarded officer commissions signed up entire communities of relatives, friends, and fellow townspeople. By August 13, 1861, two regiments of New Mexico volunteers had been raised to pit against the Confederates. The First New Mexico Infantry Regiment was a 1,100-man unit of ten companies, four of which were mounted at their own expense. Native New Mexicans made up the majority of the soldiers and officers commanded by Colonel Christopher "Kit" Carson. Carson's son-in-law, Major J. Francisco Chavez, was second in command. Colonel Miguel Pino was in charge of the Second Regiment, and the Third Regiment of Volunteers was led by Colonel José Guadalupe Gallegos. By December, 3,500 New Mexican volunteers, excluding the militia and independent companies, were in active service.57

The First New Mexico Regiment suffered from poor equipment and lack of other supplies; it was originally equipped with Mexican War surplus ordnance. Other regiments had few government-issued weapons. The New Mexican volunteers bought their own uniforms from a clothing allowance. This circumstance had an impact on the already low level of morale among the men because of widespread racism by Anglo officers and soldiers toward them. The latter displayed condescension and contempt for the Spanish-speaking volunteers; the Anglos insisted the Mexicans were cowardly and incompetent, treated them as inferiors, and referred to them disparagingly as "greaser soldiers." Despite the racism, lack of pay, and substandard weapons, the First New Mexico regiment performed well in the field. The men of the Second and Fourth New Mexico Regiments soon proved indispensable in the Battles of Valverde and Glorieta Pass.58
Colonels Carson and Pino and Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Chaves set out to stop General Sibley's Confederate troops' attempt to take control of the New Mexico territory. Chaves, who had declined a Confederate commission, was a veteran Indian fighter, as were many of the Spanish-speaking soldiers under his command. The New Mexicans were aided by Major John Chivington's Colorado Volunteers, who were led over rugged terrain behind the Confederates by Colonel Chaves.

In February 1862, 4,500 battle-hardened rebel soldiers, including the Texan Mounted Volunteers, were moving into northern New Mexico with several artillery pieces. Union troops, reinforced by several battalions of New Mexico militia led by Colonel Edward S. Canby, clashed with the Texans north of Fort Craig at a ford on the Rio Grande known as Valverde. Valverde was a turning point in the Confederate effort to conquer the West. Many of the New Mexicans were brave and skillful Indian fighters such as Captain Rafael Chacón, but none had prior experience with large-scale military confrontations. Verbally insulted and physically abused by scornful Anglo officers and soldiers, the New Mexicans demonstrated loyalty and courage at Valverde. The New Mexicans performed well under fire and in hand-to-hand combat, inflicting great losses on the Confederate soldiers, but also sustaining heavy casualties. The New Mexicans were humiliating the Texans on their front when they were abruptly ordered to fall back to Fort Craig. Unable to seize Fort Craig from the New Mexicans, the rebel troops instead continued their march north. The New Mexicans pursued the fleeing Confederates, who were fast running out of supplies. Despite the conspicuous bravery of the New Mexicans in combat, Canby's report of the battle of Valverde accused them of cowardice and blamed them for losing the battle.

The Confederate troops approached Santa Fe in early March, forcing Union soldiers from Fort Marcy to evacuate Governor Connelly to safety. The soldiers also moved military supplies and equipment from Fort Marcy to Fort Union to keep them from falling into enemy hands. Confederate forces entered Santa Fe on March 10 and occupied the capital for more than two weeks.

The Battle of Glorieta Pass was the pivotal battle of the Civil War in New Mexico. It began on March 26, 1862, when 1,342 Union troops from Fort Union, including New Mexico militia and volunteer infantry and cavalry from Colorado, fought the 3,500-strong Confederate army at Apache Canyon east of Santa Fe. For three days each side vied for control of this strategic pass. A Union raiding party led by Colonel Chavez attacked the Confederate rear positions and destroyed their train of provisions and ammunition. The loss of the supply train weakened the rebels; they had underestimated Union forces and were forced to retreat. The First New Mexico Volunteers Regiment harassed the exhausted rebel troops as they fled to Texas. Five hundred Texans died in combat or succumbed to smallpox and pneumonia, and an additional five hundred were reported missing or captured. The Confederates' threat to New Mexico ended, and the rebels were forced to abandon the campaign. The Battle of Glorieta Pass became known as the "Gettysburg of the West," the turning point of Civil War hostilities in New Mexico. By midsummer 1862, the Civil War in New Mexico was over. But in the East bitter fighting continued.

The Confederacy's 1862 Conscription Act in many instances was unenforceable in parts of the South, and many Confederate governors refused to share supplies or soldiers with Confederate armies not defending their own states. Many Tejanos were reluctant to become involved in the Civil War. Tejanos either joined Texas militia units, as they feared being sent away from their families, or avoided conscription by claiming to be Mexican citizens. The Tejanos also faced accusations of subversion and disloyalty because they were suspected of participating in the ongoing Cortina War along the border. All the South Texas counties with large Tejano populations voted for secession, though they were either misled or had been forced to do so by political bosses. Some Tejanos refused this call for help against the Union because they remembered all too well how the Texans had mistreated them. On April 12, 1861, one day before the surrender of Fort Sumter, Tejano rancher Antonio Ochoa with forty armed Tejanos took control of the third precinct of Zapata County. Most of the Tejanos were either Cortina sympathizers or veterans of the first Cortina War. Ochoa threatened to kill all the gringos in Zapata County and hang the sheriff if county officials swore allegiance to the Confederacy. Ochoa's brief insurrection reflected the strong anti-Anglo sentiment in South Texas against the large landowners who ruled over them.

Most Texas Confederate soldiers did not participate in campaigns east of the Mississippi River, but those who did engaged in some of the worst fighting of the Civil War. The few thousand Texans in the First, Fourth, and Fifth Volunteer Infantry regiments were organized into the Texas Brigade under the command of