On the day after Congress declared war on Mexico, President James K. Polk directed Col. Stephen Kearny to lead the Army of the West, stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., down the Santa Fe Trail, capture the vast province of New Mexico and then push on to California.

It was "a tall order," Winston Groom reminds us, "with colossal implications."

The author of "Forrest Gump" and books about the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War I and World War II, Groom provides a lively account of this little known episode in "Kearny's March."

For better and worse, it is an old-fashioned history. More interested in narrative than analysis, Groom is in hot pursuit of drama, melodrama, colorful characters, and blood and gore.

Alexander Doniphan, the commander of Kearny's mounted infantry, Groom writes in a typical passage, was a "giant of a man, dashing and ruggedly handsome."

Doniphan gave his men a curious order at the outset of the Battle of the Brazito: "Prepare to squat." After vanquishing the enemy, in a contest that took no more than 30 minutes, Doniphan "returned to a game of three-card loo."

Unable to resist, Groom adds the story of the Donner Party to "Kearny's March," although its connection to the Mexican War is, at best, tenuous. He reveals, in graphic detail, how the emigrants, who had begun their journey in Independence, Mo., got trapped in the Sierra Nevada mountains in the midst of winter, ate their livestock, then their mules, then their Indian companions, and then one another.

Groom is at pains to avoid assigning present-day values in his book. Unfortunately, he swings to the opposite pole, explaining away appalling behavior and ignoring a substantial volume of contemporary criticism of it.

In 1846, he declares - inaccurately - racism was a concept that "had not yet developed." And Groom's treatment of Indians is, to put it mildly, insensitive. It is tempting, he writes, to excuse brutal acts because Indians "grew up as savages and didn't know any better."

Gen. John C. Fremont, he adds, did not "think kindly of Native Americans" because he had seen firsthand their capacity for "cruelty, lying, thieving, killing and other un-Christian, un-American, and un-civilized behavior."

"Kearny's March" is history by the winners. Acknowledging that the United States "bailed" Mexico into a war of acquisition, Groom defends Polk's actions with the ends justify the means suggestion that it was the only opportunity "we" had to "create a nation from sea to shining sea."

In the long run, of course, the Mexican War did make America much stronger, but great nations - and good people - take responsibility for the costs and consequences of their actions.
Groom marches roughly over the facts | Tulsa World

‘KEARNY’S MARCH: THE EPIC CREATION OF THE AMERICAN WEST, 1846-1847’
By Winston Groom
Alfred A. Knopf, $27.95