

Was the United States Justified in Going to War With Mexico?

America's wars have often been controversial. The American Revolution had the support of only one-third of the American colonists. The War of 1812 caused several New England states to threaten secession. Entry into World War I was vigorously opposed. More recently, Vietnam, and then Iraq, divided the nation. It should come as no surprise, then, that America's war with Mexico had both its supporters and its critics.

In 1821, Mexico declared itself free from its mother country, Spain. Mexico was huge. It stretched from Guatemala to Oregon and was equal in size to the United States.

Mexican leaders were aware of the near emptiness of their northern lands. One way to increase the population was to welcome settlers from the United States. A special effort was made to encourage American farmers to settle in the Mexican province of Texas.

For Mexico, this turned out to be a bad idea. Mexico was **Catholic**, anti-slavery, and wanted to keep Texans under their control. The American settlers were mostly **Protestant**, pro-slavery, and largely ignored Mexican authority. It did not take long for these differences to boil into revolt. Following bloody encounters at places like the Alamo, the Texans won their independence from Mexico in 1836.

Two times over the next nine years, Texas applied to the United States Congress for **annexation**. Both times Congress said "no." Some Congressmen did not want to anger Mexican officials who still regarded Texas as part of their country. Other Congressmen,

especially in the Northeast, did not want a large slave territory to be added to the United States.

Then things changed. In late 1844, James K. Polk was elected President of the United States. Polk was a strong supporter of **Manifest Destiny**. He believed it was God's plan that America extend its territory all the way to the

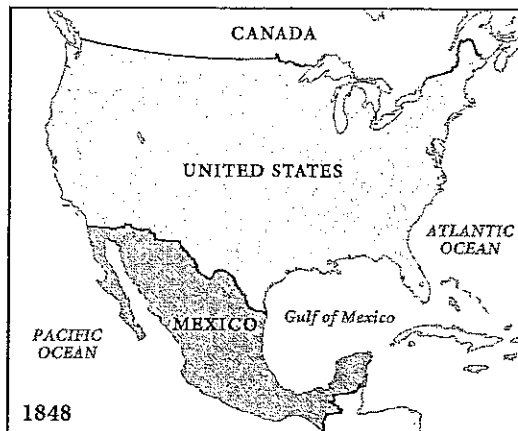
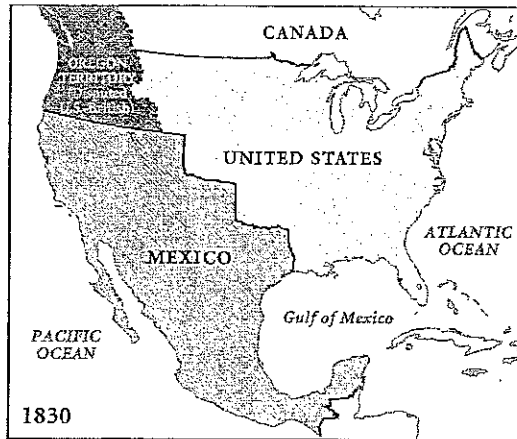
Pacific Ocean. Polk did not just want to annex Texas. He also had his eye on California.

After Polk's election, but before he took office, Congress reversed itself and voted to annex Texas. Polk was delighted. In July 1845 he sent American troops under General Zachary Taylor into the disputed area of southern Texas. He also sent John Slidell, a special envoy, to Mexico City to try to buy California. The combination of American troops at the Rio Grande and the attempt to buy a large part of their country angered the Mexican government.

Slidell was asked to leave Mexico City.

Polk saw Mexico's treatment of Slidell as an opportunity. He felt America's honor had been challenged. When word arrived on May 9, 1846, that Mexican soldiers had fired upon Americans on the "Texas side" of the Rio Grande, President Polk had a reason for going to war.

Examine the four documents that follow. Then answer the question of this Mini-Q: *Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?*



Document A

Source: John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. XVII, July, 1845.

It is time for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease.... Texas is now ours.... Let their reception into the "family" be frank, kindly, and cheerful....

(O)ther nations have undertaken ... hostile interference against us, ... hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence (God) for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

California will, probably, next fall away from (Mexico).... Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country.... The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on (California's) borders ... armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses.... All this (will happen) in the natural flow of events....

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Document B

Source: War Message of President James Polk, Washington, May 11, 1846.

**To the Senate and
House of Representatives:**

(In an earlier message) I informed you that ... I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte (Rio Grande)." This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces.... The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined ... to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

... The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic.... The country between that river and the Del Norte ... is now included within one of our congressional districts.... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country....

(On the 24th of April) a party ... of sixty-three men and officers, were ... dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its (North) bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed, or were preparing to cross, the river.... (They) became engaged with a large body of these (Mexican) troops, and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen (Americans) were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, ... Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.

Note: War Vote, May 13, 1846:
US Senate: 40 Yes, 2 No
House of Rep: 174 Yes, 14 No

CV

Document C

Source: Jesus Velasco-Marquez, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, "A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States," *Voices of Mexico*, Issue #41, Center for Research on North America (CISAN), National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2006.

The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. US historians refer to this event as "The Mexican War," while in Mexico we prefer to use the term "The U.S. Invasion." ...

From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it ... would consider such an act "a declaration of war." ...

(In early 1846, on Polk's orders) the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Río Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation.... In the eyes of the (Mexican) government, the mobilization of the US army was an outright attack on Mexico.... As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Río Grande and the Nueces River – an order which led to the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma....

... (One article) in the daily *El Tiempo* ... stated: "The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveler."

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Document D

Source: Charles Sumner, "Objections to the Mexican-American War," adopted by the Mass. State Legislature, 1847.

Note: Sumner was a young state legislator from Massachusetts who later served 24 years in the US Senate.

Mexico, on achieving her independence of the Spanish Crown ... decreed the abolition of human slavery within her dominions, embracing the province of Texas....

At this period, citizens of the United States had already begun to (move) into Texas.... The idea was ... that this extensive province ought to become a part of the United States....

A current of emigration soon followed from the United States. Slaveholders crossed the Sabine (river between Louisiana and Texas) with their slaves, in defiance of the Mexican ordinance of freedom. Restless spirits, discontented at home ... joined them.... The work of rebellion sped. Our newspapers excited the lust of territorial robbery in the public mind.... Certainly (Mexico) ... might justly charge our citizens with disgraceful robbery, while, in seeking extension of slavery, (our own citizens denied) the great truths of American freedom....

Note: According to an early Texas census, there were 103,000 whites and 38,000 slaves in the state in 1847.

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