

War with Mexico

American Blood Is Shed on American Soil

April 24, 1846

Relations between Mexico and the United States had been strained for some years before 1846. After winning its independence from Spain, Mexico had at first encouraged Americans to settle in its northern provinces, but later attempted, unsuccessfully, to close its frontiers to the flood of immigrants. After only 15 years of independence, Mexico lost Texas to a revolution led in large measure by settlers from the United States, a turn of events that Mexico deeply resented. It also resented the unabashed American ambition to possess more of Mexico's northern provinces, and had rejected repeated United States' efforts to purchase California and New Mexico. Its government had refused to meet with American envoy James Slidell when he was sent in 1845 with new offers to purchase Mexican territory. Further, the country was weakened by domestic troubles, including frequent coups and rebellions, political disagreements over whether Mexico should be a republic or a monarchy, and an economy so unstable that American business investors often lost their investments. In fact, a commission of representatives from both countries had determined in 1840 that Mexico should pay \$8.5 million in compensation, of which it paid \$5.25 million before exhausting its treasury and defaulting.

By July 1845, General Zachary Taylor had established an American military outpost on the left bank of the Nueces River near Corpus Christi. Both Mexico and the United States claimed the land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande Del Norte; the United States claimed it had been ceded in a treaty following the battle of San Jacinto, but the only Mexican signatory had been President-General Santa Anna, a prisoner of war at the time. Mexico felt the terms had been negotiated under duress but made no military move to reoccupy Texas. Mexican forces remained south of the Rio Grande, and, for a time, the United States also respected the sensitive nature of the disputed zone. But on January 13, 1846, after learning of the Mexican government's refusal to negotiate with Slidell, President Polk ordered General Taylor to advance into the contested territory. Taylor's troops began to form along the Rio Grande on March 23, training their guns across the river toward the Mexican city of Matamoras. When the Mexican commander at Matamoras demanded that American

forces withdraw beyond the Nueces, Taylor imposed a blockade at the mouth of the Rio Grande, severing Mexican supply lines to Matamoras. On April 24, General Arista of the Mexican Army sent a scouting party some 30 miles up the river from Matamoras, which crossed to the north bank of the Rio Grande. Taylor promptly dispatched a reconnaissance party of 63 dragoons to monitor Mexican troop movements. The American detachment was challenged by the Mexican cavalry unit. Shots were exchanged, and 16 American soldiers were killed or wounded. As a member of Taylor's forces wrote in his journal that night, "War has commenced." In battles on May 8 and 9 at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, American troops pushed much larger Mexican forces back across the Rio Grande.

- ***First Impressions: "By Act of the Republic of Mexico, War Exists"***

Before learning of the incident at the Rio Grande, President Polk and his Cabinet had decided to go to war. Despite Polk's initial success in winning congressional approval of his plans, the debate over whether or not American actions were justified was far from over.

Source 1: President James K. Polk's diary

Saturday, 9th May, 1846.—The Cabinet held a regular meeting today; all the members were present. I brought up the Mexican question, and the question of what was the duty of the administration in the present state of our relations with that country. The subject was very fully discussed. All agreed that if the Mexican forces at Matamoras committed any act of hostility on General Taylor's forces I should immediately send a message to Congress recommending an immediate declaration of war. I stated to the Cabinet that up to this time, as we knew, we had heard of no open act of aggression by the Mexican army, but that the danger was imminent that such acts would be committed. I said that in my opinion we had ample cause of war, and that it was impossible that we could stand *in statu quo*, or that I thought I could remain silent much longer; that I thought it was my duty to send a message to Congress very soon and recommend definite measures. I told them that I thought I ought to make such a message by Tuesday next, that the country was excited and impatient on the subject, and if I failed to do so I would not be doing my duty. I then propounded the distinct question to the Cabinet, and took their opinions individually, whether I should make a message to Congress on Tuesday, and whether in that message I should recommend a declaration of war against Mexico. All except the Secretary of the Navy gave their advice in the affirmative. Mr. Bancroft dissented but said if any act of hostility should be committed by the Mexican forces he was then in favour of immediate war. Mr. Buchanan said he would feel better satisfied in his course if the Mexican forces had or should commit any act of hostility, but that as matters stood we had ample cause of war against Mexico, and gave his assent to the measure. . . .

About 6 O'Clock p.m. Gen. R. Jones, the Adjutant-General of the army, called and handed to me dispatches received from General Taylor by the Southern mail which had just arrived, giving information that a part of the Mexican army

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had crossed the Del Norte and attacked and killed and captured two companies of dragoons of General Taylor's army consisting of 63 officers and men. . . . I immediately summoned the Cabinet to meet at 7½ O'Clock this evening. The Cabinet accordingly assembled at that hour; all the members present. The subject of the dispatch received this evening from General Taylor, as well as the state of our relations with Mexico, were fully considered. The Cabinet were unanimously of opinion, and it was so agreed, that a message should be sent to Congress on Monday . . . recommending vigorous & prompt measures to enable the Executive to prosecute the war.

Source 2: President Polk's diary

Monday, 11th May, 1846.—I refused to see company generally this morning. I carefully revised my message on the Mexican question. . . .

I addressed [notes] to Senators Cass and Benton this morning requesting them to call. Gen. Cass called first. The message was read to him and he highly approved it. Col. Benton called before Gen. Cass left, and I gave him the copy of the message and he retired to an adjoining room and read it. After he had read it I had a conversation with him alone. I found he did not approve it in all its parts. He was willing to vote men and money for defense of our territory, but was not prepared to make aggressive war on Mexico. He disapproved the marching of the army from Corpus Christi to the left bank of the Del Norte, but said he had never said so to the public. I had a full conversation with him, and he left without satisfying me that I could rely on his support . . . further than the mere defence of our territory. I inferred, too, from his conversation that he did not think the territory of the United States extended West of the Nueces River.

At 12 O'Clock I sent my message to Congress. It was a day of great anxiety with me. Between 5 & 6 O'Clock p.m. Mr. Slidell, United States Minister to Mexico, called and informed me that the House of Representatives had passed a bill carrying out the recommendations of the message by a vote of 173 ayes to 14 noes, and that the Senate had adjourned after a debate without coming to a decision.

My private secretary brought me a note from Col. Benton desiring information as to the number of men and amount of money required to defend the country. . . . The Secretaries of War and State called a few minutes before 8 O'Clock but before I had consulted the former in relation to Col. Benton's note, Col. Benton came in . . . I told him if the war [was] recognized by Congress, that with a large force on land and sea I thought it could be speedily terminated. Col. Benton said that the Ho. Repts. [House of Representatives] had passed a bill today declaring war in only two hours, and that one and a half hours of that time had been occupied in reading the documents which accompanied my message, and that in his opinion in the nineteenth century war should not be declared without full discussion and much more consideration than had been given to it in the Ho. Repts. Mr. Buchanan then remarked that war already existed by the act of Mexico herself and therefore did not require much deliberation to satisfy all that we ought promptly and vigorously to meet it. Mr. Marcy and Mr. Buchanan discussed the subject for some time with Mr. Benton, but without any change of opinion. . . .

The Whigs in the Senate will oppose it [the war declaration] on party grounds probably, if they can get Mr. Calhoun, Mr. Benton, and two or three other Senators professing to belong to the Democratic party to join them so as

to make a majority against the bill. . . . I am fully satisfied that all that can save the bill in the Senate is the fear of the people by the few Democratic Senators who wish it defeated.

Source 3: President Polk's message to Congress, May 11, 1846

The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens throughout a long period of years remain unredressed, and solemn treaties pledging her public faith for this redress have been disregarded. A government unable or unwilling to enforce execution of such treaties fails one of its plainest duties.

Our commerce with Mexico has been almost annihilated. It was formerly highly beneficial to both nations, but our merchants have been deterred from prosecuting it by the system of outrage and extortion which the Mexican authorities have pursued against them, whilst their appeals through their own Government for indemnity have been made in vain. Our forbearance has gone to such an extreme as to be mistaken in its character. Had we acted with vigor in repelling the insults and redressing the injuries inflicted by Mexico at the commencement, we should doubtless have escaped all the difficulties in which we are now involved.

Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own, she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war on us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime 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, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

Source 4: Horace Greeley's editorial, *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1846

Our Country, Right or Wrong!

This is the spirit in which a portion of the Press, which admits that our treatment of Mexico has been ruffianly and piratical, and that the invasion of her territory by Gen. Taylor is a flagrant outrage, now exhorts our People to rally in all their strength, to lavish their blood and treasure in the vindictive prosecution of War on Mexico. We protest against such counsel. . . .

We can easily defeat the armies of Mexico, slaughter them by the thousands, and pursue them perhaps to their capital; we can conquer and 'annex' their territory; but what then? Have the histories of the ruin of Greek and Roman

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liberty consequent on such extensions of empire by sword no lesson for us? Who believes that a score of victories over Mexico, the 'annexation' of half her provinces, will give us more Liberty, a purer morality, a more prosperous Industry, than we now have? . . . Is not Life miserable enough, comes not Death soon enough, without resort to the hideous enginery of War?

People of the United States! Your Rulers are precipitating you into a fathomless abyss of crime and calamity! Why sleep you thoughtless on its verge, as though this was not your business, or Murder could be hid from the sight of God by a few flimsy rags called banners? Awake and arrest the work of butchery ere it shall be too late to preserve your souls from the guilt of wholesale slaughter!

Source 5: President Polk's diary

Tuesday, 12th May, 1846.—The Cabinet held a regular meeting today. . . . The Mexican question was the subject of conversation, and all had doubts whether the Bill which passed the House on yesterday would pass the Senate to-day. . . .

At 7 O'Clock p.m. my private secretary returned from the Capitol and announced that the Bill which passed the Ho. Repts. on yesterday, making a formal declaration of war against Mexico had passed the Senate by a vote of 42 ayes to 2 noes, with some immaterial amendment in its details. He represented to me that the debate in the Senate today was most animating and thrilling.

Source 6: By the President of the United States of America: A Proclamation

Whereas the Congress of the United States, by virtue of the constitutional authority vested in them, have declared by their act bearing date this day that "by the act of the Republic of Mexico a state of war exists between that Government and the United States."

Now, therefore, I, James K. Polk, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim the same to all whom it may concern. . . .

Done at the city of Washington, the 13th day of May, A.D. 1846, and of the Independence of the United States the seventieth.

Source 7: President Polk's diary

Saturday, 30th May, 1846.—A plan of the campaign against Mexico and the manner of prosecuting the war was fully considered. I brought directly to the consideration of the Cabinet the question of ordering an expedition of mounted men to California. I stated that if the war should be protracted for any considerable time, it would in my judgment be very important that the U.S. should hold military possession of California at the time peace was made, and I declared my purpose to be to acquire for the U.S., California, New Mexico, and perhaps some others of the Northern Provinces of Mexico whenever a peace was made. In Mr. Slidell's secret instructions last autumn these objects were included. Now that we were at war the prospect of acquiring them was much better. . . . In these views the Cabinet concurred.

Source 8: Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan's speech supporting appropriations for the war with Mexico, February 10, 1847

We do not want the people of Mexico, either as citizens or subjects. All we want is a portion of territory which they nominally hold, generally uninhabited, or, where inhabited at all, sparsely so, and with a population which would soon recede, or identify itself with ours.

Source 9: Senator Thomas Corwin of Ohio's speech opposing appropriations for the war, February 11, 1847

What is the territory, Mr. President, which you propose to wrest from Mexico? It is consecrated to the heart of the Mexican by many a well-fought battle, with his old Castilian master. His Bunker Hills, and Saratogas, and Yorktowns are there. The Mexican can say, "There I bled for liberty! and shall I surrender that consecrated home of my affections to the Anglo-Saxon invaders! What do they want with it? They have Texas already. . . . What else do they want? To what shall I point my children as memorials of that independence which I bequeath to them, when those battle fields shall have passed from my possession?"

Sir, had one come and demanded Bunker Hill of the people of Massachusetts, had England's lion ever showed himself there, is there a man over thirteen, and under ninety who would not have been ready to meet him—is there a field but would have been piled high with the unburied bones of slaughtered Americans before these consecrated battle-fields of liberty should have been wrested from us? But this same American goes into a sister republic, and says to poor, weak Mexico, "Give up your territory—you are unworthy to possess it—I have got a one-half already—all I ask of you is to give up the other!" England might as well, in the circumstances I have described, have come and demanded of us, "Give up the Atlantic slope—give up this trifling territory from the Alleghany mountains to the sea; it is only . . . about one-third of your Republic, and the least interesting portion of it." What would be the response? They would say, we must give this up to John Bull. Why? "He wants room." The Senator from Michigan [Lewis Cass] says he 'must' have this. Why, my Christian brother, on what principle of justice? "I want room!"

Sir, look at this pretense of want of room. With twenty millions of people, you have about one thousand millions of acres of land, inviting settlement by every conceivable argument . . . and allowing every man to squat where he pleases. But the Senator from Michigan says we will be two hundred millions in a few years, and we want room. If I were a Mexican I would tell you, "Have you not room in your own country to bury your dead men? If you come into mine we will greet you with bloody hands, and welcome you to hospitable graves."

Why, says the Chairman of this Committee of Foreign Relations, it is the most reasonable thing in the world! We ought to have the Bay of San Francisco. Why? Because it is the best harbor on the Pacific! It has been my fortune, Mr. President, to have practiced a good deal in criminal courts in the course of my life, but I never yet heard a thief, arraigned for stealing a horse, plead that it was the best that he could find in the country! . . .

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Let us abandon all idea of acquiring further territory, and by consequence cease at once to prosecute this war. Let us call home our armies, and bring them at once within our own acknowledged limits. Show Mexico that you are sincere when you say you desire nothing by conquest. She has learned that she cannot encounter you in war, and if she had not, she is too weak to disturb you here. Tender her peace, and my life on it, she will then accept it. But whether she shall or not, you will have peace without her consent. It is your invasion that has made war, your retreat will restore peace.

Source 10: Resolution of the Massachusetts Legislature,
April 26, 1847

Resolved, that the present war with Mexico ... was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President to General Taylor to take possession of territory in dispute ... and that it is now waged by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor ... for the dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest of ... territory from which slavery has been ... excluded, with the triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the slave power, and of obtaining the control of the Free States.

Resolved, that such a war of conquest, so hateful in its objects, so wanton, unjust and unconstitutional in its origin and character, must be regarded as a war against freedom, against humanity, against justice, against the Union ... and against the free states.

Source 11: Democratic Party Platform of 1848

Resolved, That the war with Mexico, provoked on her part by years of insult and injury, was commenced by her army crossing the Rio Grande, attacking the American troops, and invading our sister State of Texas; and that, upon all the principles of patriotism and laws of nations, it is a just and necessary war on our part, in which every American citizen should have shown himself on the side of his country, and neither morally nor physically, by word or by deed, have "given aid and comfort to the enemy."

Source 12: Congressman Abraham Lincoln's speech in the
House of Representatives, January 12, 1848

[I]f any one should declare the President sent the army into the midst of a settlement of Mexican people, who had never submitted, by consent or by force, to the authority of Texas or of the United States, and that *there*, and *thereby* the first blood of the war was shed, there is not one word in all the President has said, which would either admit or deny the declaration. This strange omission ... could not have occurred but by design. . . .

I introduced a preamble, resolution, and interrogatories, intended to draw the President out, if possible, on this hitherto untrodden ground. To show their relevancy, I propose to state my understanding of the true rule for ascertaining the boundary between Texas and Mexico. It is, that *wherever* Texas was exercis-

ing jurisdiction, was hers; and *wherever* Mexico was exercising jurisdiction, was hers; and that *whatever* separated the actual exercise of jurisdiction of the one, from that of the other, was the true boundary between them. If, as is probably true, Texas was exercising jurisdiction along the western bank of the Nueces, and Mexico was exercising it along the eastern bank of the Rio Grande, then *neither* river was the boundary; but the uninhabited country between the two, was. . . .

[A]ll Mexico, including Texas revolutionized against Spain; and still later, Texas revolutionized against Mexico. In my view, just so far as she carried her revolution, by obtaining the *actual*, willing or unwilling submission of the people, *so far*, the country was hers, and no farther. Now, sir, for the purpose of obtaining the very best evidence, as to whether Texas had actually carried her revolution, to the place where the hostilities of the present war commenced, let the President answer the interrogatories I proposed. . . . Let him answer fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with *facts*, and not with arguments. Let him remember he sits where Washington sat, and so remembering, let him answer, as Washington would answer. . . . And if, so answering, he can show that the soil was ours, where the first blood of the war was shed—that it was not within an inhabited country, or, if within such, that the inhabitants had submitted themselves to the civil authority of Texas, or of the United States, . . . then I am with him for his justification. . . . But if he *can* not, or *will* not do this . . . , then I shall be fully convinced, of what I more than suspect already, that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong—that he feels the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him; that he ordered General Taylor into the midst of a peaceful Mexican settlement, purposely to bring on a war.

The Outcome of the War

The conflict that began on the banks of the Rio Grande in April 1846 ended two years later with the triumphal entry of an American army into Mexico City, an action that ultimately provided the opening phrase of the Marine Hymn, "From the halls of Montezuma (to the shores of Tripoli)." Nor were United States triumphs confined to Texas. On June 7, 1846, American settlers in California proclaimed the territory's independence of Mexico; Commodore John Sloat soon landed at Monterey to claim California for the United States, which annexed it in August. The war inspired great acts of courage and heroism on both sides. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that restored peace granted the United States possession of New Mexico and California and acknowledged the Rio Grande as the Texas border. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million for these land cessions and agreed to reimburse its own citizens the \$3.25 million owed them by Mexico.

Source 13: President Polk's message to Congress, July 6, 1848

I lay before the Congress copies of a treaty of peace, friendship, limits, and settlement between the United States and the Mexican Republic. . . .

Occupation
Proclamation

The war in which our country was reluctantly involved, in the necessary vindication of the national rights and honor, has been thus terminated. . . .

The extensive and valuable territories ceded by Mexico to the United States constitute indemnity for the past, and the brilliant achievements and signal successes of our arms will be a guaranty of security for the future, by convincing all nations that our rights must be respected. The results of the war with Mexico have given to the United States a national character abroad which our country never before enjoyed. Our power and our resources have become known and are respected throughout the world, and we shall probably be saved from the necessity of engaging in another foreign war for a long series of years. . . .

New Mexico and Upper California have been ceded by Mexico to the United States, and now constitute a part of our country. Embracing nearly ten degrees of latitude, lying adjacent to the Oregon Territory, and extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Rio Grande, . . . it would be difficult to estimate the value of these possessions to the United States. . . . Rich in mineral and agricultural resources, with a climate of great salubrity, they embrace the most important ports on the whole Pacific coast of the continent of North America. The possession of the ports of San Diego and Monterey and the Bay of San Francisco will enable the United States to command the already valuable and rapidly increasing commerce of the Pacific. . . .

While the war has been conducted with great humanity and forbearance and with complete success on our part, the peace has been concluded on terms the most liberal and magnanimous to Mexico. In her hands the territories now ceded had remained, and, it is believed, would have continued to remain, almost unoccupied, and of little value to her or to any other nation, whilst as part of our Union they will be productive of vast benefits to the United States, to the commercial world, and the general interests of mankind.

Source 14: Daily National Intelligencer, July 7, 1848

The reader's attention will be strongly arrested by the message which the President sent to Congress yesterday touching our Mexican relations; and there are few, we presume, who will not be amused at the claims to credit set up by his Excellency on account of the war into which he unnecessarily and unrighteously plunged the country, and which, after costing us some thousands of valuable lives and some hundred or two millions of money, we are extricated from by agreeing to pay our Mexican claims ourselves (which we went to war to make Mexico pay) and giving her many millions more to make peace; for it cannot be seriously urged that the distant deserts which Mexico grants us are any equivalent for the money she receives; indeed, we might well afford to give her five times as much to take them back again.

• *Second Impressions: A Determination to Secure California*

The debate over the fairness of waging war with Mexico became less passionate as time passed, but historians on both sides of the Rio Grande have continued their efforts to understand the politics and the facets of American character that led to the conflict.