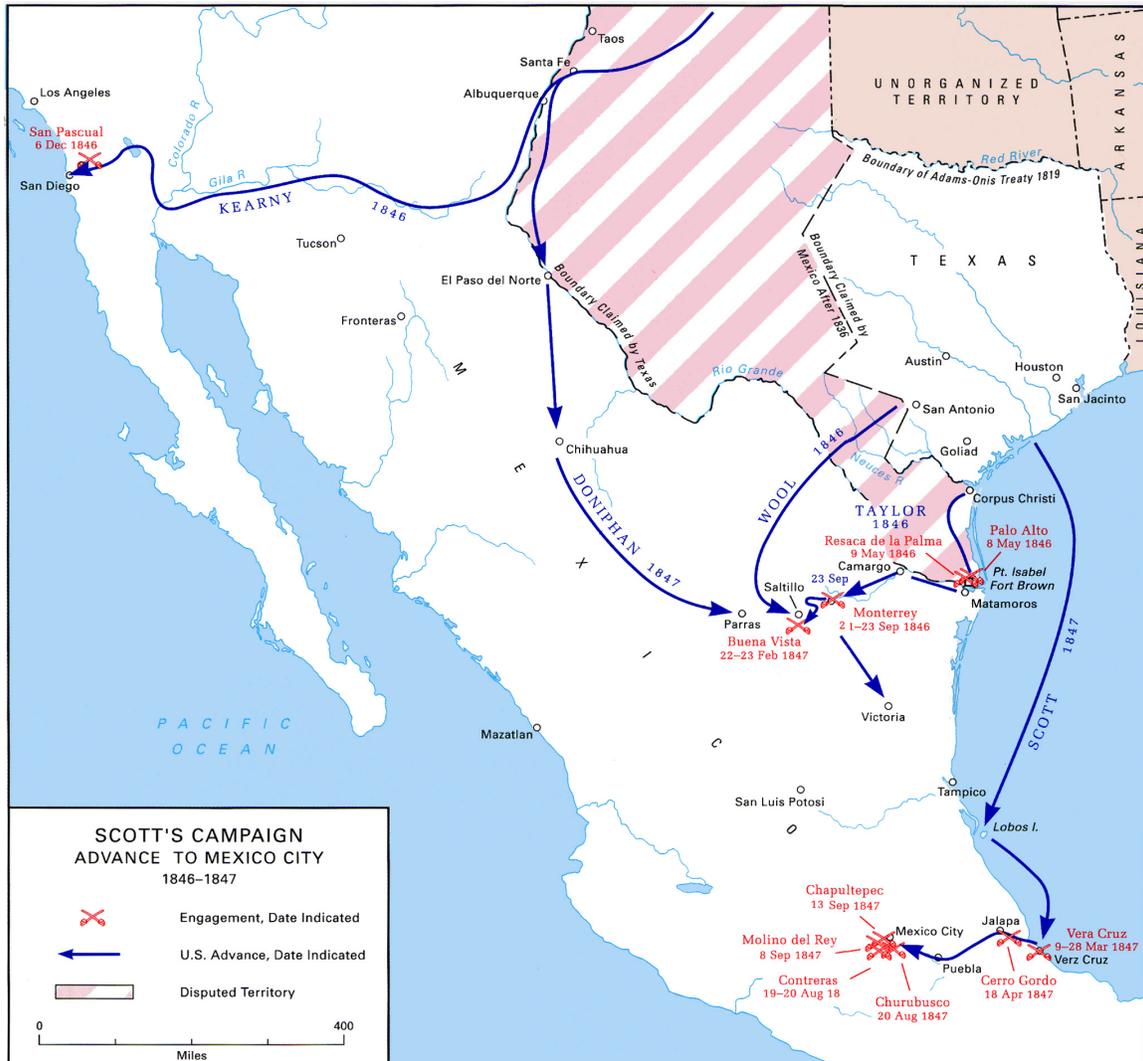


Causes of the Mexican-American War

Source A



Stephen A. Carney, *The Occupation of Mexico 1846-1848* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006) pp. 6-7, available at <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/Occupation/Occupation.htm>

Source B

Settlers and speculators, canals and railroads – all played a part in westward expansion. But ultimately the West was won by war and the principal victim was the other United States on the American continent, the United States of Mexico.

Both America and Mexico were independent republics, forged in war against a European colonial power – Britain in the 1770s and Spain in the 1820s. Both had federal systems, with separate state governments capped by a president, a two-house legislature, and a Supreme Court, and they were roughly the same size: around 1.75 million square miles. Mexico's vast domain, inherited from the Spanish empire, stretched up from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arkansas

river and the Great Salt Lake, then west to reach the Pacific several hundred miles north of the mission town of San Francisco.

With so much in common, the two United States might have chosen to cooperate as fellow New World republics. But ultimately the differences between them were more important than the similarities. The United States of America had a booming economy, knitted together by canals and railroads, whereas the United States of Mexico was still largely agrarian. America's population nearly doubled between 1820 and 1840, to over 17 million, while Mexico's grew only slightly to 7 million. American settlers were pressing into the Mexican states of Texas and California. And although America was strained by sectional tensions among North, South, and West, Mexico's union was near to collapse. Its northern states wanted greater autonomy, but this was resisted by centralizers in Mexico City. Frequent coups and rampant corruption added to the country's malaise.

David Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009) pp. 123-124.

Source C

By the mid-1840s America was under the spell of Manifest Destiny, and Texas (and the lands even farther west, still controlled by Mexico) seemed ripe for the plucking. Particularly galling to Americans was the fact that these lands, so plentiful in resources and almost screaming for development, remained in the hands of an inferior race. An American visitor to the Mexico territory of California in the early 1840s could barely contain his frustration. Lazy, beholden to the Catholic Church, brutal, and ignorant, the Mexicans in California were unworthy to control such a valuable piece of property. They were "an imbecile, pusillanimous, race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country." Fortunately, he concluded, nature would take its course. The same racial law that "curses the mulatto here with a constitution less robust than that of either race from which he sprang, lays a similar penalty upon the mingling of the Indian and white races in California and Mexico. They must fade away."

James K. Polk could not have agreed more and made the annexation of Texas of the California and Texas territories keystones of his successful 1844 campaign for the presidency. Texas, absorbed through a congressional resolution in early 1845, was already in American hands by the time Polk took office. But America still coveted the other massive holdings of Mexico in the west. American newspapers and speeches in Washington were liberally sprinkled with the terms "destiny of the race," "the path of progress," and more often "the march of civilization." For a people who had spent the last two hundred years clearing the land of red man and enslaving black men to work it, there was little hesitation in deciding that the "imbecile" Mexicans must also give way to the pressures of Anglo-Saxon expansion.

Michael L. Krenn, *The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006), p. 33.

Source D

"In America," a foreign observer wrote from afar in 1848, "we have witnessed the conquest of Mexico and have rejoiced at it." The defeated nation hitherto had been "exclusively wrapped up in its own affairs, perpetually rent with civil wars, and completely hindered in its development." The best it could have hoped for in those circumstances was economic subjection to Britain. From a Mexican viewpoint, therefore, it was "an advance" now to be "forcibly drawn into the historical process" and "placed under the tutelage of the United States." Thus the opinion of Friedrich Engels.

Later in life, Engels would become more critical of such historical “advances.” In this he was at one with his American contemporary Walt Whitman. The great poet, editor of the Democratic *Brooklyn Eagle* during the war, had found “miserable, inefficient Mexico” totally incompatible “with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race.” I cite these two figures at the outset to indicate the political span of typical mid-nineteenth-century Western notions of progress. It is good to bear that range in mind when we now [turn] to John O’Sullivan and the ideology of Jacksonian expansionism, which he expressed better than anyone else. Not only did O’Sullivan coin the phrase “manifest destiny,” but his political sallies formed a veritable summa of the arguments of this type.

Anders Stephanson, “The Ideology and Spirit of Manifest Destiny” in Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, eds. *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, Concise Ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) pp 150-151.

Source E

The republic [of Mexico], whose constitution, modelled on that of the United States, represented a triumph of theory over experience and of local over metropolitan interests, seemed to spell permanent disaster. From 1823 to 1827 stability was indeed maintained. But thereafter revolts, *pronunciamientos* and barrack-room revolutions were countless. The federal system, so soon as it had taken root, was itself abrogated in 1835, to be restored, nominally at least, some years later. But, federal government or unitary government, the result was the same. Presidents, deputy-presidents and acting-presidents followed one another in bewildering succession. In thirty years the executive office changed hands forty-six times, and throughout that period, the dominant figure in Mexican politics was a cynical opportunist, ‘in diplomacy, an unsustained Talleyrand; in war, a sorry Napoleon’, Antonio López de Santa Anna.

To preserve the territorial integrity of Mexico was, in these conditions, a nearly hopeless task. A Spanish invasion from Cuba in 1829, aimed at the reconquest of the country, was indeed effectively repelled. But separatist movements rapidly developed. Yucatan seceded from the federation in 1839 and long remained apart from it. More serious still, Texas, a periphery province colonised from the United States, revolted in 1835, proclaimed her independence in 1836, and maintained it by force of arms, the Texans, after a desperate struggle, finally capturing Santa Anna himself. Nine years later, in 1845, the ‘Lone Star Republic’ was annexed to the United States, and that event precipitated a war between the United States and Mexico which resulted in the occupation of Mexico City by General Winfield Scott and in the surrender to the United States, by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, not only of Texas, but of California and of all the territory between them... Mexico had been reduced to less than a half of her original size.

For the secession of Texas in 1836 Mexico had chiefly herself to blame. And though responsibility for the war between Mexico and the United States was divided, sooner or later, in the imperial sweep of the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific, California and New Mexico must have been lost by a country which could neither settle nor administer them.

R.A. Humphreys, “The States of Latin America”, in J.P.T Bury, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume X The Zenith of European Power 1830-70* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 674-675.

Source F

The election of 1844 was the only presidential contest in the nineteenth century that depended on an issue of foreign affairs, and one of three such elections in United States history, the others in 1796 and 1920. The sentiment for annexation alarmed Clay. He began to wobble, to

equivocate. He declared that he would be glad to see Texas acquired “without dishonor, without war, with common consent of the Union, and upon just and fair terms.” These were the weasel words of a politician who would rather be President than be right. Polk and the Democrats stood for annexation and expansion, and triumphed by a slender majority. The election map of the popular vote, however, shows no sectional division. Henry Clay would have won election except for a division of the free-soil votes of New York between him and feeble Liberty Party candidate, James G. Birney. Nevertheless the election of Polk was taken as a mandate from the people for the annexation of Texas. Since the defeat of his treaty the President had been urging annexation by a joint resolution of Congress, which would require only a majority vote of the Senate. On March 1, 1845, he exultantly signed such a joint resolution, which provided for annexation subject to arrangements to be completed by the President with the government of Texas – to be admitted directly into the Union as a state. The boundaries of the new state were left to be adjusted by the United States.

Tyler got his Texas three days before he left office. Polk got the Presidency. Andrew Jackson died happy (June 8, 1845).

The vote in Congress for annexation was more of a sectional vote than had been recorded in the Presidential election, which had been carried by annexationist sentiment for Oregon as well as for Texas.

Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955) pp. 229-230.

Source G

James K. Polk, from Tennessee, sought the presidency with only one goal: to gain Texas, and if possible California. He was an intentional one-term president who was quite willing to fight a war of policy if North American strategic interests could be served no other way. Polk, and an increasing number of his countrymen had become concerned with the British, who were working actively to make an arrangement with Texas to bar the United States from the Pacific, establishing a British center of influence in the west. Sam Houston, once again president of Texas and still an ardent believer in annexation, played skillfully on these fears in Washington, just as the Mexican ambassador, Almonte, tried to stir up animosity in New England against the entry of a new slave state. Early in 1845, after Polk’s election, the congress’ strategic vision overcame domestic quarrels, and a bill of annexation passed, angering the British government and horrifying the Mexicans. ...

[Polk] did believe in equity; he intended to offer Mexico the best deal it could expect under the circumstances.

Mexico owed the United States a large debt, ratified by international arbitration, but in default. There was also a serious question as to the boundary between Mexico and Texas, which now meant between Mexico and the United States. ... Polk was prepared to buy this extra territory through assuming the Mexican debt, a fair price at the time. He also wanted to negotiate the purchase of California, which the Mexican government did not fully control, but for which he was ready to pay a high price. It probably did not occur to Polk or his Democrats that the very offer would be taken as an insult by many Mexicans.

T. R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, Updated Edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995) pp. 392-393.

Source H

The dispute over land and money led to war. The issue of the Texas boundary provided the flash point. In May 1845, President Polk directed military and naval forces to prepare for actions against Mexico. A few weeks later, American troops under General Zachary Taylor arrived in Corpus Christi, Texas, at the mouth of the Nueces. In November, the president sent a special envoy, John Slidell, to Mexico City. He instructed Slidell to purchase California, assume all claims against Mexico, and settle the boundary along the Rio Grande. Public hatred of the United States had grown so intense that President Jose de Herrera did not dare receive the U.S. envoy. Despite this anti-American gesture, Herrera's government fell in a bloodless revolution in late December. Slidell informed Polk, "Be assured that nothing is to be done with these people until they shall have been chastised."

The president received Slidell's message on 12 January 1846; the next day he ordered General Taylor to dispatch troops into the area north of the Rio Grande. This action provoked a Mexican response. On 25 April 1846, soldiers under the command of General Mariano Arista crossed the Rio Grande and attacked an American patrol, killing or wounding sixteen men. Truth became the seventeenth casualty when Polk proclaimed to Congress in his war message on 11 May, "Mexico... has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil."

Clyde A. Milner II, "National Initiatives" in Clyde A. Milner II et al, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 167.

Source I

With an expansionist like James K. Polk in the White House, future events took on a predictable, even inevitable, cast. ... Polk was bent on provoking a war between Texas and Mexico so the United States would be forced to interfere and he ordered General Zachary Taylor to "defend" the Texan frontier, Commodore David E. Conner, in charge of the U.S. fleet in the Gulf of Mexico, was ordered to keep the gulf ports under surveillance, and Commodore John D. Sloat was to take San Francisco in case of war. These preparations were made to counteract a Mexican attack, a highly improbable event since the border was garrisoned by only twelve or thirteen hundred Mexican soldiers who were virtually unarmed. ...

On 13 January 1846, President Polk ordered General Taylor to march to the Rio Grande, and began to write his declaration of war on Mexico. By March, Taylor had established himself on the river's northern bank and had begun to construct Fort Brown, near the river's mouth. The inhabitants of Matamoros protested in vain. When Mexico's General Ampudia arrived, he threatened the U.S. Army and demanded its withdrawal to the border; in response, Conner's fleet blocked the mouth of the river. Some U.S. observers evaluated the situation perceptively. Ethan Hitchcock, a U.S. Army colonel, wrote: "We do not have a particle of right to be here... if looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, as to have a pretext to take California."

Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *The United States and Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) pp. 41, 43.

Source J

Annexation opponents such as John Quincy Adams squinted sourly into the future and saw nothing good resulting from Texas statehood. "I have opposed it for ten long years, firmly believing it tainted with two great crimes: one, the leprous contamination of slavery; and two, robbery of Mexico... Fraud and rapine are at its foundation. They have sown the wind..."

Joseph Wheelan, *Invading Mexico: America's Continental Dream and the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007) p. 60.

Source K

The period since 1983 has seen an abundance of work on Mexican-American relations both prior to and after the war between the two nations. The sesquicentennial of the conflict in particular elicited a flood of work, especially from scholars or American scholars writing from a Mexican, Chicano, or Mexican-American perspective. ...

The cultural and psychological roots of American relations with Latin America more generally were examined in Frederick B. Pike's *The United States and Latin America* (1992), which analyzes a wide range of literary, documentary, and personal sources to probe the assumptions that structured US relations with Hispanic America. In Pike's view, Latin America was another frontier of renewal on which Americans could revitalize both their civilization and their manhood. Pike documents the conflicting North American responses to race mixing and concludes that US perceptions of Latin America across the political spectrum were more a projection of their hopes and fears than a result of direct engagement with the region.

William E. Weeks, "American Expansionism, 1815-1860" in Robert D. Schulzinger, ed., *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) pp. 69-70.

Essay Question

With reference to these sources and your own knowledge, analyze the causes of the Mexican-American War.