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


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....

Document Analysis

1. How does John O’Sullivan feel about the United States annexing Texas?

2. In your own words, what does O’Sullivan mean when he says it is “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence”?

3. After Texas, what is the next likely candidate for American annexation?

4. What does O’Sullivan have to say about Mexico’s ability to govern?

5. What do you suppose O’Sullivan means by “the Anglo-Saxon foot”?

6. How can this document be used to justify America’s going to war with Mexico?

7. How can this document be used to argue against America going to war with Mexico?
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

Document Analysis

1. What river did Texas and President Polk regard as the Texas-Mexico border?

2. Would Mexico have viewed a Mexican advance north of the Rio Grande an invasion of the US?

3. Where did the April 24 fight between Mexican and American soldiers occur?

4. What was the response of Congress to Polk's war message?

5. How does this document help answer the Mini-Q question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
Document C

Source: Jesus Velasco-Marquez, Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico, "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, 2008.

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 Rio 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 Rio 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."

Document Analysis
1. Whose point of view is held by the author of this document?

2. How did the Mexican government feel about the annexation of Texas by the United States?

3. According to the author, why did a Mexican force attack Zachary Taylor's troops when they arrived at the Rio Grande River?

4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
Document D


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.

Document Analysis
1. After achieving independence from Spain in 1821, did Mexico make slavery legal or illegal?

2. Sumner mentions a “disgraceful robbery.” Who robbed what from whom?

3. Did Charles Sumner have the support of the people of Massachusetts? Provide evidence and explain your thinking.

4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
The Mexican War—Was It in the National Interest?

Part A.

Use the following documents as a resource in completing the chart that follows on the arguments for and against American expansion to the Pacific, even at the expense of war with Mexico, in the 1840s.

**Document A**

But I am in danger of running into unnecessary details, which my debility will not enable me to close. The question is full of interest, also, as it affects our domestic relations and as it may bear upon those of Mexico to us. I will not undertake to follow it out to its consequences in those respects, though I must say that, in all respects, the annexation of Texas to the United States promises to enlarge the circle of free institutions, and is essential to the United States, particularly as lessening the probabilities of future collision with foreign powers, and giving them greater efficiency in spreading the blessings of peace.

Andrew Jackson in a letter to Cong. Aaron V. Brown of Tennessee, February 12, 1843

**Document B**

John L. O'Sullivan, the influential Democratic editor who gave the movement its name, wrote in 1845 that the American claim to new territory

... is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth.


**Document C**

"We love to indulge in thoughts of the future extent and power of this Republic—because with its increase is the increase of human happiness and liberty. ... What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission! Be it ours to roll down all of the upstart leaven of old despotism, that comes our way!"

Document D

For American expansion to the Pacific was always a precise and calculated movement. It was ever limited in its objectives. American diplomatic and military policy that secured the acquisition of both Oregon and California was in the possession of men who never defined their expansionist purposes in terms of a democratic ideal. The vistas of all from Jackson to Polk were maritime and they were always anchored to specific waterways along the Pacific Coast. Land was necessary to them merely as a right of way to ocean ports—a barrier to be spanned by improved avenues of commerce. Any interpretation of westward extension beyond Texas is meaningless unless defined in terms of commerce and harbors.


Document E

However superior the Anglo-American race may be to that of Mexico, this gives the Americans no right to infringe upon the rights of the inferior race. The people of the United States may rightfully, and will, if they use the proper means, exercise a most beneficial moral influence over the Mexicans and other less enlightened nations of America. Beyond this they have no right to go.


Document F

"Then—Resolve,—Thet we wunt hev an inch o'slave territory;
Thet President Polk's holl perceedins air very tory;
Thet the war is a damned war, an' them thtat enlist in it
Should hev a cravat with a dresse tight twist in it;
Thet the war is a war fer the spreadin' o' slavery:"

James Russell Lowell, The Biglow Papers, 1846

Document G

Less than a year before he became President, Lincoln wrote that "the act of sending an armed force among the Mexicans was unnecessary, inasmuch as Mexico was in no way molesting or menacing the United States or the people thereof; and that it was unconstitutional, because the power of levying war is vested in Congress, and not in the President" (June 1, 1860).


Document H

Long-memoried Mexicans have never forgotten that their northern enemy tore away about half of their country. The argument that they were lucky not to lose all of it, and that they had been paid something for their land, did not lessen their bitterness. The war also marked an ugly turning point in the relations between the United States and Latin America as a whole. Hitherto, Uncle Sam had been regarded with some complacency, even friendliness. Henceforth, he was increasingly feared as the "Colossus of the North." Suspicious neighbors to the south condemned him as a greedy and untrustworthy bully, who might next despoil them of their soil.

Bailey and Kennedy, American Pageant, 272.
Document I

Within the United States, indecision about how much territory the country should demand also impeded rapid settlement. At the beginning of the war, ambitions of most Americans were relatively modest: California and New Mexico. But with each new, dazzling victory, the national appetite grew until “All Mexico” became a powerful slogan and movement.

The reluctance of most Americans to take on the responsibility of governing an alien, non-English-speaking people with different institutions and traditions, ultimately decided the All Mexico issue. Racism clearly played a part in the decision: Mexicans were “half-breeds,” incapable of self-government; they would be a dead weight around the bounding young America’s neck.


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**Mexican-American War: Was it in the National Interest?**

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