

Polk's War

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History III

An event often overlooked in American history is the Mexican-American war.

The Mexican-American war was an armed conflict between the Mexico and the United States from 1846-1848. The Mexican-American war ended with a compromise between the two sides at the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The main question one must ask about this conflict is how did the Mexican and American presidents shape the war and compromise? Many argue the American and Mexican view of national honor shaped this conflict, but the Mexican-American war occurred because of Polk's desire to expand the United States which stemmed from the annexation of Texas. The paper will be broken down into five parts which are the historical context, causes of the war, key figures in the war, the war and compromise.

The election of 1844 preceded the Mexican-American War. As the election of 1844 neared, the Whigs attempted to find middle ground. The Whig party, a precursor to the modern Republican party was formed in the 19th century to oppose Andrew Jackson and the Democratic party. On the other hand, the Democratic nomination was controlled by Van Buren and radical democrats¹. A chain of events changed the political topic of discussion of the election of 1844 from how to unite the Whig and Democrat parties to the annexation of Texas².

¹ Sean Wilentz, *The rise of American Democracy: jefferson to lincoln*, (New York city, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, September 17, 2006), 293-294.

² Ibid.

The annexation of Texas became the main topic of discussion when John Calhoun of South Carolina proposed the annexation treaty for Texas in 1844³. The annexation treaty for Texas sought to bring Texas into the union because Texas was a “republic” who desired to join the union. This treaty was not brought to fruition because a significant number of northern Democrats feared Texas would be split into five slavery states since it was so large. Thus northerners thought annexation only served to expand slavery. A few days later Calhoun released a statement which said the only reason for the annexation of Texas was to protect slavery⁴. Calhoun’s statement further supported the northerner’s argument that the only reason for annexing Texas was to expand slavery.

The election of 1844 appeared to have one defined prospective presidential candidate from each party. At the Whig convention in May, Henry Clay was nominated. At the Democratic convention, Van Buren lost the support of the Democrats because he opposed Annexation⁵. Van Buren opposed Annexation because he was against Manifest Destiny and did not want to expand slavery. Manifest destiny was a prominent idea in the early 19th century which claimed the United States must expand and possess the whole of the continent which Providence had given the United States for the expansion of liberty. At the Democratic convention, A new political candidate in place of Van Buren was presented named James K Polk who fully supported the annexation of Texas and Manifest Destiny⁶. In the end Polk won the nomination at the convention due to his aggressive expansionism⁷.

³ John M, Murrin. *Liberty, Equality, Power: a history of the American people*. Vol. 6, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2011), 355.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

The annexation of Texas caused turmoil in the political climate of the United States. Many northern states opposed the annexation because they believed Manifest Destiny was an excuse for expanding slavery⁸. Northern anti-slavery Whigs saw annexation as the South trying to increase slavery's control over the federal Government⁹. In contrast to northern opposition, many southern states in the Union supported annexation but for varied reasons. Many southern states supported annexation because they wished to protect and expand slavery. Other southern states supported Annexation out of fear that England would control Texas and have a foothold in North America. In 1844 Andrew Jackson and many Americans believed England was a threat because England was working to prevent the annexation of Texas to the United States¹⁰. In the end many Americans felt a strong bond of friendship with the Texians. Furthermore most Texans were desperate to join the union¹¹.

With the encouragement from Secretary of state Abel Upshur, John Tyler set out to annex Texas. John Tyler became president as vice president because William harrison died of pneumonia one month after his election. John Tyler's political views as president were pro slavery because he was a slaveholding Virginia aristocrat¹². One of Tyler's main objectives while in office was to win a presidential election and he sought to do this through the Annexation of Texas¹³. During the election of 1844, Secretary of state Upshur used the threat of Britain to promote annexing Texas to President John Tyler. Thus President Tyler set out to annex Texas because of the threat of Britain and for his re-election¹⁴. In the end, President Tyler accomplished

⁸ Ibid., 351.

⁹ Wilentz, *The Rise*, 295.

¹⁰ Justin H Smith "The Mexican Recognition of Texas." *The American historical review*, Vol 16, No. 1 (Oct. 1910): 46-47, Accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1834307>.

¹¹ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 10-11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 12.

annexation, but did not get re-elected . On April 12, 1844 Calhoun as secretary of state signed a treaty with Texas which brought Texas into the union as a territory¹⁵.

The deep cause of the Mexican-American war manifested itself in the Texas revolution. The Texas revolution began in 1835, when Mexican nationalists attempted to consolidate their power in their northern territories¹⁶. At the time many Mexican states revolted against Mexico and formed their own republics. So the Mexican nationalists in the federal government sought to reconquer all the lost states. Then the Tejanos and Americans allied to protest the loss of autonomy in their province and formed the Texas republic with a constitution¹⁷. Then the Mexican president Santa Anna Lopez attacked the Alamo and killed 187 on March 6, 1836¹⁸. On April 19, the Texan army and southern pro slavery volunteers captured Santa Anna and forced him to sign a treaty giving Texas independence¹⁹. From that point on, Texas remained separate from Mexico.

The Mexican war was caused by the break of diplomatic relations between the United States of America and Mexico. Mexico broke diplomatic relations because of the legality of Annexation. When Mexico heard about congress's joint resolution on annexation, President Jose herrera sent a formal protest about the legality of annexation²⁰. Mexico saw Annexation as illegal because in their eyes Texas was a Mexican province who rebelled. As a result, Mexico thought the national honor must be vindicated and the interest of Mexico preserved²¹. Therefore Mexico believed a perpetual war with Texas must be carried out²².

¹⁵ Wilentz, *The Rise*, 298.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.,355

¹⁹ Ibid.,355

²⁰ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 76.

²¹ Smith, *Recognition*, 36.

²² Ibid., 50-51.

After examining the formal protest of the legality of annexation, The United States responded by saying both Texas and the united states were independent nations. Therefore, they had no need of consulting with a foreign power before forming a union²³. On April 10, Mexico's U.S minister Almonte left the country which meant diplomatic relations were officially broken between the two countries²⁴. Almonte argued annexation was "an act of aggression the most unjust which can be found recorded in the annals of modern history."²⁵ In essence, Almonte claimed the United States of America was committing an injustice so grave that Mexico would declare war if the United States annexed Texas.

The trigger cause of the Mexican-American war was President Polk's instigation of war with Mexico. After Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States of America, Mexico made empty threats to go to war. President Polk wanted Mexico to declare war and decided to force them to. Polk forced Mexico to declare war by blockading and crossing into Mexican land. He ordered Commodore J.D.Sloat to seize San Francisco and other ports in California if war broke out²⁶. On January 13, 1846, Polk increased pressure on Mexico by ordering Zachary Taylor to march to the Rio Grande and ordering the navy to blockade the Rio Grande²⁷. Polk believed marching into Mexican land would force Mexico to take some form of action whether it be surrendering Texas or attacking American forces in Texas²⁸.

Another trigger cause of the war was Polk's failed attempts at diplomacy with Mexico. Polk's attempt to negotiate with Mexico was a farce because Polk sent a diplomat to Mexico by

²³ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ Smith, *Recognition*, 46-47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the name of John Slidell who was a representative from Louisiana²⁹. Polk sent Slidell with certain terms which were inadequate for diplomatic relations³⁰. John Slidell was instructed to treat Texas independency as fact and forgive two million dollars in Mexico's debt in order to settle the boundary dispute³¹. John Slidell was also supposed to buy California on his mission. On December 29, 1845, Slidell sent a letter to Polk in which he advised him to settle the conflict through war with Mexico³².

Furthermore Polk sent William parrot as Slidell's assistant whom the Mexican authorities labeled as an enemy of the state³³. Polk made the appointments of Slidell and Parrot despite the fact that "the mexican government asked that no one offensive be sent as minister". Polk essentially committed a fraud by sending Slidell to Mexico. The Mexican president refused to meet with Slidell; Slidell's mission failed before he even met with President Herrera³⁴. Although Slidell's mission failed, the United States had attempted "diplomacy" before war. Thus Polk gained support from the American people for a war with Mexico through demonstrating all had been done to prevent war³⁵.

The primary people involved in the Mexican-American war were Mariano Paredes, Herrera and James K Polk. The Mexican war involved two different mexican presidents with two different views on the war. After the Texas revolution and Santa Anna's failed presidency, President Herrera took office. Although the Mexican press protested annexation, President Herrera was willing to negotiate with the United States³⁶. After President Herrera refused to meet

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

³⁰ Ibid., 78.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

³⁶ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 77.

with John Slidell, Mariano Paredes became president of Mexico through a coup. In 1846, Mexico was in utter chaos³⁷. Mariano Paredes promised to take Texas from the United States³⁸. Paredes tried to fight off the American army in northern Mexico and his generals were defeated by Zachary Taylor³⁹. Then Paredes abdicated and instituted a Monarchy with a Spanish ruler in order to “preserve” Mexico.⁴⁰

On the American side of the war, President Polk was the primary person involved on behalf of the United States. Before becoming president, James Polk’s political career was molded by Andrew Jackson. Polk embodied partially the essence of the Jacksonian democracy because he worked hard to get where he was, although Jackson won the presidential nomination for him⁴¹. Polk believed in the principles of Jacksonian democracy which supported expansion, upheld the rights of the common man, and opposed the urban elite⁴². Polk supported Annexation because he believed it would protect America from Britain⁴³. Polk also stood for annexation in order to expand the freedom of America and to help independent farmers⁴⁴.

As president, Polk immediately sought to bring Texas, Oregon and California into the union. James K. Polk believed the Annexation of Texas was the first step in manifest destiny which was the “God-given goal: that of the United States stretching from shore to shore, taking its place as Europe’s equal”⁴⁵. Aside from Oregon and Texas, Polk desired to strip Mexico of California because it was a land full of natural resources, “the richest, most beautiful, and the

³⁷ Wikipedia, s.v. “Mariano Paredes,” accessed October 15, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariano_Paredes_\(President_of_Mexico\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariano_Paredes_(President_of_Mexico))

³⁸ Ibid., 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Wilentz, *The Rise*, 301.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 33.

healthiest country in the whole world”⁴⁶. Polk did not want to be blamed for a war, but instead counted on bullying and a little incident to start a war⁴⁷. Polk was certain that Mexico would surrender when faced with war and then sell California⁴⁸.

The American army was far superior than the Mexican army. In the battle of Brazito, Doniphan’s army decimated the Mexican army. On the 25th of December, Doniphan's army no more than 800 fought the Mexican army which was composed of 1300 men divided by many different corps⁴⁹. The battle began by the Mexican army outflanking the United states army, but then Doniphan held his ground and pushed back the Mexicans⁵⁰. Then Doniphan took over an artillery gun of the Mexican army and the Mexican army fell⁵¹. Issac George notes: “col. Doniphan, his officers and men displayed the utmost courage, and determined resolution to conquer or perish in conflict”⁵².

The United States of America under James K Polk was unwilling to compromise in order to avoid conflict before the Mexican-American war. The United States was unwilling to compromise with Mexico with regard to the legality of annexation. At the same time as President herrera sent his protest to the United States, he was attempting a compromise with Texas. President Jones and the Texan secretary drew up “conditions preliminary to a treaty of peace” on April 10⁵³. The “conditions” were based upon the principles of recognition by Mexico and a pledge of nationality⁵⁴. On April 11, the proposition of Texas was presented to President Herrera

⁴⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Isaac, *Heroes*, 67-68.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 69-71.

⁵³ Smith, *Recognition*, 47-48.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

who was willing to work with Texas⁵⁵. On April 21, Cuevas proposed to congress the iniciativa (permission to discuss with Texas it's proposition and negotiate a treaty)⁵⁶. The Federal Government and the congress of Mexico approved of the iniciativa⁵⁷. The United States however responded by saying both Texas and the United States were independent nations⁵⁸. This was an excellent place where a compromise could have been made between the three nations, but the United States insisted Texas had no need of consulting with a foreign power before forming a union.

President Polk actively sought out war with Mexico because he believed Mexico should not be compromised with but punished. In March of 1846, Zachary Taylor marched 4000 men into the Nueces strip which caused Mexican forces to amass at Matamoros. Once Taylor's army marched into the strip, his men came to realize they had no right to be in mexican territory⁵⁹. On April 24, General Ampudia who was stationed at the port of Matamoros sent a cavalry across the Rio Grande and Taylor sent a squad of dragoons. In the Rio Grande, there was a skirmish in which the American troops surrendered and lost eleven men⁶⁰.

On April 25, 1846, Polk proposed to his cabinet they must take action to punish Mexico for its "offenses" against the United States of America⁶¹. Polk viewed foreign relations with Mexico through a lense of slavery⁶². Since Mexico was "inferior" in both race and power, they must obey the United States of America. The political concept of southern honor also shaped

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48-49.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵⁸ Greenberg, *Wicked*, 76.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 101

⁶⁰ Ibid., 102

⁶¹ Ibid., 95

⁶² Ibid., 96

Polk's view of foreign relations with Mexico⁶³. The southern conception of honor stated national honor like personal honor was so important that if hurt, the "inferior" must be punished. On May 9th, Polk received news of the "attack" on Taylor's forces and immediately wrote a declaration of war⁶⁴.

In conclusion, one can see the Mexican-American war occurred because of Polk's desire to expand the United States which stemmed from the annexation of Texas. Although the argument can be made to put all the blame on Polk for the Mexican-American war, Polk's actions can be justified. President Tyler had successfully signed a treaty with Texas for annexation; how could Polk not use annexation as a springboard to gain other territories. On the other hand, the argument can be made that Polk's actions were not justified. His actions were not justified because he inherently viewed the Mexicans as inferior and of needing punishment for their "offenses". Also Polk was at all times unwilling to compromise with Mexico in order to expand the United States of America. Thus it is left to the audience to decide whether Polk was justified or not in provoking war with Mexico.

Annotated Bibliography

George, Isaac. *Heroes and Incidents of The Mexican War*. Hollywood: Sun Dance Press, 1971. Isaac George served in the Mexican war and recorded his observations. The focus of book is the Mexican war in the early 19th century. I plan to use it to help me form the argument presented my paper.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 103

Smith, Justin H. "The Mexican Recognition of Texas." *The American historical review*, Vol 16, No. 1 (Oct. 1910): 36-55. Accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1834307>.

Justin Harvey Smith was an American historian who was a specialist on the Mexican-American War. Smith was educated at Dartmouth College and Union Theological Seminary. He was Professor of Modern History at Dartmouth 1899–1908. He published *The Annexation of Texas* in 1911 and *The War with Mexico* in 1919. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for *The War with Mexico* and the first Loubat Prize in 1923. The Focus of the book is the Mexican recognition of Texas in the early 19th century. The argument of the article is still to be discovered. I plan to use it to gain insight on the Mexican side of the war. I also plan to use it to support and further the argument of my research paper.

Murrin, John M. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*. Vol. 6. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2011.

John Murrin graduated with a B.A., College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1957; and received an A.M., University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1960. He also attained a Phd at Yale university. He currently is a professor of history of the 17th and 18th centuries at Princeton. The focus of the book is the history of the United States of America. The purpose of the book is to teach readers about American history and expose them to movies and other forms of popular culture that tell the stories of the nation's past. The book shows how the united states was transformed from a land filled with Native Americans into one of the most powerful countries on the face of the earth. The text book helped me understand the the major ideas and historical context of the time around the Mexican-American War.

Wilentz, Sean. *The rise of American democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. New York city, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Sean Wilentz received a bachelor's degree at Columbia University and then at Oxford University in the 1970's. He went on to earn a Master's degree and PhD at Yale. The focus of *The Rise of American Democracy* is an overview of how America progressed as a democracy from the time of Jefferson to Lincoln. There was no argument in the section which was read from Wilentz. The book helped me grasp a better understanding of the historical setting surrounding the Mexican-American war.

Greenberg, Amy. *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*. New York City, NY: Knopf, 2012.

Amy Greenberg received a bachelor's at the University of California in 1989 and then went on to earn a PhD at Harvard in 1995. Greenberg received the Gilder Lehrman Fellowship award in 2005 and Robert M. Utley Award in 2013. The focus of *A Wicked War* is to narrate the events leading up to the Mexican-American War and the war itself. There is no apparent argument in *A Wicked War*. The source has helped me with historical context before the war. But it has primarily served to inform me of the trigger causes of the war. I also plan to use it to support and further the argument in my research paper.