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The Mexican War: A Study in Causation

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ON MAY 11, 1846, President James K. Polk presented his war message to Congress. After reviewing the skirmish between General Zachary Taylor's dragoons and a body of Mexican soldiers along the Rio Grande, the President asserted that Mexico "has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. . . . [W]ar exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by act of Mexico. . . ." No country could have had a superior case for war. Democrats in large numbers (for it was largely a partisan matter) responded with the patriotic fervor which Polk expected of them. "Our government has permitted itself to be insulted long enough," wrote one Georgian. "The blood of her citizens has been spilt on her own soil. It appeals to us for vengeance." Still, some members of Congress, recalling more accurately than the President the circumstances of the conflict, soon rendered the Mexican War the most reviled in American history—at least until the Vietnam war of the 1960s. One outraged Whig termed the war "illegal, unrighteous, and damnable." Whigs questioned both Polk's honesty and his sense of geography. Congressman Joshua Giddings of Ohio accused the President of "planting the standard of the United States on foreign soil, and using the military forces of the United States to violate every principle of international law and of moral justice." To vote for the war, admitted Senator John C. Calhoun, was "to plunge a dagger into his own heart,

and more so." Some critics in Congress openly wished the Mexicans well.

For well over a century such profound differences in perception have pervaded American writings on the Mexican War. Even in the past decade, historians have reached conclusions on the question of war guilt as disparate as those which separated Polk from his wartime conservative and abolitionist critics. Justin H. Smith's *The War with Mexico* stands at the core of the perennial debate. Few books of American history have such impressive scholarly credentials; the footnotes and bibliography alone seem worthy of the Pulitzer Prize which the book received in 1920. According to Smith, the war was "deliberately precipitated by the will and act of Mexico."¹ For the past half century every judgment of the Mexican War has begun with the acceptance or rejection of that verdict. Bernard DeVoto, in *The Year of Decision*, wondered how Smith could accept conclusions which denied the very facts he presented. "If there is a more consistently wrongheaded book in our history, or one which so freely cites facts in support of judgments which those facts controvert," wrote DeVoto, "I have not encountered it."² Similarly Glenn W. Price, in his *Origins of the War with Mexico*, concluded that "Smith's work, in all its argument that pertained to the origins of the War, was simply preposterous as history. . . ."³ Yet as recently as 1971 Seymour V. Connor and Odie B. Faulk, in their *North America Divided: The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, while acknowledging that they did not follow Smith "slavishly," concluded that Smith's study "remains today a monument of historical scholarship."⁴ Although nationalistic biases will color the judgments of those who study war, it seems strange that historical agreement on a subject as remote and as well documented as the Mexican War should be that elusive. President Polk's diary, published in 1910, remains the last major addition to the historic record on the origins of that war.

¹Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York, 1919), I, 155.

²Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston, 1943), 510.

³Glenn W. Price, *Origins of the War with Mexico: The Polk-Stockton Intrigue* (Austin, Tex., 1967), 103.

⁴Seymour V. Connor and Odie B. Faulk, *North America Divided: The Mexican War 1846-1848* (New York, 1971), 192-193.

In some measure the diversity of judgment on the Mexican War, as on other wars, is understandable. By basing their analyses on official rationalizations, historians often ignore the more universal causes of war which transcend individual conflicts and which can establish the bases for greater consensus. Neither the officials in Washington nor those in Mexico City ever acknowledged any alternatives to the actions which they took. But governments generally have more choices in any controversy than they are prepared to admit. Circumstances determine their extent. The more powerful a nation, the more remote its dangers, the greater its options between action and inaction. Often for the weak, unfortunately, the alternative is capitulation or war. Certainly the choices available to Franklin D. Roosevelt and Cordell Hull in their relations with Japan in 1941 were far greater than either would acknowledge. Similarly, as James C. Thomson had noted so well, the John F. Kennedy administration vigorously eliminated a multitude of available alternatives when it bound itself to a single course of action in Vietnam.⁵ Polk and his advisers developed their Mexican policies on the dual assumption that Mexico was weak and that the acquisition of certain Mexican territories would satisfy admirably the long-range interests of the United States. Within that context, Polk's policies were direct, timely, and successful. But Polk had choices. Mexico, whatever its internal condition, was no direct threat to the United States. Polk, had he so desired, could have avoided war; indeed, he could have ignored Mexico in 1845 with absolute impunity.

In explaining the Mexican War historians have dwelled on the causes of friction in American-Mexican relations. In part these lay in the disparate qualities of the two populations, in part in the vast discrepancies between the two countries in energy, efficiency, power, and national wealth. Through two decades of independence Mexico had experienced a continuous rise and fall of governments; by the 1840s survival had become the primary concern of every regime. Conscious of their weakness,

⁵For James C. Thomson's analysis of the efforts of the Kennedy administration to eliminate all alternatives to its single course of action, see "How Could Vietnam Happen? *An Autopsy.*" *The Atlantic*, CCXXI (April 1968), 47-53.

the successive governments in Mexico City resented the superior power and effectiveness of the United States and feared American notions of destiny that anticipated the annexation of Mexico's northern provinces.⁶ Having failed to prevent the formation of the Texas Republic, Mexico reacted to Andrew Jackson's recognition of Texan independence, in March 1837, with deep indignation. Thereafter the Mexican raids into Texas, such as the one on San Antonio in 1842, aggravated the bitterness of Texans toward Mexico, for such forays had no purpose beyond terrorizing the frontier settlements.

But such mutual animosities, extensive as they were, do not account for the Mexican War. Governments as divided and chaotic as the Mexican regimes of the 1840s usually have difficulty in maintaining positive and profitable relations with their neighbors; their behavior often produces annoyance, but seldom armed conflict. Belligerence toward other countries had flowed through United States history like a torrent without, in itself, setting off a war. Nations do not fight over cultural differences or verbal recriminations; they fight over perceived threats to their interests created by the ambitions or demands of others.

What increased the animosity between Mexico City and Washington was a series of specific issues over which the two countries perennially quarreled—claims, boundaries, and the future of Texas. Nations have made claims a pretext for intervention, but never a pretext for war.⁷ Every nineteenth-century effort to collect debts through force assumed the absence of effective resistance, for no debt was worth the price of war. To collect its debt from Mexico in 1838, for example, France blockaded Mexico's gulf ports and bombarded Vera Cruz. United States claims against Mexico created special problems which discounted their seriousness as a rationale for war. True, the Mexican government failed to protect the possessions

⁶For an excellent review of Mexican attitudes toward the United States, see Gene M. Brack, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny 1821–1846* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1975).

⁷Clayton Charles Kohl came to this general conclusion in his study, *Claims as a Cause of the Mexican War* (New York, 1914). Those who defend Polk quite logically recognize the legitimacy of all Polk's arguments for war, including claims. See, for example, Connor and Faulk, *North America Divided*, 234.

and the safety of Americans in Mexico from robbery, theft, and other illegal actions. But Americans were under no obligation to do business in Mexico and should have understood the risk of transporting goods and money in that country. United States citizens suffered similarly at the hands of other people without provoking wars of retribution. Minister Waddy Thompson wrote from Mexico City in 1842 that it would be “with somewhat of bad grace that we should war upon a country because it could not pay its debts when so many of our own states are in the same situation.”⁸ Even as the United States after 1842 attempted futilely to collect the \$2 million awarded its citizens by a claims commission, it was far more deeply in debt to Britain over speculative losses. Minister Wilson Shannon reported in the summer of 1844 that the claims issue defied settlement in Mexico City and recommended that Washington take the needed action to compel Mexico to pay. If Polk would take up the challenge and sacrifice American human and material resources in a war against Mexico, he would do so for reasons other than the enforcement of claims. The President knew well that Mexico could not pay. Yet as late as May 9, 1846, Polk was ready to ask Congress for a declaration of war on the question of unpaid claims alone.⁹

Congress’s joint resolution for Texas annexation in February 1845 raised the spectre of war among editors and politicians alike. As early as 1843 the Mexican government had warned the American minister in Mexico City that annexation would render war inevitable; Mexican officials in Washington repeated that warning. To Mexico, therefore, the move to annex Texas was an unbearable affront. Within a month after Polk’s inauguration on March 4, General Juan Almonte, the Mexican minister in Washington, boarded a packet in New York and sailed for Vera Cruz to sever his country’s diplomatic relations with the United States. Even before the Texas Convention could meet on July 4 to vote annexation, rumors of a possible Mexican invasion of Texas prompted Polk to advance General Zachary Taylor’s forces from Fort Jesup in Louisiana down the Texas coast. Polk

⁸Quoted in Kohl, *Claims as a Cause of the Mexican War*, 51.

⁹Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk* (Chicago, 1910), I, 384–385.

instructed Taylor to extend his protection to the Rio Grande but to avoid any areas to the north of that river occupied by Mexican troops.¹⁰ Simultaneously the President reinforced the American squadron in the Gulf of Mexico. "The threatened invasion of Texas by a large Mexican army," Polk informed Andrew J. Donelson, the American chargé in Texas, on June 15, "is well calculated to excite great interest here and increases our solicitude concerning the final action by the Congress and the Convention of Texas. . . ."¹¹ Polk assured Donelson that he intended to defend Texas to the limit of his constitutional power. Donelson resisted the pressure of those Texans who wanted Taylor to advance to the Rio Grande; instead, he placed Taylor at Corpus Christi on the Nueces. Taylor agreed that the line from the mouth of the Nueces to San Antonio covered the Texas settlements and afforded a favorable base from which to defend the Texas frontier.¹²

Those who took the rumors of Mexican aggressiveness seriously lauded the President's action. With Texas virtually a part of the United States, argued the *Washington Union*: "We owe it to ourselves, to the proud and elevated character which America maintains among the nations of the earth, to guard our own territory from the invasion of the ruthless Mexicans. . . ." The *New York Morning News* observed that Polk's policy would, on the whole, "command a general concurrence of the public opinion of his country." Some Democratic leaders, fearful of a Mexican attack, urged the President to strengthen Taylor's forces and order them to take the offensive should Mexican soldiers cross the Rio Grande.¹³ Others believed the reports from Mexico exaggerated, for there was no apparent relationship between Mexican expressions of belligerence and that country's capacity to act. Secretary of War William L. Marcy admitted that his information was no better than that of other

¹⁰For Taylor's instructions, see George Bancroft to Taylor, June 15, 1845, *House Ex. Doc. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 81; William L. Marcy to Taylor, July 30, 1845, *Senate Ex. Doc. 18*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 9.

¹¹Polk to Donelson, June 15, 1845, Polk Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

¹²Taylor to Donelson, July 30, 1845, Donelson Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

¹³*Semi-Weekly Union* (Washington), July 10 and Aug. 11, 1845; C. J. Ingersoll to Polk, Aug. 20, 1845, Polk Papers.

commentators. "I have at no time," he wrote in July, "felt that war with Mexico was probable—and do not now believe it is, yet it is in the range of possible occurrences. I have officially acted on the hypothesis that our peace may be temporarily disturbed without however believing it will be." Still convinced that the administration had no grounds for alarm, Marcy wrote on August 12: "The presence of a considerable force in Texas will do no hurt and possibly may be of great use."¹⁴ In September William S. Parrott, Polk's special agent in Mexico, assured the President that there would be neither a Mexican declaration of war nor an invasion of Texas.¹⁵

Polk insisted that the administration's show of force in Texas would prevent rather than provoke war. "I do not anticipate that Mexico will be mad enough to declare war," he wrote in July, but "I think she would have done so but for the appearance of a strong naval force in the Gulf and our army moving in the direction of her frontier on land." Polk restated this judgment on July 28 in a letter to General Robert Armstrong, the United States consul at Liverpool: "I think there need be but little apprehension of war with Mexico. If however she shall be mad enough to make war we are prepared to meet her." The President assured Senator William H. Haywood of North Carolina that the American forces in Texas would never aggress against Mexico; they would, however, prevent any Mexican forces from crossing the Rio Grande. In conversation with Senator William S. Archer of Virginia, on September 1, the President added confidently that "the appearance of our land and naval forces on the borders of Mexico & in the Gulf would probably deter and prevent Mexico from either declaring war or invading Texas."¹⁶ Polk's continuing conviction that Mexico would not attack suggests that his deployment of United States land and naval forces along Mexico's periphery was designed less to protect Texas than to support an aggressive diplomacy which might extract a satisfactory treaty from Mexico without

¹⁴Marcy to General P. M. Wetmore, July 5 and Aug. 12, 1845, Marcy Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁵Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, I, 33.

¹⁶Polk to A. O. J. Nicholson, July 28, 1845; Polk to General Robert Armstrong, July 28, 1845; Polk to William H. Haywood, Aug. 9, 1845, Polk Papers; Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, I, 13.

war. For Anson Jones, the last president of Texas, Polk's deployments had precisely that purpose:

Texas never actually needed the protection of the United States after I came into office. . . . There was no necessity for it after the "preliminary Treaty," as we were at peace with Mexico, and knew perfectly well that that Government, though she might bluster a little, had not the slightest idea of invading Texas either by land or water; and that nothing would provoke her to (active) hostilities, but the presence of troops in the immediate neighborhood of the Rio Grande, threatening her towns and settlements on the southwest side of that river. . . . But Donelson appeared so intent upon "encumbering us with help," that finally, to get rid of his annoyance, he was told he might give us as much protection as he pleased. . . . The protection asked for was only *prospective* and contingent; the *protection* he had in view was *immediate* and *aggressive*.¹⁷

For Polk, the exertion of military and diplomatic pressure on a disorganized Mexico was not a prelude to war. Whig critics of annexation had predicted war; this alone compelled the administration to avoid a conflict over Texas. In his memoirs Anson Jones recalled that in 1845 Commodore Robert F. Stockton, with either the approval or the connivance of Polk, attempted to convince him that he should place Texas "in an attitude of active hostility toward Mexico, so that, when Texas was finally brought into the Union, *she might bring war with her*. . . ."¹⁸ If Stockton engaged in such an intrigue, he apparently did so on his own initiative, for no evidence exists to implicate the administration.¹⁹ Polk not only preferred to achieve his purposes by means other than war, but also assumed that his military measures in Texas, limited as they were, would convince the Mexican government that it could not escape the necessity of coming to terms with the United States. U.S. policy toward Mexico during 1845 achieved

¹⁷Anson Jones, *Memoranda and Official Correspondence Relating to the Republic of Texas, Its History and Annexation* (New York, 1859), 53.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 46–47.

¹⁹Some historians have accepted Jones's allegations. See Richard R. Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigue of 1845," *Pacific Historical Review*, IV (March 1935), 39–68; Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1960), 138; and Price, *Origins of the War with Mexico*, 49–78, 105–152. Price's effort to perfect the case against Polk was laudable; his evidence remained circumstantial.

the broad national purpose of Texas annexation. Beyond that it brought U.S. power to bear on Mexico in a manner calculated to further the processes of negotiation.²⁰ Whether the burgeoning tension would lead to a negotiated boundary settlement or to war hinged on two factors: the nature of Polk's demands and Mexico's response to them. The President announced his objectives to Mexico's troubled officialdom through his instructions to John Slidell, his special emissary who departed for Mexico in November 1845 with the assurance that the government in Mexico City was prepared to re-establish formal diplomatic relations with the United States and negotiate a territorial settlement.

No one grasped the limited choices confronting Mexico more clearly than Charles Bankhead, the British minister in Mexico City. This experienced diplomat recognized both the mounting United States pressures on Mexico and the despair which they created among Mexican officials. Bankhead no less than the Mexicans feared that Washington would use the occasion of Texas annexation to push its boundary claims on a weak and reluctant neighbor. The American squadrons off Vera Cruz and Mazatlan created consternation throughout the country. On May 30, 1845, Bankhead reported to Lord Aberdeen in London that the United States was seeking an excuse to attack Mexico.²¹ Bankhead condemned the anti-Americanism in Mexico City, for it compelled the Mexican government to confront Washington with a bravado that eliminated any forthright negotiations and belied its apprehensions and doubts. "It is distressing," he wrote, "to see a country like Mexico, possessing so many elements of prosperity, torn to pieces by intestine broils, brought about in reality for purposes of the basest personal aggrandisement."²²

²⁰For Polk's preference for peaceful negotiations see James Buchanan to John Black, Sept. 17, 1845, *House Ex. Doc. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 12. Others agreed with Polk that the mere presence of American forces in Texas would compel the Mexicans to negotiate. For example, the St. Louis *Missouri Reporter* declared on July 29, 1845: "By displaying a competent military and naval force, we shall command respect, and secure the objects we have in view without delay. The Administration should, in the mean time, be looking forward to what may be accomplished by negotiation."

²¹Bankhead to Aberdeen, April 29 and May 30, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vol. 185, London: Public Record Office.

²²Bankhead to Aberdeen, July 30, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vol. 186.

Until the summer of 1845, British officials in both Mexico City and London urged the Mexicans to preserve, if possible, the one defense available to them—an independent Texas. Annexation, Aberdeen argued, would endanger no fundamental British interest; but Mexico, without a buffer state separating it from the United States, he predicted, would not withstand the encroachments of American power. Indeed, Aberdeen feared that the United States, in possession of Texas, would threaten the very independence of Mexico. Thus, Aberdeen advised the Mexicans to normalize their relations with Texas; without that, the friends of Mexico could offer little help. Mexico, Bankhead warned repeatedly, could not reconquer Texas; Mexican officials seemed to agree. This enabled him to assure Charles Elliot, the British chargé in Texas, that Mexico wanted to avoid trouble with Texas and had dispatched troops to the frontier for defense alone. As late as February 1845, Bankhead continued to warn the Mexicans that their security demanded an independent Texas. Finally in May, Mexican officials acknowledged the independence of Texas, too late to prevent its annexation to the United States.²³ Within two months Mexico faced an American military presence on its exposed and still undefined border.

Mexico's troubles were not limited to the Rio Grande frontier. By 1845 Mexican officials had reminded Bankhead repeatedly of California's vulnerability to American encroachment. During July 1845 Bankhead reported that California had become the major topic of concern in the Mexican capital.²⁴ Informed Mexicans could recall that President Andrew Jackson had attempted to purchase the Bay of San Francisco in 1835. Only a year later Mexico accused Americans of supporting a revolution in California which ousted the governor. José María Tornel, the Mexican minister of war, predicted in 1837 that the loss of Texas, if accepted by Mexico, "will inevitably result in the loss of

²³Bankhead to Aberdeen, May 30 and 31, 1844 and Feb. 3, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 174, 183; Aberdeen to Bankhead, June 3, Sept. 30, Oct. 23, Nov. 28, and Dec. 31, 1844, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 172, 183; Bankhead to Elliot, March 22, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vol. 184.

²⁴Aberdeen to Bankhead, Oct. 1 and Dec. 31, 1844, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 172, 183; Bankhead to Aberdeen, June 29, 1844, and July 30, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 174, 186.

New Mexico and the Californias.”²⁵ What disturbed Mexican leaders more profoundly was Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones’s seizure of Monterey in 1842. Jones, as commander of the United States Naval Squadron in the Pacific, had acted under the rumor that the United States and Mexico were at war.

When Californians launched a second revolution in 1844 to overthrow the Mexican regime, officials in Mexico City assumed that Americans were attempting to repeat the Texas drama in California. Captain John C. Fremont’s defiance of local authorities at Monterey prompted Tornel to repeat his earlier warning:

The passion of the Anglo-American people, their pronounced desire to acquire new lands, is a dynamic power which is enhanced and nourished by their own industry. An ill-defined line, the source of a yet unknown river, scientific explorations with the pretext of establishing monuments that shall *mark with perfect accuracy* the limits of both nations, all these have given a golden opportunity to the combined efforts of the people and government to promote their plans to acquire what belongs to their neighbors.

“California is entirely at the mercy of the North Americans,” lamented *El Amigo del Pueblo* (Mexico City) in August 1845. “In regard to the United States,” echoed *El Patriota Mexicano* (Mexico City) in November, “its designs [on California] are no longer a mystery.” For *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* (Mexico City) the strongest evidence of American ambition was the “irritating insolence” which the newspapers of the United States displayed in advocating emigration and the annexation of California.²⁶

Confronted with the loss of its borderlands, Mexico reached out to Britain for help. Earlier, Mexican officials warned Bankhead that, without British guarantees, an independent Texas would not protect Mexico’s northern border. Now they offered Britain a protectorate in California; some suggested that Britain purchase the province. In September 1845 a distraught Mexico again sought a British commitment to the defense of its frontiers.

²⁵Carlos E. Castaneda, trans. and ed., *The Mexican Side of the Texas Revolution by the Chief Mexican Participants* (Dallas, 1928), 368, 370; quoted in Frank A. Knapp, Jr., “Mexican Fear of Manifest Destiny in California,” in Thomas E. Cotner, ed., *Essays in Mexican History* (Austin, Tex., 1958), 195.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 196, 200, 203.

But British diplomacy was not prepared to underwrite the Mexican cause. Aberdeen, hoping to keep California out of American hands, suggested that Mexico concentrate all its military power in California. Bankhead admitted that Mexico, standing alone, had little chance of success in its mounting crisis with the United States, but he refused to draw his country into the quarrel. He acknowledged a British interest in Mexico's welfare, nothing more.²⁷

Unable to offer British support, Bankhead could only advise the Mexicans to show greater restraint in their relations with the United States. Mexican writings, he complained, were too inflammatory; moreover, they created objectives which no Mexican government could achieve. Politicians and journalists aggravated the Mexican spirit of defiance by insisting that the United States was militarily weak, was divided over slavery and the justice of Polk's demands, and therefore would not fight. Mexico, they added, would benefit from the advantages that accrue to defensive power. Yet among Mexico's leaders there was always a sharp contrast between their public expressions of confidence and their private admissions of dread. Mexico, they knew, stood no chance in a war with the United States. If Mexico was too weak to fight, Bankhead warned, it had no choice but to negotiate. He advised the Herrera government in Mexico City to deal directly with Washington rather than risk a drift toward war. Yet that regime, even as it toppled in December 1845, denounced the United States to counter the appeals of its political opposition to Mexican nationalism. Such behavior distressed Bankhead. "The self conceit and weakness of the government here," he complained to Aberdeen, "preclude the possibility of my giving them any advice. . . ."²⁸ Bankhead recognized Herrera's vulnerability. Paredes, he reported as early as August, could overthrow him whenever he chose. Yet Paredes, Bankhead believed, would be an improvement over Herrera's Federalists. As the leader of the Centralists, Paredes appeared better able to give Mexico the strong, central admin-

²⁷Bankhead to Aberdeen, Jan. 29 and July 30, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 184, 186.

²⁸Bankhead to Aberdeen, Sept. 29 and Nov. 29, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 186, 187.

istration that it required. Despite his deep disillusionment with Mexican politics, Bankhead believed Slidell's arrival unwisely premature, for it seemed no less than an American effort to impose an immediate boundary settlement on a chaotic Mexico under the threat of force.²⁹

Actually, Slidell's presence in Mexico inaugurated a diplomatic crisis not unlike those which precede most wars. Fundamentally the Polk administration, in dispatching Slidell, gave the Mexicans the same two choices that the dominant power in any confrontation gives to the weaker—the acceptance of a body of concrete diplomatic demands or eventual war.³⁰ Slidell's instructions described United States territorial objectives with considerable clarity. If Mexico knew little of Polk's growing acquisitiveness toward California during the autumn of 1845, Slidell proclaimed the President's intentions with his proposals to purchase varying portions of California for as much as \$25 million. Other countries such as England and Spain had consigned important areas of the New World through peaceful negotiations, but the United States, except in its Mexican relations, had never asked any country to part with a portion of its own territory. Yet Polk could not understand why Mexico should reveal any special reluctance to part with Texas, the Rio Grande, New Mexico, or California. What made the terms of Slidell's instructions appear fair to him was Mexico's military and financial helplessness. Polk's defenders noted that California was not a *sine qua non* of any settlement—that Polk offered to settle the immediate controversy over the acquisition of the Rio Grande boundary alone in exchange for the cancellation of claims. Unfortunately, amid the passions of December 1845, such distinctions were lost. Furthermore, a settlement of the Texas boundary would not have resolved the California question at all.³¹

²⁹Bankhead to Aberdeen, Aug. 29, Sept. 29, and Nov. 29, 1845, Foreign Office, 50, vols. 186, 187.

³⁰The issues were different—the desire for California as opposed to the demand for an independent Cuba, the preference for a British victory, or the defense of China's integrity—but the limited choices which the United States gave its opponents in 1846, 1898, 1917, and 1941 were similar in quality and had the same effect.

³¹Historians who regard Polk's proposals fair have scant respect for Mexico's belligerent rejection of them. Dwelling on Mexican behavior which followed Congress's completion of annexation and the arrival of Polk's emissary, Slidell, in Mexico during December 1845, Connor and Faulk have rebuilt the classic case against Mexico. For

Throughout the crisis months of 1845 and 1846, spokesmen of the Polk administration warned the Mexican government repeatedly that its choices were limited. In June 1845, Polk's mouthpiece, the Washington *Union*, observed characteristically that if Mexico resisted Washington's demands, "A corps of properly organized volunteers . . . would invade, overrun, and occupy Mexico. They would enable us not only to take California, but to keep it." American officials, in their contempt for Mexico, spoke privately of the need to chastize that country for its annoyances and insults. Parrott wrote to Secretary of State James Buchanan in October that he wished "to see this people well flogged by Uncle Sam's boys, ere we enter upon negotiations. . . . I know [the Mexicans] better, perhaps, than any other American citizen and I am fully persuaded, they can never love or respect us, as we should be loved and respected by them, until we shall have given them a positive proof of our superiority." Mexico's pretensions would continue, wrote Slidell in late December, "until the Mexican people shall be convinced by hostile demonstrations, that our differences must be settled promptly, either by negotiation or the sword." In January 1846 the *Union* publicly threatened Mexico with war if it rejected the just demands of the United States. "The result of such a course on her part," it declared, "may compel us to resort to more decisive measures . . . to obtain the settlement of our legitimate claims." As Slidell prepared to leave Mexico in March 1846, he again reminded the administration: "Depend upon it, we can never get along well with them, until we have given them a good drubbing."³² In Washington on May 8, Slidell advised the

them, Mexico's responsibility for the coming of war was unmistakable: the Mexicans simply translated their inexcusable animosity toward the United States into preparations for war and the final decision of April 1846 to attack. "Perhaps it was all foreordained," they wrote, "for there can be no question but that the annexation of Texas precipitated a reaction among patriotic zealots in Mexico which produced war—California, Polk, Manifest Destiny, claims, Nueces boundary notwithstanding." Connor and Faulk argue logically that California was no issue in the coming of the war. That province, they noted, "was peripheral to the main issue—the arousing of Mexican nationalism (by Herrera's opponents) over the annexation of Texas. By the time of Slidell's appointment in November 1845 Herrera's overthrow was imminent and war was virtually inevitable. It really matters little whether Polk was interested in California or not." Connor and Faulk, *North America Divided*, 22, 27, 28, 32.

³² Parrott to Buchanan, Oct. 11, 1845, Slidell to Buchanan, Dec. 27, 1845, and Slidell to Buchanan, March 18, 1846, all in William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence*

President "to take the redress of the wrongs and injuries which we had so long borne from Mexico into our own hands, and to act with promptness and energy."³³

Mexico responded to Polk's challenge with an outward display of belligerence and an inward dread of war. Mexicans feared above all that the United States intended to overrun their country and seize much of their territory. Polk and his advisers assumed that Mexico, to avoid an American invasion, would give up its provinces peacefully. Obviously Mexico faced growing diplomatic and military pressures to negotiate away its territories; it faced no moral obligation to do so. Herrera and Paredes had the sovereign right to protect their regimes by avoiding any formal recognition of Slidell and by rejecting any of the boundary proposals embodied in his instructions, provided that in the process they did not endanger any legitimate interests of the American people. At least to some Mexicans, Slidell's terms demanded nothing less than Mexico's capitulation. By what standard was \$2 million a proper payment for the Rio Grande boundary, or \$25 million a fair price for California? No government would have accepted such terms. Having rejected negotiation in the face of superior force, Mexico would meet the challenge with a final gesture of defiance. In either case Mexico was destined to lose, but historically nations have preferred to fight than to give away territory under diplomatic pressure alone. Gene M. Brack, in his long study of Mexico's deep-seated fear and resentment of the United States, explained Mexico's ultimate behavior in such terms:

President Polk knew that Mexico could offer but feeble resistance militarily, and he knew that Mexico needed money. No proper American would exchange territory and the national honor for cash, but President Polk mistakenly believed that the application of military pressure would convince Mexicans to do so. They did not respond

of the United States: Inter-American Affairs 1831-1860 (Washington, D.C., 1937), VIII, 760, 803, 832. Slidell again revealed his lack of respect for Mexico and its power when he wrote on April 2, 1846: "The best security for the inaction of Paredes is his utter inability, to concentrate on the frontier, a sufficient force to cope with General Taylor, he cannot at present by any effort untie six thousand men for that object, and from what I have seen of the Mexican troops, I should have no apprehension of the result of any attack with that number." Slidell to Buchanan, April 2, 1846, *ibid.*, 839.

³³Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, I, 382.

logically, but patriotically. Left with the choice of war or territorial concessions, the former course, however dim the prospects of success, could be the only one.³⁴

Mexico, in its resistance, gave Polk the three choices which every nation gives another in an uncompromisable confrontation: to withdraw his demands and permit the issues to drift, unresolved; to reduce his goals in the interest of an immediate settlement; or to escalate the pressures in the hope of securing an eventual settlement on his own terms. Normally when the internal conditions of a country undermine its relations with others, a diplomatic corps simply removes itself from the hostile environment and awaits a better day. Mexico, despite its animosity, did not endanger the security interests of the United States; it had not invaded Texas and did not contemplate doing so. Mexico had refused to pay the claims, but those claims were not equal to the price of a one-week war. Whether Mexico negotiated a boundary for Texas in 1846 mattered little. The United States had lived with unsettled boundaries for decades without considering war. Settlers, in time, would have forced a settlement, but in 1846 the region between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was a vast, generally unoccupied wilderness. Thus there was nothing, other than Polk's ambitions, to prevent the United States from withdrawing its diplomats from Mexico City and permitting its relations with Mexico to drift. But Polk, whatever the language of his instructions, did not send Slidell to Mexico to normalize relations with the Mexican government. He expected Slidell to negotiate an immediate boundary settlement favorable to the United States, nothing less.

Recognizing no need to reduce his demands on Mexico, Polk, without hesitation, took the third course which Mexico offered. Congress bound the President to the annexation of Texas; thereafter the Polk administration was free to formulate its own policies toward Mexico. With the Slidell mission Polk embarked on a program of gradual coercion to achieve a settlement, hopefully without war. That program led logically from his dispatching of an army to Texas and his denunciation of Mexico in his annual message of December 1845 to his new instructions

³⁴Brack, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny*, 179.

of January 1846, which ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande. Colonel Atocha, spokesman for the deposed Mexican leader, Santa Anna, encouraged Polk to pursue his policy of escalation. Polk recorded Atocha's advice:

He said our army should be marched at once from Corpus Christi to the Del Norte, and a strong Naval force assembled at Vera Cruz, that Mr. Slidell, the U.S. Minister, should withdraw from Jalappa, and go on board one of our ships of War at Vera Cruz, and in that position should demand the payment of [the] amount due our citizens; that it was well known the Mexican Government was unable to pay in money, and that when they saw a strong force ready to strike on their coasts and border, they would, he had no doubt, feel their danger and agree to the boundary suggested. He said that Paredes, Almonte, & Gen'l Santa Anna were all willing for such an arrangement, but that they dare not make it until it was made apparent to the Archbishop of Mexico & the people generally that it was necessary to save their country from a war with the U. States.³⁵

Thereafter Polk never questioned the efficacy of coercion. He asserted at a cabinet meeting on February 17 that "it would be necessary to take strong measures towards Mexico before our difficulties with that Government could be settled. . . ." Similarly on April 18 Polk instructed Calhoun that "our relations with Mexico had reached a point where we could not stand still but must treat all nations whether weak or strong alike, and that I saw no alternative but strong measures towards Mexico." A week later the President again brought the Mexican question before the cabinet. "I expressed my opinion," he noted in his diary, "that we must take redress for the injuries done us into our own hands, that we had attempted to conciliate Mexico in vain, and had forborne until forbearance was no longer either a virtue or patriotic. . . ."³⁶ Convinced that Paredes needed money, Polk suggested to leading Senators that Congress appropriate a million dollars both to encourage Paredes to negotiate and to sustain him in power until the United States could ratify the treaty. The President failed to secure Calhoun's required support.³⁷

³⁵Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, I, 228–229.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 233, 337, 354.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 306–312, 317.

Polk's persistence led him and the country to war. Like all escalations in the exertion of force, his decisions responded less to unwanted and unanticipated resistance than to the requirements of the clearly perceived and inflexible purposes which guided the administration.³⁸ What perpetuated Polk's escalation to the point of war was his determination to pursue goals to the end whose achievement lay outside the possibilities of successful negotiations.³⁹ Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri saw this situation when he wrote: "It is impossible to conceive of an administration less warlike, or more intriguing, than that of Mr. Polk. They were *men of peace, with objects to be accomplished by means of war*; so that war was a necessity and an indispensability to their purpose. . . ."⁴⁰

Polk understood fully the state of Mexican opinion. In placing Taylor on the Rio Grande he revealed again his contempt for Mexico. Under no national obligation to expose the country's armed forces, he would not have advanced Taylor in the face of a superior military force. Mexico had been undiplomatic; its denunciations of the United States were insulting and provocative. But if Mexico's behavior antagonized Polk, it did not antagonize the Whigs, the abolitionists, or even much of the Democratic Party. Such groups did not regard Mexico as a threat; they warned the administration repeatedly that Taylor's presence on the Rio Grande would provoke war. But in the balance against peace was the pressure of American expansionism. Much of the Democratic and expansionist press, having accepted without restraint both the purposes of the Polk administration and its charges of Mexican perfidy, urged the President on to more vigorous action.⁴¹

During March 1846 Taylor established his headquarters on the northern bank of the Rio Grande, opposite the Mexican village of Matamoros. He assured citizens of the Mexican

³⁸During the spring of 1846 Polk made clear in his diary that the settlement he sought would include no less than the Rio Grande border and the transfer of the Bay of San Francisco to the United States. See *ibid.*, 307.

³⁹Such inflexibility of purpose underwrote the most classic of all escalations in U.S. history—that in Vietnam between 1965 and 1968.

⁴⁰Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View* (New York, 1856), II, 680. Italics are those of the writer.

⁴¹See Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York, 1955), 151–153.

community that the United States, in placing an army on the Rio Grande, harbored no hostility toward Mexico and would not disturb the Mexicans residing north of the river. His army, he added, would not, in any case, go beyond the river unless the Mexicans themselves commenced hostilities. Still Mexican officials reacted violently. "The civilized world," proclaimed the Mexican commandant at Matamoros, "has already recognized in [the annexation of Texas] all the marks of injustice, iniquity and the most scandalous violation of the law of nations. . . . The cabinet of the United States does not, however, stop in its career of usurpation. Not only does it aspire to the possession of the department of Texas, but it covets also the regions on the left bank of the Rio Grande." What hope was there of treating with an enemy, continued the proclamation, that sent an army into territory which was not an issue in the pending negotiations? "The flame of patriotism which burns in our hearts," warned the statement, "will receive new fuel from the odious presence of these invaders for conquest. . . ."⁴² On April 11, General Pedro Ampudia, backed by 3,000 Mexican troops, arrived at Matamoros and immediately ordered Taylor to return to Corpus Christi. Taylor refused to move, declaring that he had taken positions along the Rio Grande under presidential orders. He warned Ampudia that the side which fired the first shot would bear responsibility for the war.

Amid the pressures which Taylor's maneuvering exerted, Paredes visited Bankhead with another plea for help. The British minister reported that Paredes "did not exaggerate the difficulties in which this country finds itself." Bankhead advised a prudent course and the avoidance of any show of aggression along the frontier. Paredes agreed to avoid a conflict and ordered his general to remain on the south bank of the Rio Grande. Late in March, Paredes, in a final gesture, urged Bankhead to place the Mexican dilemma before the government in London; Britain alone, he said, could save Mexico from its impending struggle with the United States. When Bankhead learned that Taylor had reached the left bank of the Rio Grande, he urged the Mexicans to remain on the defensive but

⁴²For Taylor's communications, see the notes in the Trist Papers, XXXIII, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

suspected correctly that the Mexican officers would disobey orders and attack. Mexico's chances appeared dim. Because there would be no help, he concluded, "the extinction of this country as an independent state is near at hand." For too long Mexico's rulers had lacked the capacity and honesty to protect "what might, under other hands, have become one of the most flourishing countries in the world."⁴³

Facing the certainty of a clash along the Rio Grande, Polk made no effort to avoid war. On May 5 the cabinet discussed the status of the American army on the Rio Grande and the possibility of a brush with Mexican forces. On the following day the President noted in his diary that he had received dispatches from Taylor dated as late as April 15. "No actual collision had taken place," he wrote, "though the probabilities are that hostilities might take place soon." On May 9 the cabinet agreed that any Mexican attack on Taylor's forces would require an immediate message to Congress requesting a declaration of war.⁴⁴ Polk, in this crisis, wanted war with Mexico precisely as Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted war with Germany amid his private operations in the Atlantic during the summer and autumn of 1941. There would be no war until Mexico committed the necessary act of open hostility; thereafter, that country would bear the responsibility alone. The United States, dealing from strength, could afford to wait. The Mexicans, facing a symbolic threat at the Rio Grande to their entire military and diplomatic position, revealed the impatience of those who find their strength disintegrating.

Faced with the prospect of further decline which they could neither accept nor prevent, they lashed out with the intention of protecting their self-esteem and compelling the United States, if it was determined to have the Rio Grande, New Mexico, and California, to pay for its prizes with something other than money.⁴⁵ On April 23, Paredes issued a proclamation declaring

⁴³Bankhead to Aberdeen, March 10 and 30, April 6, 8, and 29, 1846, Foreign Office, 50, vol. 196.

⁴⁴Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, I, 379, 380, 384.

⁴⁵Mexico's behavior was symbolically identical to that of the South when it attacked Fort Sumter in 1861, to that of Spain in its resistance to American demands in 1898 (a variant because Spain did not order the destruction of the *Maine* although the effect of the destruction was the same), to that of Germany when it launched unrestricted

a defensive war against the United States. Predictably, one day later the Mexicans fired on a detachment of U.S. dragoons. Taylor's report of the attack reached Polk on Saturday evening, May 9. On Sunday the President drafted his war message and delivered it to Congress on the following day. Had Polk avoided the crisis, he might have gained the time required to permit the emigrants of 1845 and 1846 to settle the California issue without war.

What clouds the issue of the Mexican War's justification was the acquisition of New Mexico and California, for contemporaries and historians could not logically condemn the war and laud the Polk administration for its territorial achievements. Perhaps it is true that time would have permitted American pioneers to transform California into another Texas. But even then California's acquisition by the United States would have emanated from the use of force, for the elimination of Mexican sovereignty, whether through revolution or war, demanded the successful use of power. If the power employed in revolution would have been less obtrusive than that exerted in war, its role would have been no less essential. There simply was no way that the United States could acquire California peacefully. If the distraught Mexico of 1845 would not sell the distant province, no regime thereafter would have done so. Without forceful destruction of Mexico's sovereign power, California would have entered the twentieth century as an increasingly important region of another country.

Thus the Mexican War poses the dilemma of all international relations. Nations whose geographical and political status fails to coincide with their ambition and power can balance the two sets of factors in only one manner: through the employment of force. They succeed or fail according to circumstances; and for

submarine warfare in 1917, and to that of Japan when it attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. In each case, the United States, as the more powerful antagonist and with its interests not directly engaged, could rest easily behind its uncompromising demands, while the weaker power, conscious of its slipping position and with its interests directly engaged, made the decision for war in the hope of salvaging what it could from an immediately threatening and ultimately hopeless situation. It is well to recall that Admiral Tojo, in explaining the Japanese decision for war in 1941, remarked that "sometimes a man has to jump with his eyes closed, from the temple of Kiyomizu into the ravine below." The Mexican-American confrontation of 1846 presented a pattern of challenge and response not unlike those which brought the United States into most of its wars.

the United States, the conditions for achieving its empire in the Southwest and its desired frontage on the Pacific were so ideal that later generations could refer to the process as the mere fulfillment of destiny. "The Mexican Republic," lamented a Mexican writer in 1848, ". . . had among other misfortunes of less account, the great one of being in the vicinity of a strong and energetic people."⁴⁶ What the Mexican War revealed in equal measure is the simple fact that only those countries which have achieved their destiny, whatever that may be, can afford to extol the virtues of peaceful change.

⁴⁶Quoted in Brack, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny*, 1.