



Was the Mexican War an Exercise in American Imperialism?

YES: Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, from "Manifest Destiny and the Mexican War," in Howard H. Quint, Milton Cantor, and Dean Albertson, eds., *Main Problems in American History*, 5th ed. (Dorsey Press, 1988)

NO: Norman A. Graebner, from "The Mexican War: A Study in Causation," *Pacific Historical Review* (August 1980)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of history Ramón Eduardo Ruiz argues that for the purpose of conquering Mexico's northern territories, the United States waged an aggressive war against Mexico from which Mexico never recovered.

NO: Professor of diplomatic history Norman A. Graebner argues that President James Polk pursued an aggressive policy that he believed would force Mexico to sell New Mexico and California to the United States and to recognize the annexation of Texas without starting a war.

As David M. Plecher points out in his balanced but critical discussion of *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* (University of Missouri Press, 1973), the long-range effects on American foreign policy of the Mexican War were immense. Between 1845 and 1848, the United States acquired more than 1,200 square miles of territory and increased its size by over a third of its present area. This included the annexation of Texas and the subsequent states of the southwest that stretched to the Pacific coast incorporating California and the Oregon territory up to the 49th parallel. European efforts to gain a foothold in North America virtually ceased. By the 1860s, the British gradually abandoned their political aspirations in Central America, "content to compete for economic gains with the potent but unimilitary weapon of their factory system and their merchant marine." Meanwhile, the United States flexed her muscles at the end of the Civil War and used the Monroe Doctrine for the first time to force the French puppet ruler out of Mexico.

The origins of the Mexican War began with the controversy over Texas, a mishap possession for three centuries. In 1821, Texas became the northernmost province of the newly established country of Mexico. Sparsely populated by a mixture of Hispanics and Indians, the Mexican government encouraged migration from the United States. By 1835, the Anglo population had swelled to 30,000 plus over 2,000 slaves, while the Mexican population was only 5,000.

Fearful of losing control over Texas, the Mexican government prohibited further immigration from the United States in 1830. But it was too late. The Mexican government was divided and had changed hands several times. The powers of power were thousands of miles from Texas. In 1829, the Mexican government abolished slavery, an edict that was difficult to enforce. Finally General Santa Anna attempted to abolish the federation and impose military rule over the entire country. Whether it was due to Mexican intransigence or Anglo's assertiveness, the settlers rebelled in September 1835. The war was fought. Santa Anna was captured at the battle of San Jacinto in April 1836, and Texas was granted her independence.

For nine years, Texas remained an independent republic. Politicians were divided that if Texas were annexed it would be carved into four or five states, thereby upsetting the balance of power between the evenly divided free states. A slave states that had been created in 1819 by the Missouri Compromise. But pro-slavery president John Tyler pushed through Congress a resolution annexing Texas in the three days of his presidency in 1845.

The Mexican government was incensed and broke diplomatic relations with the United States. President James K. Polk sent John Slidell as the American emissary to Mexico to negotiate monetary claims of American citizens in Texas, to purchase California, and to settle the southwestern boundary of Texas at the Rio Grande River and not farther north at the Nueces River, which Mexico recognized as the boundary. Upon Slidell's arrival, news leaked out about his proposals. The Mexican government rejected Slidell's offer. In March 1846, President Polk stationed General Zachary Taylor in the disputed territory along the Rio Grande with an army of 4,000 troops. On May 9, Slidell returned to Washington and informed Polk that he was refused. Polk met with his cabinet to consider war. By chance that same evening, Polk received a dispatch from General Taylor informing him that on May 25 the Mexican army crossed the Rio Grande and killed or wounded 16 of his men. On May 11, Polk submitted his war message claiming "American blood was shed on American soil." Congress voted overwhelmingly for war, 4 to 14 in the House and 40 to 2 in the Senate despite the vocal minority of anti-war protesters and intellectuals who opposed the war.

In the following selections, Ramón Eduardo Ruiz argues that the United States waged a racist and aggressive war against Mexico for the purpose of acquiring what became the American southwest. In his view Manifest Destiny is strictly an ideological rationale to provide noble motives for what were really acts of aggression against a neighboring country. Norman A. Graebner contends that President James Polk pursued the aggressive policy of a stronger nation in order to force Mexico to sell New Mexico and Texas to the United States and to recognize America's annexation of Texas without causing a war.