



Was the Mexican War an Exercise in American Imperialism?

According to Graebner, President James Polk assumed that Mexico was weak and that acquiring certain Mexican territories would satisfy “the long-range interests” of the United States. But when Mexico refused Polk’s attempts to purchase New Mexico and California, he was left with three options: withdraw his demands, modify and soften his proposals, or aggressively pursue his original goals. According to Graebner, the president chose the third option.

Graebner is one of the most prominent members of the “realist” school of diplomatic historians. His writings were influenced by the cold war realists, political scientists, diplomats, and journalists of the 1950s who believed that American foreign policy oscillated between heedless isolationism and crusading wars without developing coherent policies that suited the national interests of the United States.

Graebner’s views on the Mexican War have not gone unchallenged. For example, both David M. Pletcher’s *The Diplomacy of Annexation* (University of Missouri Press, 1973), which remains the definitive study of the Polk administration, and Charles Sells’s biography *James K. Polk*, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1957–1966) are critical of Polk’s actions in pushing the Mexican government to assert its authority in the disputed territory.

Professor Ruiz offers a Mexican perspective on the war in chapter 11 of his book *Triumphs and Tragedy: A History of the Mexican People* (W. W. Norton, 1992), in which he argues that while the United States went on to achieve great economic success after the Civil War, Mexico never recovered from losing half of her territories.

Ruiz also takes issue with Graebner, who considers Manifest Destiny to be mere political rhetoric with very limited goals. In Ruiz’s view, Manifest Destiny was a reflection of the racist attitudes shown toward the non-white Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans who stood in the way of white America’s desire for new land.

Both Graebner and Ruiz appear ethnocentric in their analysis of the origins of the war. Graebner neglects the emotionalism and instability of Mexican politics at the time, which may have precluded the rational analysis a realistic historian might have expected in the decision-making process. Ruiz also oversimplifies the motives of the Euroamericans, and he appears to neglect the political divisions between slaveholders and nonslaveholders and between Whig and Democratic politicians over the wisdom of going to war with Mexico.

The best two collections of readings from the major writers on the Mexican War are old but essential: see Archie McDonald, ed., *The Mexican*

War: Crisis for American Democracy (D. C. Heath, 1969) and Ramon Eduardo Ruiz ed., *The Mexican War: Was It Manifest Destiny?* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963). There are several nontraditional books that cover the Mexican War, including John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk’s War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846–1848* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1973). Robert W. Johannsen summarizes the ways in which contemporaries viewed the war in *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

