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The U.S.-Mexico War

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Summary and Keywords

The United States–Mexico War was the first war in which the United States engaged in a conflict with a foreign nation for the purpose of conquest. It was also the first conflict in which trained soldiers (from West Point) played a large role. The war’s end transformed the United States into a continental nation as it acquired a vast portion of Mexico’s northern territories. In addition to shaping U.S.–Mexico relations into the present, the conflict also led to the forcible incorporation of Mexicans (who became Mexican Americans) as the nation’s first Latinos. Yet, the war has been identified as the nation’s “forgotten war” because few Americans know the causes and consequences of this conflict. Within fifteen years of the war’s end, the conflict faded from popular memory, but it did not disappear, due to the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War. By contrast, the U.S.–Mexico War is prominently remembered in Mexico as having caused the loss of half of the nation’s territory, and as an event that continues to shape Mexico’s relationship with the United States. Official memories (or national histories) of war affect international relations, and also shape how each nation’s population views citizens of other countries. Not surprisingly, there is a stark difference in the ways that American citizens and Mexican citizens remember and forget the war (e.g., Americans refer to the “Mexican American War” or the “U.S.–Mexican War,” for example, while Mexicans identify the conflict as the “War of North American Intervention”).

Keywords: U.S.–Mexico War, Manifest Destiny, Mexico, Mexican Americans, American Indians, Texas, slavery, westward expansion, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

Competing Territorial Expansions

The war was the result of competing territorial expansions. By the end of the 18th century, Spain had been struggling for years to populate its northern borderlands with

Spanish colonists to defend its territorial claims from French, British, and later, American colonists. While Spain had struggled to attract colonists to its northern borderlands throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, American colonists quickly moved onto the nation's expanding territory during the 19th century. Poor communications with distant territories and sparse populations of Spanish colonists in those areas hampered the colonial state's efforts to populate its far northern territory. After obtaining independence in 1821, Mexico also struggled to control and populate its northern borderlands due to national political instability, lack of finances, and deteriorating relations with Native Americans. The American government, by contrast, increased in size and power as the nation's territory expanded between 1815 and 1830. Its territorial expansion was accompanied by a rapid demographic growth in the newly acquired lands. However, expansion generated internal disunity, especially sectional disagreements over slavery. While Spain and Mexico strove to maintain control over their northern borderlands as a defensive measure against other imperial powers, the U.S. expanded westward as a solution to its domestic political and economic problems. The additional lands, according to the expansionists, would lessen the conflict over slavery (instead, westward expansion heightened sectional conflicts) and help the nation emerge from its economic depression of the 1830s.¹

The colonists representing each expanding power also shared similarities. They regarded the people already living on the coveted land with disdain; only the subjects of their contempt differed. Spanish-Mexican colonists claimed that their conquest brought civilization and religion to indigenous nations. The colonists sought to incorporate some Indians but only after these indigenous people agreed to convert to Catholicism and to acculturate into Spanish society. Anglo Americans justified their acquisition on the grounds that they were better guardians of the land than Indians or Mexicans.² Like their Spanish-Mexican predecessors, Anglo Americans were critically important to their nation's state-building efforts. They migrated in search of economic opportunities, which they realized by acquiring land and establishing trading ventures. The newcomers also depended on their government for military protection. The American government, in turn, needed them to enforce its jurisdiction on a conquered population and to defend its territory against possible incursions from Mexican troops attempting to retake Mexico's lost land. This interdependence positioned American newcomers as agents and privileged citizens of the United States.³

New Spain's northern borderlands were unattractive to potential colonists in the 18th century because the settlements had long been isolated and distant from its population centers. Spanish colonists not only struggled to acquire manufactured items such as clothing and tools, but they also had difficulty obtaining sufficient military protection from the colonial government. Soldiers stationed in northern forts were poorly equipped and rarely paid, so they often engaged in the Indian slave trade to supplement their

meager incomes. Their practice of kidnapping and sexually assaulting Indian women and children worsened relations between Spanish colonists and American Indian nations. Although Spain claimed vast territories, in reality independent Indians (e.g., Comanches, Apaches, and Caddos) controlled much of these lands because they greatly outnumbered Spanish colonists and also possessed superior weapons. Toward the end of the 18th century, Spain's new Bourbon leaders adopted a new Indian policy—modeled after the successful French strategy toward Native Americans—of seeking alliances and offering tribute payments to independent Indian nations. The new policy decreased Indian raids and led to a more peaceful experience but came at a financial expense that was difficult to continue during economic downturns.

Mexico's independence movement exacerbated the problems in its northern borderlands. The Spanish colonial state's neglect of its far northern territory increased as it became preoccupied with suppressing the independence struggle. Facing increasing expenditures for its military, the colonial government stopped sending tribute payments for its Indian allies in the northern borderlands. As a result, these former allies renewed their raids on northern Spanish towns to obtain livestock and weapons. The lack of military support failed to improve with Mexico's independence in 1821. The new nation was in disarray after its devastating eleven-year war of independence that left it bankrupt and its infrastructure in ruins. The Mexican government subsequently failed to establish control of its northern borderlands due to its internal political crises and troubled economic situation.

The contrasting laws and racial structures of Mexico and the United States influenced their path toward war. Enshrined in the Constitution of the United States was a belief in white supremacy because national citizenship was only extended to white, property-owning men, while slavery was upheld in the three-fifths clause used to determine representation in the House of Representatives. The United States reinforced these racial preferences in the Naturalization Act of 1790, which permitted immigrants to become naturalized citizens only if they were white. Congress also excluded American Indians from citizenship when it passed the Trade and Intercourse Act (1790), defining them as "foreign nations." By contrast, Mexico's Constitution included some Indians as citizens and eliminated most racial and property restrictions to holding office.⁴

While Spain and Mexico struggled to retain control and populate the northern borderlands, the United States flourished as it expanded westward and as its population moved onto the newly acquired territories. The United States' westward expansion was driven by several factors, including population pressures. In 1790, ninety-five percent of the nation's population lived along the Atlantic Coast, but the nation's population was shifting westward as it grew. Twenty-five percent of its population lived west of the Appalachian Mountains by 1820, and twenty years later, the majority of the nation's

population lived west of the original thirteen states. Another example of this rapid population growth in the west is the admission of new states into the union. During the first forty years of the 19th century, the United States admitted ten new states; all but one (Maine) were located west of the Appalachian Mountains. By 1840, the majority of the nation's population lived west of the original thirteen states.

The acquisition of western territory was also partly motivated by Americans' belief in the nation's "Manifest Destiny," a term coined by John O'Sullivan in 1845 in the *Democratic Review*. The term referred to the belief that Americans had a God-given right to expand across the continent and bring the benefits of U.S. democracy, institutions, and culture to seemingly "backward" people. Some scholars have described Manifest Destiny as part racism and part missionary zeal because of the ethnocentric focus on "superior" Americans bringing "progress" to non-white people in the western territories. According to recent studies, rather than being a deeply held belief, Manifest Destiny was in reality a strategy by expansionists to distract Americans from linking territorial expansion with the goal of expanding slavery. This strategy was partly successful; many Americans began to use Manifest Destiny as justification for the goals of territorial expansion, seeking new western markets, and imposing U.S. institutions and values on conquered people.⁵

The nation's rapid population growth and acquisition of western lands reinforced Thomas Jefferson's ideal of an "agrarian republic" as the basis for the nation. Jefferson believed that the United States could avoid reproducing the extreme disparities of income and industrial squalor found in Europe by following agrarianism as a development model. According to Jefferson, Europe's extreme wealth disparities were antithetical to republicanism because industrial employers could manipulate their workers' votes. He and other Democratic-Republicans believed that this wealth inequality was the result of European nations' emphasis on industrialization and urbanization. For republicanism to flourish in the United States, Jefferson argued, the nation needed to acquire additional territory to enable the development of an agrarian republic made up of independent white yeoman farmers. Such farmers would not be dependent on someone else for their livelihoods and would, therefore, make independent choices based on their concern for the republic's common good. Unlike Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans, the Whigs opposed territorial expansion and favored industrialization. The Whigs (many of them based in the North) feared that acquiring additional western lands would allow slavery to expand.

The rapid westward expansion of American colonists threatened the Spanish colonial government, which began a colonization program that laid the groundwork for the secession of Texas. The Spanish colonial government sought to increase the number of its colonists in New Spain's northern borderlands to stake a claim to these lands in advance of other European powers and to explore potential mineral deposits. To encourage this

settlement, the colonial government offered potential colonists land, supplies, and tax breaks. Nevertheless, New Spain's government failed to convince many of its subjects to move to Texas, New Mexico, or California due to these territories' remoteness, isolation, and danger from Indian attacks. Because its northern borderlands remained sparsely populated by Spanish colonists, New Spain's government worried about other imperial powers staking claims to these territories. After obtaining its independence from Spain, Mexico proposed a colonization plan that would encourage foreigners (American and European immigrants) to settle in Texas. These settlements were also intended to serve as a buffer between independent Indian nations and Spanish settlements in New Spain's interior. Mexico's colonization plan also sought to prevent the United States from encroaching on its northern borderlands. To encourage foreign colonists to settle in Texas, Mexico offered several incentives, including land and tax exemptions. In return, the Mexican government required the immigrants to become Mexican citizens, to pledge their loyalty to Mexico, to practice Christianity (which meant Catholicism because this was the only Christian religion practiced in Mexico), and to uphold good habits and morality.

The Secession of Texas

Mexico's effort to colonize its northern borderlands with Americans and Europeans was a huge success for Americans but a disaster for Mexico. The foreign colonists who intended to participate in Mexico's colonization program were supposed to obtain permission from the Mexican government to settle in Texas. Some immigrants obtained individual permission, while others came as part of government contracts between the Mexican government and immigration agents or *empresarios*. Under their *empresario* contracts, immigration agents received land to allocate to the colonists they had recruited. The *empresarios* were also responsible for enforcing the national laws among their colonists. Some 13,500 families immigrated to Texas under *empresario* contracts between 1821 and 1835 to take advantage of the inexpensive land and tax breaks. Although the colonization plan attracted numerous Americans, many did not obtain the necessary permission to migrate. Those who immigrated illegally were often fugitives from the law or from debts in the U.S. Historian David Weber ingeniously identified these Americans as the first "illegal aliens" in Texas because they entered the territory without permission from the Mexican government. By the early 1830s, Anglo Americans outnumbered Mexican Texans (*Tejanos*) by seven to one.

In response to the increasing number of Americans in Texas and their lack of acculturation, the Mexican government moved to restrict immigration. Mexican officials

grew worried not only because of the number of Americans in Texas but also because of their lack of acculturation to Mexican society and their refusal to acknowledge their “naturalized” Mexican nationality. Many American immigrants refused to become Mexican citizens, to learn Spanish, or to abide by Mexican laws. In 1829, Mexico outlawed slavery to discourage further immigration from the U.S. South to Texas (slavery was not significant elsewhere in Mexico). Tejano elites, however, eager to attract more Anglo-American colonists, successfully obtained an exemption to the outright prohibition of slavery in Texas by persuading the federal government to allow indefinite indenture. The following year, Mexico prohibited further immigration into Texas, and reimposed taxes on colonists in Texas. Passing these new restrictions was a centralist national government that favored a colonization plan that relied on Mexicans from the interior and foreigners from Europe over Americans. The centralists also sought more power for the federal government at the expense of the states. Since obtaining its independence, Mexico had witnessed an intense struggle between the centralists and federalists, who favored more power in the state governments under a weak central government. In 1834, Antonio López de Santa Anna reassumed the presidency as a centralist, abolished the federalist Constitution of 1824, and replaced state legislatures with military governments led by appointed leaders. The centralist control of Mexico’s government led to conflicts with various states, including Texas.

Responding to the increasing centralization of power and to the suspension of the Constitution of 1824, Anglo Texans and Tejanos launched a separatist rebellion. This rebellion placed Mexican Texans in the awkward position of having to choose between aiding the separatist rebels or supporting their national government. While a few chose sides (even if it meant fighting against their own family members), most Tejanos remained neutral. However, both the Mexican government and the Texas rebels viewed the Tejanos’ decision to stay neutral as a sign of disloyalty. For the Tejanos who actively participated on either side of the conflict, their decisions were influenced by political views, nationalism, as well as economic and personal relationships with the Anglo Americans. Other borderland residents, like the those living in the Rio Grande river towns, indirectly helped the Texas rebels by refusing to aid the Mexican military en route to Texas. Such refusal was a reaction to the Mexican military’s continuous pattern of abusing civilians by appropriating their livestock, housing, and food without payment.

Anglo Texans and Tejanos were part of the Texas rebels who launched Texas’ independence. Among the most famous battles of the rebellion was the one that occurred at the Alamo, a mission complex in San Antonio de Béxar. In late February, some 190 Anglo Texans and Tejanos at the Alamo fought a thirteen-day battle against approximately 1,800 Mexican troops. The Mexican Army won the battle but at the substantial cost of 600 casualties. All but a few of the Texas rebels were killed in battle or after they surrendered. Among the survivors were families of the Tejano rebels, Anglo

American women, and an African American male slave. News of the defeat of the Texas rebels at the Alamo and at Goliad, a subsequent battle, and especially of the execution of survivors, fueled anti-Mexican sentiment throughout Texas and the United States. The Texas rebellion concluded on April 21 when some 900 Anglo Texan and Tejano troops defeated Santa Anna's army of approximately 1,500 in the battle of San Jacinto. The Texas rebels captured Santa Anna and forced him to sign the Treaties of Velasco, in which he recognized the independence of Texas and agreed to remove the Mexican military beyond the Rio Grande. The Mexican government never ratified these treaties.

The actions of the Mexican military during the secessionist struggle and in its aftermath fueled anti-Mexican sentiment among Anglo Texans. In addition to newspaper accounts that condemned the Mexican military, ex-soldiers published personal accounts of the Mexican military's actions during the rebellion, which contributed to the popularization of anti-Mexican views throughout the nation. These sentiments were partly a result of confusing a people (Mexican Texans) with a government (Mexico), which many Tejanos opposed. Violence against Mexican Texans became widespread; squatters appropriated their ranches while vigilantes persecuted and murdered innocent Tejanos, believing that they were responsible for the actions of Mexico's military. Juan Seguín, San Antonio's mayor in the early 1840s, became a target of vigilante justice due to several disagreements with Anglo Texan city residents. After intervening on behalf of Mexican Texan residents who had been targeted by vigilantes and squatters, Seguin received threats against him and his family and eventually resigned his position and left for Mexico. Vigilante violence also drove other Tejanos away as many fled to the South Texas border region, and on occasion, into Mexico. The violence against Mexican Texans was accompanied by their loss of social, economic, and political power. Tejanos faced economic and political challenges when local Anglo Texan officials enacted U.S. laws (of which Mexican Texans were unfamiliar), and when courts and merchants began to conduct business in English. They not only lost land to Anglo Texan squatters but also held onto few political offices as Anglo Texans became the new elite in most towns outside of the South Texas border and El Paso region.

The Texas separatist rebellion and its aftermath led to the beginning of the U.S.-Mexico War. In the republic's first election in 1836, Anglo Texans and Tejanos elected the first government officials of the republic, approved a constitution, and supported the republic's annexation to the United States. Sam Houston, the republic's first president, sought to obtain international diplomatic recognition for the independent republic. Such recognition was necessary to allow the republic to borrow money, establish credit, sign international treaties, and establish laws respected by other nations. President Andrew Jackson refused to annex Texas because he feared fierce opposition from northerners who believed that incorporating Texas into the Union would lead to slavery's expansion. In the ensuing years of the republic's existence, opposition to slavery's expansion

continued to block the annexation of Texas. For similar reasons, Jackson also delayed official recognition of the republic until the following year when the United States became the first nation to recognize the independence of Texas.

Although the United States, France, and other European nations formally recognized the independence of Texas, the Mexican government refused to do so. Instead, Mexico attempted to recapture Texas several times during the republic's nine-year history. One of these attempts occurred in 1841 after Texas sought to expand its territory into New Mexico. The Santa Fe Expedition involved Texan troops marching toward New Mexico, which remained under Mexican rule, to try to gain control of this territory and its lucrative trading houses in Santa Fe. This expedition ended in disaster in 1841 as the Texan troops arrived in Santa Fe exhausted from the long trek, and quickly surrendered to Mexican troops sent to intercept the intruders. In response to the Santa Fe Expedition, Mexican troops recaptured San Antonio. Subsequently, Texas sent troops to capture several towns along the Rio Grande in the Somervell Expedition. Texas officials ordered troops to pursue this punitive expedition into Mexico to punish it for three raids into Texas. After capturing Laredo and Guerrero, Alexander Somervell, the military general of Texas' troops, decided to retreat, but some 300 volunteers ignored his orders and pressed on to Mier (on the south side of the river). The Mier Expedition ended in disaster: Mexican soldiers captured the Texan volunteer troops, executed several of them, and marched the survivors to a prison in Mexico City. These military offensives and counter-offensives worsened the already tense relationship between Texas and Mexico. As a result, Texas officials began reconsidering their dormant plan to become part of the United States in order to receive its military protection and economic assistance.⁶

Expansionists and the Outbreak of War

Westward expansion and the annexation of Texas became the dominant issues of the 1844 presidential campaign. James Polk, the Democratic candidate for president, attempted to shift the debate away from slavery's growth by running on a platform of westward expansion. His successful election convinced Congress to reconsider its position on acquiring Texas after the U.S. Senate rejected the initial annexation treaty early in 1844. The Whig Party candidate, Henry Clay, had initially opposed the acquisition of Texas, but later changed his mind under pressure from Southerners in favor of expansion. Subsequently, John Tyler, the lame duck president, convinced Congress to approve the annexation treaty that admitted Texas into the Union as the twenty-eighth state in December 1845. The acquisition of Texas furthered the uneven distribution of

power between slave and free states as Texas entered the Union as the fifteenth slave state.

The United States' annexation of Texas led to the outbreak of the U.S.-Mexico War. The decision to annex the republic led Mexico to break off diplomatic relations with the United States. Polk pursued two strategies, one diplomatic and one military, to obtain additional territory from Mexico. His diplomatic strategy involved sending John Slidell to Mexico City with an offer to purchase Mexico's northern territory, including California, New Mexico, and the disputed region between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers (the so-called Nueces Strip). The Republic of Texas had claimed the Rio Grande as its southern boundary but had only exercised jurisdiction over the territory north of the Nueces river. Polk's military strategy consisted of sending U.S. troops to Texas to prepare for a possible invasion. The troops established camp near Corpus Christi, just north of the Nueces river. After Mexico rejected Slidell's offer to purchase its northern territory, Polk ordered Zachary Taylor to move U.S. troops into the disputed Nueces Strip. This provocation was intentional; military leaders and critics would later confirm that Polk's military strategy was to goad Mexico into attacking first within disputed territory. The Mexican military commander stationed in Matamoros ordered Taylor to withdraw his troops, and when Taylor refused, hostilities erupted in the disputed region that left eleven U.S. soldiers dead. Polk now had the excuse he needed to ask Congress to declare war after inaccurately claiming "American blood had been shed on American soil."⁷

The declaration of war created vigorous domestic opposition. Many Whigs opposed the president's actions, believing that he had led the nation into an unnecessary war in a "land grab" from Mexico. They labeled the conflict "Mr. Polk's War," arguing that the president had manipulated Congress to declare war and to create public support for a war of conquest. Some critics also accused Polk of provoking a war against a weaker nation to acquire additional western territory for slavery's expansion. The war would enlarge the power of the slave states according to various abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, who believed that Polk had been quick to declare war without much diplomatic effort. The state legislature of Massachusetts passed anti-war resolutions condemning Polk's actions, and several of its residents voiced similar opposition. Among the most famous critics was Henry David Thoreau, who went to jail for refusing to pay his poll tax that he believed would be used to foment a war to expand slavery. In response to his jailing, Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience," an essay in which he argued in favor of a person's right to oppose an immoral government. This essay would have long-term repercussions because it subsequently inspired anti-war and anti-colonial activists in Europe, South Africa, and the United States as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and others cited Thoreau's essay as inspiration for their civil disobedience. The year after the war began, Abraham Lincoln introduced the so-called Spot Resolutions in the House of Representatives, in which he questioned whether the

spot where American blood had been shed was really U.S. soil. Lincoln and other Whigs believed the war was an immoral action that threatened republican values. Some northern Democrats also opposed the conflict because they sought to reserve western territories for free white laborers. Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania attached his Wilmot Proviso to a war appropriation bill in an attempt to bar slavery and indentured servitude from the territories acquired from Mexico. Opposition to the war also emerged from nativists who argued against incorporating some of Mexico's non-white Catholic population into the United States.⁸

Expansionists overcame sectional and ideological differences by using nationalism to forge a temporary alliance. Acquiring Mexico's northern borderlands, they argued, would provide the nation's growing population with farmlands needed to preserve the Jeffersonian ideal of a republic of independent white yeoman farmers. To obtain support from the North, expansionists manipulated the region's racial fears, convincing slavery's northern opponents of the advantage of westward expansion—preventing free blacks and escaped slaves from migrating to northern cities. Rather, they argued, blacks would move to western states because of their warmer climate. A partial annexation ultimately proved more agreeable to political leaders who believed that the northern borderlands' sparsely settled population would either disappear or eventually identify with U.S. institutions.⁹



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Figure 1. Mexican-American War Summary of Operations, 1846-1847.

In prosecuting the war, the U.S. military launched three major campaigns against Mexico. Stephen Watts Kearny led troops into New Mexico, which was captured without much opposition, and subsequently into California. Taylor directed U.S. soldiers in an invasion of northern Mexico and successfully routed Mexican troops led by Santa Anna in the Battle of

Buena Vista, near Saltillo, Coahuila. The third campaign was an amphibious one led by Winfield Scott, who invaded Veracruz with 10,000 soldiers. When the war began, the Mexican government faced several significant obstacles in defending its territories. The nation had undergone pronounced political instability after its independence caused by the struggles between centralists and federalists. Mexico's northern borderland population had also experienced devastating financial and human losses due to persistent

Comanche and Lipan Apache Indian attacks, which also served to weaken the nation's military. Although the Mexican Army performed poorly, Mexican civilians engaged in spirited guerilla tactics that slowed the advancing U.S. troops. The U.S. campaign was marred by a series of atrocities, including thefts, murders, and rapes committed against Mexico's civilian population. The principal perpetrators were U.S. volunteers imbued with anti-Mexican views (promoted during the Texas secessionist struggle) and with the widespread nativism of U.S. society in the mid-19th century. Nativism in the United States had assumed an anti-Catholic dimension as a result of the large Irish immigration fueled by the potato famine in the early 1840s. Due to the virulent anti-Catholic bias among American troops and these soldiers' desecration of Catholic churches and abuse of priests in Mexico, several Irish and German immigrant soldiers deserted the U.S. troops and joined the Mexican side. The Mexicans alternately referred to the deserters as the San Patricios (after the patron saint of Ireland) or *Pelirrojos* ("Redheads"). The San Patricios fought valiantly at several major battles, including Buena Vista, Cerro Gordo, and Churubusco, but U.S. troops eventually captured several of the deserters, holding some as prisoners while executing others.¹⁰



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Figure 2. "General Scott's entrance into Mexico in the Mexican American War." Hand-colored lithograph by Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot (1810-1866) after a drawing by Carl Nebel (1805-1855).

Originally published in George Wilkins Kendall and Carl Nebel. *The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated, Embracing Pictorial Drawings of all the Principal Conflicts*, New York: D. Appleton; Philadelphia: George Appleton (Paris: Plon Brothers), 1851.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the War's Legacy

The war ended after U.S. troops had seized control of several of Mexico's capital cities, including Mexico City. During the war, fervent supporters of annexation, imbued with a belief in the nation's Manifest Destiny, began advocating for the United States to take the entire territory of Mexico. Most of the opposition to these "all of Mexico" proponents came from Southerners who feared the national consequences of acquiring a large Mexican population that they believed to be composed of a "mongrel" people. Some opponents also objected to the possibility that a large number of Mexicans (who many considered non-whites) might be given the same rights as white U.S. citizens. When the war ended in February 1848, Mexico had lost some 20,000 people, while the United States had lost 13,000. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, the United States acquired more than half of Mexico's territory, paid \$18.25 million for land and claims, and obtained control over Texas.

The war's conclusion not only expanded the nation's territory but also its population, with the incorporation of Mexicans and Indians living in the annexed territories. The treaty included provisions for Mexican men to obtain U.S. citizenship after a year or remain Mexican citizens by moving to Mexico. According to the treaty, those who elected to become U.S. citizens were guaranteed full citizenship rights, including freedom of religion and the right to hold onto their property. By extending citizenship to Mexican Americans, the treaty legally made them white because only whites could become U.S. citizens according to the Naturalization Act of 1790. Unfortunately, the federal government was not able to enforce these rights for all, and many of the nation's first Mexican Americans lost their property. The end of the war had led to an influx of white Americans onto Mexico's former territories, fueled by the promise of land and the discovery of gold in California. Some Mexican Americans were victims of vigilantes and squatters who took over their lands, while others lost their property to sheriff's sales for non-payment of property taxes and to lawyers as payment for establishing title to their land. Many Native Americans also lost their lands as white settlers encroached on their property and eliminated their source of livelihood. Additionally, the federal government abolished indigenous nations' sovereignty, waged wars of extermination against some American Indians, and forced others onto reservations. In addition to losing property, Mexican Americans became concentrated in lower-paying and lower-skilled jobs after the war. Although Anglo-American politicians generally replaced them throughout the U.S. Southwest, some Mexican-American politicians were able to hold onto power in regions where they remained a majority of the population.



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Figure 3. A section of the original Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The slavery issue remained unresolved by the war's end and became inflamed by the acquisition of additional territories. Determining whether to permit slavery in Mexico's former territories became an explosive political issue. While Texas entered the Union as a slave state in 1845, California joined as a free state under the Compromise of 1850, which also allowed for the populations of Utah and New Mexico territories to decide the question of

slavery by popular sovereignty at a later time. This compromise also enacted a more stringent national fugitive slave law that angered Northerners, who were required to help capture runaway slaves by the new law. Subsequently, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery north of the 36'30" latitude and allowed residents of Kansas and Nebraska to decide on slavery according to popular sovereignty. In the following decade, the United States would witness several events that contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War, including the 1856 bloodshed over Kansas' popular sovereignty vote, the Dred Scott decision, Abraham Lincoln's election, and the secession of the southern states. A part of this increasing turmoil over slavery was linked to the annexation of Texas as a slave state and the acquisition of Mexico's former territories.

The legacies of the U.S.-Mexico war continued to reverberate beyond the 19th century. Several U.S. military officers who fought in the war subsequently served in the U.S. Civil War, while Mexican officers involved in the conflict later engaged in their nation's struggle to expel the French rulers in the 1860s. The treaty affected each nation's interactions with indigenous nations in the borderlands as they sought to diminish cross-border raids. The war influenced diplomatic relations between the two nations throughout the 20th century, as well as how each nation's citizens viewed their counterparts. The acquisition of former Mexican territory increased the nation's diversity; Mexican Americans and various Native American nations became incorporated. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Mexican Americans based many civil rights

complaints and property litigation on articles 8 and 9 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which guaranteed property rights and established the terms for U.S. citizenship for the former Mexican citizens incorporated into the United States. Because the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo enumerated certain rights, several generations of Mexican Americans (especially during the Chicano Movement, 1960s–1970s) would recall its promises and appeal to the collective memories of the war in various struggles for full citizenship rights.

Discussion of Literature

The scholarship on the U.S.-Mexican War has been shaped by the domestic and international politics of each nation. Not surprisingly, historians based in Mexico have offered interpretations of the causes and consequences of the war that differed markedly from those offered by historians based in the United States. Often each federal government's need to promote nationalism and contemporary diplomatic issues in U.S.-Mexico relations was the most significant factor influencing scholarship.

The first interpretations of the war published in Mexico blamed the United States for the armed aggression and identified its territorial ambitions as the main cause of the conflict. Several politicians charged Mexico's military officers with incompetence and cowardice during the war, while some military officers and their allies published books absolving themselves of battlefield decisions. Perhaps the most famous of these apologists was Antonio López de Santa Anna, who, along with other officers, sought to revive their political careers.¹¹ A group of officers and politicians published a more balanced account after meeting to reflect on the conflict and its implications. Their account also blamed the United States for starting the war, for harboring long-standing goals of obtaining Mexico's territory, for unethical behavior, and for contributing to political unrest and crime in Mexico.¹² These authors also began to rehabilitate the role of Mexico's military by praising Mexican soldiers' valor in confronting a larger and better-equipped U.S. army.¹³ They also argued that Mexico had won the battle of Buena Vista, and they initiated the praise for the young military cadets (*Niños Héroes*) who defended Chapultepec Castle, where their military academy was located in Mexico City.



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Figure 4. "Battle of Chapultepec during the Mexican-American War." Hand-colored lithograph by Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot (1810–1866) after a drawing by Carl Nebel (1805–1855).

Originally published in George Wilkins Kendall and Carl Nebel. *The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated, Embracing Pictorial Drawings of all the Principal Conflicts*, New York: D. Appleton; Philadelphia: George Appleton (Paris: Plon Brothers), 1851.

The first U.S. books revisited similar themes as those published in Mexico but promoted the United States' perspective. Several authors blamed Mexico for causing the war by refusing to negotiate and trying to keep Texas within its jurisdiction. They characterized Mexico's military as very capable and downplayed the military advantages of U.S. troops in order to portray the war as a conflict between equals.¹⁴ As in Mexico, various authors offered

interpretations that advanced domestic political agendas. Several Whig and pacifist authors, for example, blamed the South's goal of expanding slavery for the war, criticized the policy of manifest destiny, and warned about the precedents set by a war of conquest. Despite these war critics, a nationalist narrative prevailed that praised American exceptionalism, disparaged the character of Mexican soldiers, and blamed Mexico for its refusal to compromise.¹⁵

Nationalism also influenced Mexican scholarship in the latter part of the 19th century, after Mexico's removal of French control over the nation partly led to a surge in patriotism. The mythologizing of the *Niños Héroes* (Boy Heroes) surged during the Porfiriato (1876–1910), the reign of the dictator Porfirio Díaz, because Díaz promoted commemorations and monuments to the Boy Heroes to increase patriotism, improve the military's reputation, and further his state-building goals. Several published works supported Díaz's goals of state building by praising the heroism of Mexico's military, blaming the United States for initiating the war, and advancing the mythology of the Boy Heroes. This scholarship, however, started to criticize Mexico's internal problems for the outcome of the war. Historians identified the nation's underdevelopment, corruption, and incompetent bureaucrats as domestic problems that contributed to Mexico's loss.¹⁶ After the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the federal government implemented programs to increase the population's literacy and began using textbooks to spread nationalism and patriotism among the general population by emphasizing the mythology of the Boy

Heroes. These textbooks identified the U.S. South's goal of expanding slavery and the superior weaponry of the United States as causes for the war and its outcome. At mid-century, historians published translations of U.S. abolitionists memoirs as well as several books that described the diplomacy between the United States and Mexico and the political rivalries in the United States that led to war.¹⁷

The domestic politics of the U.S. Civil War and the nation's imperialist adventures shaped the postbellum U.S. scholarship. This period witnessed the publication of Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, in which he voiced an anti-war position, blamed Polk for the war, and characterized the United States as a bully seeking territorial gain. The struggle of U.S.-Mexican War veterans to obtain a federal pension also shaped published books on the war; several authors attempted to downplay the role of Confederate officers (like Jefferson Davis) in key battles.¹⁸ In the 1880s, Hubert Howe Bancroft's multivolume history offered one of the sharpest critiques of slavery's supporters and the nation's premeditated territorial ambitions. Critics (often associated with veterans' associations) attacked Bancroft's interpretation, his alleged unprofessionalism, and his abolitionist background. As the United States became involved in a war with Spain, intervention in Mexico, and the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico, war scholarship reflected these conflicts. Several books revived older arguments blaming Mexico for initiating the war, negatively characterized Mexican culture, and renewed calls to annex Mexico.¹⁹ Opposing such blatant imperialist apologies were a few books that characterized the U.S.-Mexican War as unethical and unjustified. These works also took strong stands against the U.S. intervention in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution.²⁰

Mexico's economic problems and its trade relations with the United States influenced the war scholarship after the mid-20th century. While the federal government continued to promote patriotism and nationalism through its textbooks, several new interpretations appeared that highlighted previously ignored actors. One was the role of the San Patricio Battalion, the group of Irish- and German-American immigrants who deserted the U.S. Army to join the Mexican forces after facing xenophobia within the military and witnessing their colleagues' anti-Catholic actions against Mexican civilians and religious officials. Influenced by Chicana/o civil rights movements, several Mexican scholars described the role of Mexican Americans in resisting the U.S. Army throughout the present-day U.S. Southwest, their continuous struggle against discrimination, and their campaigns for civil rights.²¹

The U.S. scholarship on the war during the second half of the 20th century repeated previous interpretations, but new perspectives also emerged from scholars influenced by the nation's foreign intervention in Vietnam and by the Chicana/o movement. A few books published at mid-century questioned the legality of the nation's annexation of Texas, while others once again blamed Mexico for starting the war, highlighted Polk's

expansionist goals, and supported the U.S. annexation of Texas.²² Shaped by the nation's involvement in the U.S.-Vietnam War, various authors drew comparisons to the U.S.-Mexican War, highlighted opposition to the war, and avoided placing blame on Mexico for initiating the hostilities.²³ Influenced by the Chicana/o movement, several historians emphasized the Mexican troops' bravery, discussed Mexican-Americans' origins in the U.S. Southwest, linked Mexican-Americans' current socioeconomic problems to their 19th-century conquest, and characterized the war atrocities as war crimes.²⁴ Toward the end of the 20th century, scholars offered new interpretations that focused on Mexican-Americans' resistance to the U.S. takeover, U.S. racism as motivation for the war, the impact of U.S. trade and ideas on Mexican Americans, and the influence of U.S. literature on empire building.²⁵

Primary Sources

Two recently published collections of primary sources include documents from Mexican and U.S. authors and place the documents in the proper transnational context. Ernesto Chávez's *The U.S. War with Mexico: A Brief History with Documents*, begins with a very good introduction to the war that describes race, Manifest Destiny, and popular opinion about the war. Chávez does an admirable job of identifying each document included in the reader as he explains various issues and controversies in the introduction. The introduction pays particular attention to Americans' racial views toward and laws about American Indians, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. This collection includes excerpts from Mexican and U.S. laws, newspapers, political correspondence, pamphlets, diaries, memoirs, and personal letters. Each document includes a brief introduction to place it in its proper context. A chronology of the war, questions for students, and a selected annotated bibliography are also included. The second collection, Christopher Conway's *The U.S.-Mexican War: A Binational Reader*, also provides a general introduction that discusses the non-indigenous settlement of Texas and its annexation, various developments during the war, and the legacies of the conflict. This reader includes excerpts from U.S. and Mexican political documents, laws, eyewitness accounts, newspapers, letters, fiction, song lyrics, and poetry. Each primary source includes a brief introduction for context and footnotes to the original document.²⁶

Several libraries and organizations have created useful online guides to primary sources in their collections, and to digitized sources. The Library of Congress has a **finding guide** to the war that includes links to digital collections of manuscripts, broadsides, newspapers, music, and images in their collection. This online guide also includes a selected bibliography and a list of external web sources. The library at the University of Texas at Arlington has a created a very useful website, **A Continent Divided: The U.S.-**

Mexico War, which contains short topical essays, images, and maps. This website has a useful section for educators that includes lesson plans and a list of online resources of primary and secondary sources. Northern Illinois University has **an online overview of the war**, as well as a collection of digitized primary sources (music lyrics and images) from its collection as well as from area libraries. The website also includes a section for educators with lesson plans. Virginia Tech's website, **The Mexican-American War and the Media, 1845-1848**, includes transcriptions of newspaper articles, images, bibliographies, indexes to sources at various libraries, and primary sources found at Virginia Tech's library. The University of Tennessee Knoxville has created **The James K. Polk Project** website with searchable digitized copies of all the correspondence to and from President Polk between 1817 and 1847. This website also includes a brief biography of Polk and a few images.

Several organizations have created useful websites with brief essays and links to primary sources. PBS created a companion website for its documentary series, **U.S.-Mexican War, 1846-1848**. This website includes brief essays on the war, biographies of major figures, a timeline, resources for educators, selected list of primary sources, and a video library. **The Descendants of Mexican War Veterans** maintains a website that includes an introduction and finding guide to veterans' records (military service, bounty land, and pension files) in the National Archives. The DMWV has also created a website that includes **a brief history, image list, maps, artifact list, historic sites list, and primary sources** (mainly battle reports).

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