
Was the United States Justified in Going to War With Mexico?



Overview: In 1846 the United States went to war with Mexico. Like several wars the United States has fought, this war had its strong supporters and its critics. Compared to the Civil War, which was fought just fifteen years later, the Mexican War sometimes seems like a small thing. But it was not! Thousands of Mexicans and Americans died, and half of the country of Mexico was taken by the United States as a war prize. This Mini-Q asks the simple question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

The Documents:

Document A: John O'Sullivan and Manifest Destiny

Document B: President James Polk's War Declaration

Document C: A Mexican Viewpoint

Document D: Charles Sumner: Objections to the Mexican-American War

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Document A

Source: John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. XVII, July, 184:

It is time for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease.... Texas is now ours.... Let their reception into the "family" be frank, kindly, and cheerful....

(O)ther nations have undertaken ... hostile interference against us, ... hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence (God) for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

California will, probably, next fall away from (Mexico).... Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country.... The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on (California's) borders ... armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses.... All this (will happen) in the natural flow of events....

Document Analysis

1. How does John O'Sullivan feel about the United States annexing Texas?
2. In your own words, what does O'Sullivan mean when he says it is "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence"?
3. After Texas, what is the next likely candidate for American annexation?
4. What does O'Sullivan have to say about Mexico's ability to govern?
5. What do you suppose O'Sullivan means by "the Anglo-Saxon foot"?
6. How can this document be used to justify America's going to war with Mexico?
7. How can this document be used to argue against America going to war with Mexico?

Document B

Source: War Message of President James Polk, Washington, May 11, 1846.

To the Senate and House of Representatives:

(In an earlier message) I informed you that ... I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte (Rio Grande)." This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces.... The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined ... to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

... The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic.... The country between that river and the Del Norte ... is now included within one of our congressional districts.... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country....

(On the 24th of April) a party ... of sixty-three men and officers, were ... dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its (North) bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed, or were preparing to cross, the river.... (They) became engaged with a large body of these (Mexican) troops, and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen (Americans) were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, ... Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.

Note: War Vote, May 13, 1846:
US Senate: 40 Yes, 2 No
House of Rep: 174 Yes, 14 No

Document Analysis

1. What river did Texas and President Polk regard as the Texas-Mexico border?
2. Would Mexico have viewed a Mexican advance north of the Rio Grande an invasion of the US?
3. Where did the April 24 fight between Mexican and American soldiers occur?
4. What was the response of Congress to Polk's war message?
5. How does this document help answer the Mini-Q question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

Document C

Source: Jesus Velasco-Marquez, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, "A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States," *Voices of Mexico*, Issue #41, Center for Research on North America (CISAN), National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2008.

The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. US historians refer to this event as "The Mexican War," while in Mexico we prefer to use the term "The U.S. Invasion." ...

From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it ... would consider such an act "a declaration of war." ...

(In early 1846, on Polk's orders) the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Río Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation.... In the eyes of the (Mexican) government, the mobilization of the US army was an outright attack on Mexico.... As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Río Grande and the Nueces River – an order which led to the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma....

... (One article) in the daily *El Tiempo* ... stated: "The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveler."

Document Analysis

1. Whose point of view is held by the author of this document?
2. How did the Mexican government feel about the annexation of Texas by the United States?
3. According to the author, why did a Mexican force attack Zachary Taylor's troops when they arrived at the Rio Grande River?
4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

Document D

Source: Charles Sumner, "Objections to the Mexican-American War," adopted by the Mass. State Legislature, 1847.

Note: Sumner was a young state legislator from Massachusetts who later served 24 years in the US Senate.

Mexico, on achieving her independence of the Spanish Crown ... decreed the abolition of human slavery within her dominions, embracing the province of Texas....

At this period, citizens of the United States had already begun to (move) into Texas.... The idea was ... that this extensive province ought to become a part of the United States....

A current of emigration soon followed from the United States. Slaveholders crossed the Sabine (river between Louisiana and Texas) with their slaves, in defiance of the Mexican ordinance of freedom. Restless spirits, discontented at home ... joined them.... The work of rebellion sped. Our newspapers excited the lust of territorial robbery in the public mind.... Certainly (Mexico) ... might justly charge our citizens with disgraceful robbery, while, in seeking extension of slavery, (our own citizens denied) the great truths of American freedom....

Note: According to an early Texas census, there were 103,000 whites and 38,000 slaves in the state in 1847.

Document Analysis

1. After achieving independence from Spain in 1821, did Mexico make slavery legal or illegal?
2. Sumner mentions a "disgraceful robbery." Who robbed what from whom?
3. Did Charles Sumner have the support of the people of Massachusetts? Provide evidence and explain your thinking.
4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?