

## The Mexican War (1846-48)

### The Decision to Go to War:

#### BORDER DISPUTE

- ✓ After taking office in 1845, President James K. Polk insisted that the Texas border was the Rio Grande.
- ✓ Mexican authorities insisted that the colonial border of Texas had always been 100 miles to the northeast along the Nueces River

#### JOHN SLIDELL

- ✓ President Polk sent ambassador Slidell to resolve the border dispute. Polk's idea was to end the dispute by offering \$25 million to purchase California, New Mexico and the disputed territory.
- ✓ The instability of the Mexican government hindered negotiations. Dictator Santa Anna was forced to flee to Cuba after being removed from power by General Jose Herrera. Herrera's future as a leader was on "shaky" ground during the Slidell negotiations (The United States actually supported Santa Anna's return to overthrow Herrera in 1846. The support of Santa Anna proved, however, to be a misguided policy when Santa Anna attacked US General Zachary Taylor at Buena Vista).
- ✓ Mexico, for obvious reasons, flatly rejected Polk's offer (would America just sell 1/3 of its land area today?).

#### "AMERICAN BLOOD HAS BEEN SHED ON AMERICAN SOIL"

- ✓ After Slidell's "offer" was rejected, Polk ordered US troops to move south of the Nueces River toward the Rio Grande River.
- ✓ The movement of US troops deep into disputed territory provoked Mexico to action. Polk's order, from the Mexican perspective, was an invasion of Mexican land.
- ✓ Mexican forces, viewing American troops as invaders, attacked on May 9, 1846.
- ✓ President Polk spoke to Congress on May 11, 1846 saying that war *"exists by the act of Mexico herself."*
- ✓ Polk delivered his war message on May 13 asserting that, *"Mexico has invaded our territory and shed American Blood upon the American soil."*
- ✓ Congress debated for only two hours before issuing a formal declaration of war.

## Antiwar Positions:

[Not all Americans, however, supported Polk's war effort. The Mexican War, like the War of 1812 intensified sectional tensions.]

## ABOLITIONISTS

- ✓ Northerners in particular opposed a war which they viewed as a fight to expand slavery.
- ✓ New England Whigs called the Mexican War "Mr. Polk's War" (recall that Federalist New Englanders also opposed the War Hawk/Democratic-Republican and sarcastically called the War of 1812 "Mr. Madison's War").

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

- ✓ Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau opposed the war for abolitionist reasons. Thoreau was jailed for protesting the war and not paying poll taxes.
- ✓ He wrote the famous essay *The Duty of Civil Disobedience* while in jail. Thoreau's essay encouraged people to stand up for what they believe is morally right even if it is illegal -- to be disobedient but endure legal consequences in a polite manner.
- ✓ Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were both influenced by Thoreau's essay.

## SPOT RESOLUTIONS

- ✓ Illinois Whig Abraham Lincoln attempted to get Congress to pass several "spot resolutions" in December of 1847. The resolutions challenged President's claim by demanding that the Democrat President (Polk) identify exactly where "American blood had been shed on American soil."
- ✓ Whig congressmen correctly pointed out that while the United States had once claimed eastern Texas as part of the Mississippi River basin, the American government had never before attempted to claim land beyond the Nueces River.

## DANIEL WEBSTER - who opposed the war on constitutional grounds:

- ✓ Whigs interpreted Democrat President Polk's actions to provoke Mexico as an abuse of executive or presidential power.
- ✓ Webster charged that Polk had started the war without permission from Congress. Such an action, Webster argued was unconstitutional because only Congress was granted authority to officially declare war.
- ✓ Webster, like many Whigs, feared that Executive power would grow to take power away from the Legislative Branch.
- ✓ Northern Whigs had power in Congress but found it difficult to retain control of the White House.

*Traditional view:* a victorious and wonderful moment for Americans.

*Today:* a war of national aggression on the part of the United States, simply to gain territory.

There are many valid points of view about a historical event. Not all of them may be right, but they may be valid; it's better to think many truths constitute the past, rather than to think of a single truth.

This war between the United States and Mexico, about which Americans have known and cared so little, made a profound difference in the United States' future shape -- in our wealth with the discovery of gold in California and in our image of ourselves as an expansionist, transcontinental empire, which later became a major player on the global stage.

For Mexicans, the reverse is certainly the case. Mexico lost the rich potential of California and its fabulous gold mines, lost the potential of the agricultural potential and the water resources that this region might have offered for what is today northern Mexico. And instead of a great pride in becoming an expansionist country that the United States developed into, Mexico developed a massive inferiority complex as a result of that war, wondering where they had gone wrong as a nation. How could it lose half of its national territory? The war became a scar on the national psyche that would last well into this century and was quite in sharp contrast to our own loss of memory, largely about this victorious moment for Americans.

I also think, in part, the U.S.-Mexican War was obliterated from the United States' national memory by the Civil War, which followed in its heels. The "great victory" began to crumble in the midst of sectional conflict, and then Americans killing Americans, which became the great story if one wanted to think about conflict in the middle of the century. The U.S.-Mexican War then was forgotten. One wonders a bit if the victory in a war that was, after all, a war of aggression to seize territory was not conveniently forgotten by Americans, because it's not one of the more honorable moments in American history.