

US History: Mexican-American War

Was the US justified in going to war with Mexico in 1846?

Directions:

Read the documents, consider both perspectives and develop an argument in response to the question: *Was the US justified in going to war with Mexico in 1846?* Use evidence from the documents to support your argument. Remember what you have learned about reading and writing with documents.

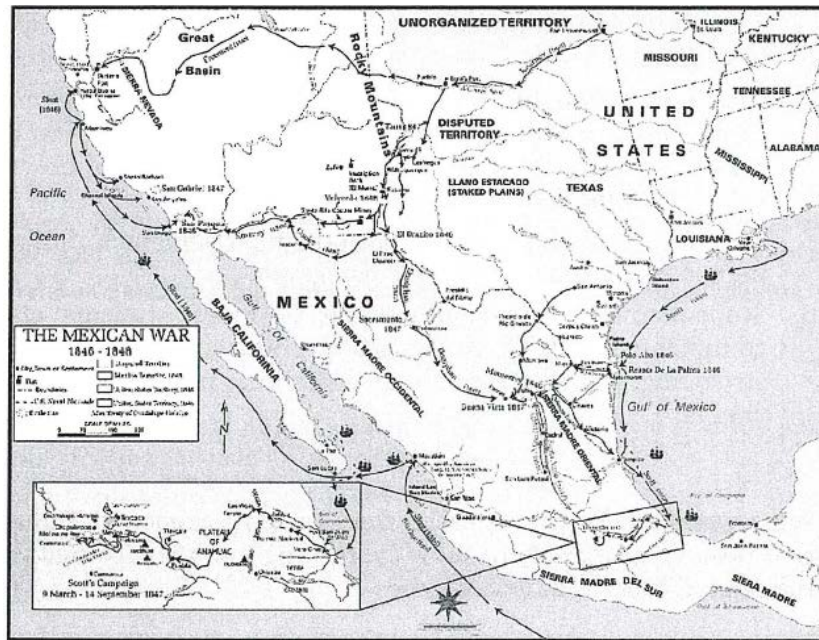
(*justified = right, did they have a good reason for the action taken)

Background:

Before 1835, Texas was a part of Mexico. In the Texas Revolution, the Texans defeated the Mexicans. Mexico did not accept the 1836 treaty that gave Texas rights to all of the land north of the Rio Grande (even though the Mexican General signed it). Texas was an independent country for 10 years before the US annexed (added) Texas to its territory. People in the US questioned whether adding Texas helped the US by adding more land and resources, or hurt it by expanding slavery and dividing the Northern and Southern states. Texans wanted to join the US, but Mexico did not want to lose Texas. After Texas was added to the US, Mexico and the US disagreed about the location of the border between them. Both thought the disputed area (see map below) was a part of their country. President Polk sent troops to this disputed area in March 1846. Mexicans saw this as an invasion and attacked the US troops. This was the start of the Mexican American War. People disagreed about whether the US should have gone to war with Mexico and if the US unfairly started this war.

Mexican-American War

Although diplomacy helped the US resolve territorial disputes in the Pacific Northwest, diplomats working in the Southwest faced more challenges. Faced with an unstable and uncooperative Mexican government, the US found it necessary to become more aggressive in its diplomatic overtures. As a result, diplomatic relations between Mexico and the US became increasingly strained. US involvement in California and Texas contributed to this tension.



Source: Mexican-American War Overview, Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mexican_war_overview.gif

Source 1: Conflict Breaks Out:

Mexico had long insisted that its northern border in Texas lay along the Nueces River and refused to accept Texas annexation as legitimate. The US said the border was farther south, along the Rio Grande. In June 1845 President Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to lead an army into the disputed region.

Polk send diplomat John Slidell to Mexico City to settle the border dispute. Slidell came with an offer to buy New Mexico and California for \$30 million. Mexican officials refused to speak to him.

In March 1846 General Taylor led his troops to the Rio Grande. He camped across from Mexican forces stationed near the town of Matamoros, Mexico. In April, the Mexican commander told Taylor to withdraw from Mexican territory. Taylor refused. The two sides clashed, and several US soldiers were killed.

In response, President Polk said to Congress:

“Mexico has passed the boundary of the US, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil... The two nations are now at war.”

-James K. Polk, from his address to Congress, May 11, 1846

Polk’s war message was persuasive. Two days later, Congress declared war on Mexico.

War Begins At the beginning of the war with Mexico, the US Army had better weapons and equipment. Yet it was greatly outnumbered and poorly prepared. The government put out a call for 50,000 volunteers. About 200,000 responded. Many were young men who thought the war would be a grand adventure in a foreign land.

On the home front, many Americans debated the war, fighting proceeded. General Taylor’s soldiers won battles south of the Nueces River. Taylor then crossed the Rio Grande and occupied Matamoros, Mexico. While Taylor waited for more men, Polk ordered General Stephen Kearny to attack New Mexico. On August 18th, 1846, Kearny took Santa Fe, the capital city, without a fight. He claimed the entire province of New Mexico for the US and marched west to California, where another conflict with Mexico was already under way.

Source 2: A Staff Writer’s Pro-War Newspaper Article

Head note: When the US added Texas to its territory in 1845, Mexico kicked out the US ambassador and stopped working with politicians from the US. Later when the US sent a representative (Minister Slidell) to Mexico, he was not welcomed. In 1847, most Democrats supported the war with Mexico.

Newspaper articles and Congressmen believe that annexation of Texas is one of the causes of the Mexican American War. We do not deny that it has to do with the war. But Mexico alone is responsible for making the annexation of Texas a problem. The annexation of Texas was not an act of war on our part. Texas was an independent country like other nations of the earth. The most powerful European governments recognized its freedom. Texas had the power to choose to become a member of the US. There is no good reason why the annexation of Texas would offend Mexico.

After a lot of angry communication, Mexico and the US agreed to discuss and resolve our disagreements. We sent our minister, Mr. Slidell, in good faith and Mexico promised that they would receive him. We sincerely offered friendship. These efforts only led to new insults. Mexico was unwelcoming and misled our minister. Slidell’s life was hardly safe in the hands of such untrustworthy people. The treatment of Mr. Slidell and the harmful effect of this event on our national honor are causes of this war.

A Mexican force threatened to attack Texas. Texas was worn out from its struggle for independence and needed our assistance. When we acted, there was no great military effort as if we had some grand plan. We merely ordered troops to protect a distant post, as we have

done for years with the rivers and prairies of the far west. The instructions were to avoid all aggressive conduct towards Mexico and the Mexicans unless in self-defense. The Mexicans took the lead with their usual craftiness and love of blood. Mexico murdered two officers and attacked some troops in Texas for no reason. Mexico was not willing to accept our peace offering. Mexico must be charged with a deliberate plan to make a war.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the newspaper article “The Mexican War: Its Origin and Conduct.” Written by a staff writer for the pro-Democratic newspaper, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. April 1847.

Source 3: Corwin’s Speech

Head note: The President of the US (President Polk) wanted to expand the territory of the US at this time although he tried to gain land from Mexico by offering money, he also told his commanders to prepare for the possibility of war after adding Texas to the US in 1845. Senator Corwin gave this speech to the US Senate when they debated whether to give more money to the US military effort in Mexico.

The US President ignored the protests and needs of Mexico before the war. Mexico humbly begged the President not to take Texas. Mexico said that taking Texas might disturb the peace between our countries. But our President was still unstoppable. Mexico begged the President to leave Texas alone. If Texas were independent, let her enjoy her independence. If Texas were free, let her enjoy her liberty. The President said no. He said we would take Texas at Mexico’s expense.

At least the President was told that Mexico was willing to have a low-level US government official come to negotiate a quiet settlement about the Texan boundary. Instead, the US President sent a more important government official – a minister – and demanded a public welcome worthy of a minister. The Mexican President at the time was in trouble in his country and losing power. He begged Minister Slidell not to force a reception at that time. Slidell was told that the Mexican people were so agitated that he must wait. What did Slidell do? He said, “You shall meet with me now. You shall recognize me as minister and not as a simple official. You shall treat me as though the most peaceful relations existed between the two countries.” From Slidell’s letters it is perfectly clear that if Mr. Slidell has acted as a humble official to work out the Texas boundary, treaties and not bullets would have solved the problem. But the US President wanted a powerful war, not a peace process. He threw down the pen of the diplomat, and picked up the sword of the warrior.

We are fighting this war for territory, for “room.” But why? Look at the US. It extends from the Alleghany Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. It can support more people than will be in the whole Union for one hundred years to come. And yet Americans persist in the ridiculous assertion, “I want room.” The need for room is an outrageous excuse for war. In the future, people will see this is a lie we created to cover up our greed for land that is not ours.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Senator Corwin’s speech to the US Senate in Washington, DC February 11, 1847. Senator Corwin was a member of the Whig Party.