



A Sublime Moral Spectacle

“Our beloved country presents a sublime moral spectacle to the world.”
James K. Polk, upon payment to Mexico of \$15 million after seizing half its territory

ASSURING THE WORLD in his 1845 inaugural address that it had *“nothing to fear from military ambition in our government,”* president James K. Polk confided privately only hours later his determination to acquire not only Texas but also the Oregon Territory and California.

Polk’s saber-rattling convinced Britain to peaceably part with the Northwest, but Mexico warned the U.S. that any attempt to encroach upon its territory would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

After threatening and bribing Mexico without success, Polk dispatched Gen. Zachary Taylor into disputed territory.

The illegal incursion provoked an attack in which a handful of American soldiers were killed, and with U.S. newspapers falsely decrying that ‘American blood was shed on American soil’, an indignant United States Congress promptly declared war.

The roots of the conflict with Mexico actually dated back to 1821, when Mexico—inspired by America’s own successful war for independence—broke away from the Spanish Empire after a bloody, eleven-year struggle. In the process, Mexico inherited the vast, sparsely populated northern region that would later become Texas, the American Southwest, and California.

Politically and financially weakened in the independence effort and plagued by Native American raids on its northern province, Mexico initially welcomed the relatively small number of Americans who settled there. But soon, the trickle became a flood.

Despite outlawing further American immigration in 1830, Mexico found itself unable to maintain control of the region from its distant capital in Mexico City.

Meanwhile, American settlers in Texas became increasingly disillusioned with the Mexican government's insistence on Catholicism as the state religion, and unhappy with its policy of encouraging its own citizens to resettle in the region.

Things came to a head in 1835, when Mexico outlawed slavery. American settlers—many of whom were slave owners who had emigrated from the southern states—were outraged, and early the next year, the Republic of Texas declared its independence.

Initially, the strongest opposition to the Texas Republic came not from Mexico, but from Native Americans. The Comanches put up fierce resistance, especially after peace talks in 1840 ended with the massacre of 35 of their delegates and family members, but the tribe was eventually subdued and the rebels' attention shifted to the south.

Despite Mexican general Santa Anna's famous victory at the Battle of the Alamo, his subsequent defeat caused him to recognize the new Republic, but the series of short-lived Mexican governments which followed all continued to resist, and sporadic conflict continued into the 1840s.

Meanwhile, Polk was eager to expand the country's southern borders, and over the strenuous objections of non-white settlers, the U.S. annexed the Texas Republic in 1845, making it the nation's 28th state.

Texas was still legally Mexican territory, making the annexation illegal, but Polk knew that the U.S. could easily win a war with Mexico, provided the Mexicans could be provoked into starting one. (As General Ulysses S. Grant confessed in his memoirs, "*we were sent to provoke a fight, but it was essential that Mexico should commence it.*")

Disorganized and poorly armed, Mexican forces were swiftly defeated, and U.S. Army troops captured Mexico City in late 1847.

The Mexican-American War (known in Mexico as the 'U.S. Intervention') cost about 40,000 lives. With an estimated casualty rate as high as 40%, the war was in relative terms the bloodiest in U.S. military history.

Under the surrender terms, Polk demanded not only Texas but all of Mexico. He settled for about about half, including Texas, California, and most of the Southwest—apart from the Louisiana Purchase, the largest acquisition of territory in the nation's history. In order to deflect claims that it had wrongfully seized Mexican land, the U.S. made a token payment of \$15 million, prompting one cynical reporter to quip "*America takes nothing by conquest...Thank God.*"

The war left Mexico in what prominent Mexicans called 'a state of devastation and ruin', and nearly 175 years later it remains a painful historical event for the nation.

Not all Americans were in support of the war. Writer Henry David Thoreau was an out-spoken critic, serving jail time for civil disobedience, and Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted America's conquest would be a pyrrhic victory: "*The United States will conquer Mexico, but Mexico will poison us.*"

Emerson's warning was prescient. One immediate consequence of the country's sudden increase in size was to upset the delicate political balance between the slave-owning states of the South and the 'free states' of the North, unleashing a series of increasingly bitter and intractable debates about slavery which would ultimately lead to the Civil War less than a decade later.

Another reluctant participant of what critics called 'Mr. Polk's War' was none other than Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who called it "*the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.*"