

Mexican-American War: Primary Sources

DOCUMENT A

The United States Declares War on Mexico

Background: On April 26, 1846, following a tense stand-off between U.S. and Mexican troops on the banks of the Rio Grande (which the U.S. now claimed as its border with Mexico, having annexed the state of Texas), a small patrol of sixty- three U.S. soldiers was attacked by Mexican forces, with eleven Americans killed. In response, U.S. General Zachary Taylor engaged the Mexican army in battles sites located on the Rio Grande, and informed President Polk that hostilities between the two nations had begun. On May 11th, Polk sent this declaration of war to Congress, claiming that Mexico had started the war by “shedding American blood upon American soil.”

To the Senate and the House of Representatives:

... We have tried every effort at reconciliation... But now, after [repeated threats], Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil. [Mexico] has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and interests of our country.

In further vindication of our rights and defense of our territory, I invoke the prompt action of Congress to recognize the existence of the war, and to place at the disposition of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace...

-James K. Polk, May 11, 1846.

DOCUMENT B

A Mexican General Issues a Proclamation at Matamoros

General Francisco Mejia was the commander of the Mexican army at Matamoros, facing the American forces at Fort Texas on the opposite side of the Rio Grande. In this strongly-worded proclamation, General Mejia criticizes the United States for the annexing Texas and sending troops to the border with Mexico. He vows to meet the “odious presence of the conquerors” with military force.

Fellow Citizens: The annexation of... Texas to the United States... does not yet satisfy the ambitious desires of the degenerate sons of Washington... Indelible is the stain which will forever darken the character... [of] the people of the United States... The right of conquest has always been a crime against humanity...

Fellow-countrymen, with an enemy which respects not its own laws, which shamefacedly derides the very principles invoked by it previously, in order to excuse its ambitious views, we have no other resource than arms. We are fortunately always prepared to take them up with glory, in defense of our country... [and] to assure our nationality and independence...

- General Francisco Mejia, March 18, 1846.

Mexican-American War: Effects

What did the Mexican War mean to Americans in the mid-19th century? The answer reflects the nature and character of mid-century America itself. Americans were reaching out beyond their border. Advancements in transportation and communications technologies were dissolving the nation's geographic and cultural isolation. Commerce expanded and travel increased as interest in exploration carried Americans around the globe.

The U.S.-Mexican War had a tremendous impact on the history of both countries. For the United States, this was the nation's first foreign war fought almost entirely on foreign territory. The war was divisive for the northern republic, exacerbated by the slavery issue and by factious politics in Washington. Another negative factor was the cost in human lives that was deeply felt by the survivors for many years — more than 5,800 Americans were killed or wounded in battle. And while the addition of the Texas territory was a victory for the United States, it did upset the balance between free and slave states, which helped bring on the catastrophe of the American Civil War.

Some unpleasant aspects of the war were offset in the United States by the exhilarating effect of a string of military victories and the acquisition of half a million miles of territory. The discovery of rich gold and silver deposits in California and Nevada was an unexpected bonanza that greatly contributed to the national economy and to the westward movement of the population. This new territory made the United States a continental power and provided fine ports on the Pacific coast.

For Mexico, the war was a series of tragedies. Besides the thousands of military and civilian deaths directly attributed to battles, the war left tens of thousands of orphans, widows and cripples. Artillery shelling and small-arms gunfire caused extensive destruction to buildings in a number of cities, in addition to damage to port facilities and roads. This destruction to land, buildings and roads also severely affected the economy, disrupting internal trade, and causing a steep decline in agricultural production. The war also destroyed or upset political careers and caused chaos in the national government — there were seven presidents and 10 different ministers of foreign relations during the two years of war. The political instability during and immediately after the war led to a new despotic regime and eventually to another civil war.

The most lasting effect of the war on Mexicans was psychological. A tragic loss of soldiers and battles, the humiliation of having their capital and much of the country occupied by enemy troops, and the ignominy of a peace treaty that alienated half of the national territory (counting Texas) was a severe blow. It shattered a sense of national honor and dignity, and it engendered a deep and long-lasting feeling of resentment toward U.S. troops. Mexicans continue to lament the consequences of the war that they call "the American Intervention."

