

Document 10: Polk's War Message

In 1846 the Mexicans still claimed all of the state of Texas. The border between the United States and Mexico was clearly in dispute although the area was uninhabited. When Mexicans passed the "border" of the Rio Grande into the disputed territory, President James K. Polk asked Congress for a declaration of war.

"The existing state of the relations between the United States and Mexico renders it proper that I should bring the subject to the consideration of Congress. . . In my message at the commencement of the present session I informed you that upon the earnest appeal both of the Congress and convention of Texas that I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position 'between the Nueces and the Del Norte.' This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union, and under these circumstances it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil. . .

Meantime Texas, by the final action of our Congress, had become an integral part of our Union. The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that Republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended and exercised beyond the Nueces. The country between that river and the Del Norte had been represented in the Congress and in the convention of Texas, had thus taken part in the act of annexation itself, and is now included within one of our Congressional districts. Our own Congress had, moreover, with great unanimity, by the Act approved December 31, 1845, recognized the country beyond the Nueces as a part of our territory by including it within our own revenue system, and a revenue officer to reside within that district has been appointed by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country.

The movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made by the commanding general under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens and to regard the relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful unless she should declare war or commit acts of hostility indicative of a state of war. . . .

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude, and on the 12th of April, General Ampudia, then in command, notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours and to retire beyond the Nueces River, and in the event of his failure to comply with these demands announced that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question. But no open act of hostility was committed until the 24th of April. On that day General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated to General Taylor that 'he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them.' A party of dragoons of 63 men and officers were on the same day dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, 'became engaged with a large body of these troops, and after a short affair, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender. . . .'

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She 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 the 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. . . ."

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Document 11: The Mexican Invasion

Not everyone saw the Mexican War from Polk's perspective. Abraham Lincoln, then a Congressman, condemned the war, Mexicans were bitter, and others, as in this account from a Mexican historian, view the war as an invasion.

A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States
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"The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. U.S. historians refer to this event as 'The Mexican War,' while in Mexico we prefer to use the term 'The U.S. Invasion...'. When the U.S. Congress authorized a declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, President Polk's viewpoint was officially accepted. It held that the posture of the Mexican government—or better said, the Mexican governments—had left the United States with no other alternative for defending its national security and interests, and that Mexico was to blame for causing the war. . . . Indeed, in order to understand Mexico's viewpoint with regard to the war with the United States, it is necessary to consider three important issues: first, Mexico's internal state of affairs during the 1840s; second, the problem of Texas; and third, the U.S. invasion of Mexican territory.

Between 1841 and 1848, Mexico experienced one of the most critical periods in the formation of its State. First, there was the Santa Anna dictatorship between 1841 and 1843, and then, the second Centralist Republic, in power until December 1845. This was followed by the Mariano Paredes dictatorship, which lasted eight months and during which the possibility of setting up a monarchy was once again discussed. The federal republican government was finally restored in 1847, after six presidents had succeeded one another from June 1844 to September 1847.

From the Mexican perspective, there were two facets to the problem of Texas: one was related to its separation from Mexico and the other to its annexation to the United States. With regard to the first, Mexico asserted from 1836 to 1845, perhaps a bit inflexibly that the secession of Texas was illegitimate, and it reaffirmed its right to reincorporate this part of its territory by any means necessary, including the use of force. Furthermore, it considered that despite the recognition that Texans had gained in other countries, the conflict was an internal problem. Let it be said in passing that Mexico's position was very similar to that adopted by the U.S. government when it faced the problem of the secession of its southern states years later. . . . 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 reaffirmed the posture it had expressed a year before that Mexico would consider such an act 'a declaration of war.' And later, when the Congress approved the joint resolution inviting Texas to join the United States, Mexico suspended diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Mexico asserted that the annexation of Texas—whether by treaty or in a U.S. Congressional resolution—was a violation of the 1828 border treaty, which had acknowledged Mexico's sovereignty over that territory. . . . Once the Texas government had agreed to the annexation, on July 4, 1845, the Herrera

administration ordered the mobilization of federal troops to protect the northern border. . . . Mexico's anti-belligerent posture in favor of negotiations was confirmed October 15, 1845, when its foreign relations minister, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, notified U.S. consul John Black "that although the Mexican nation was gravely offended by the United States due to its actions in Texas—belonging to Mexico—the government was willing to receive a commissioner who would arrive in this capital from the United States possessing full faculties to settle the current dispute in a peaceful, reasonable and respectable way. . . . A week later 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. This provocation by President Polk would be acknowledged even by John C. Calhoun, who had been the main promoter of the annexation of Texas. In the eyes of the Mariano Paredes government, the mobilization of the U.S. army was an outright attack on Mexico's territorial integrity and clearly demonstrated that the United States had no intention of subjecting itself to the terms of the 1828 border treaty. 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.

Even before these incidents, President Polk had already decided to ask the U.S. Congress to declare war against Mexico, but the battles provided a pretext to mobilize the opinions of both U.S. legislators and the public in favor of such a measure. . . . Polk immediately ordered the occupation of the territory south of the Río Grande, as well as the New Mexico and California territories and the blocking of Mexican ports. The question was and continues to be: were these actions in defense of U.S. territorial security or the flagrant invasion of Mexican territory? From the viewpoint of Mexicans, the answer was clear: the U.S. government was not seeking to protect its territorial security, nor did it have other supposed demands, but rather it was determined to take over a territory legitimately belonging to Mexico.

Indeed, during the entire conflict, from the separation of Texas to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico defended its territory and if at any time its position was belligerent, it was belligerent in the defense of national security and for the preservation of international legal order. Therefore, it was not a result of arrogance, nor of irresponsibility, but rather the only possible response to the arguments and the actions of the U.S. government. In conclusion, the armed conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the product of deliberate aggression and should therefore be referred to as 'The U.S. War Against Mexico.'"

Jesús Velasco-Márquez. *The U.S.-Mexican War*, Pbs.org.
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