

The Mexican American War: Primary Source Documents

Below are 4 primary source documents from the time of the Mexican American War. A few noteworthy passages have been highlighted for you, but you should analyze the entirety of each excerpt below.

#1: President Polk Calls for War (May 11, 1846)

About this document: President James Polk outlines the US government's grievances against Mexico and calls for a declaration of war in a special message to Congress.

Monday, May 11, 1846.

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 communicating to Congress a succinct statement of the injuries which we had suffered from Mexico, and which have been accumulating during a period of more than twenty years, every expression that could tend to inflame the people of Mexico, or defeat or delay a pacific result, was carefully avoided. An Envoy of the United States repaired to Mexico with full powers to adjust every existing difference. But though present on the Mexican soil, by agreement between the two Governments, invested with full powers, and bearing evidence of the most friendly dispositions, his mission has been unavailing. The Mexican Government not only refused to receive him, or listen to his propositions, but after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil.

...

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, I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and 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 ... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country.

...

Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own, she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and, in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us, for the purpose of reconquering Texas ...

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.

#2: U.S. Senator Denounces Mexican War (February 11, 1847)

About this document: Ohio Senator Thomas Corwin questions the justification and motives of US efforts to obtain Mexican territory. He fears that expansion will spread slavery into new territories.

What is the territory, Mr. President, which you propose to wrest from Mexico? It is consecrated to the heart of the Mexican by many a well-fought battle with his old Castilian master. His Bunker Hills, and Saratogas, and Yorktowns, are there! The Mexican can say, "There I bled for liberty! and shall I surrender that consecrated home of my affections to the Anglo-Saxon invaders? What do they want with it? They have Texas already. They have possessed themselves of the territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande.

...

Sir, had one come and demanded Bunker Hill of the people of Massachusetts, had England's Lion ever showed himself there, is there a man over thirteen and under ninety who would not have been ready to meet him? ... But this same American goes into a sister republic and says to poor, weak Mexico, "Give up your territory, you are unworthy to possess it; I have got one-half already, and all I ask of you is to give up the other." ...

Sir, look at this pretence of want of room. With twenty millions of people, you have about one thousand millions of acres of land, inviting settlement by every conceivable argument, bringing them down to a quarter of a dollar an acre, and allowing every man to squat where the pleases.

...

There is one topic connected with this subject which I tremble when I approach, and yet I cannot forbear to notice it. It meets you in every step you take, it threatens you which way soever you go in the prosecution of this war. I allude to the question of slavery ... [W]e will not, cannot consent that you shall carry slavery where it does not already exist ... If, then, we persist in war, which, if it terminate in anything short of a mere wanton waste of blood as well as money, must end (as this bill proposes) in the acquisition of territory, to which at once this controversy must attach—this bill would seem to be nothing less than a bill to produce internal commotion. Should we prosecute this war another moment, or expend one dollar in the purchase or conquest of a single acre of Mexican land, the North and the South are brought into collision on a point where neither will yield. Who can foresee or foretell the result! ... Let us abandon all idea of acquiring

further territory, and by consequence cease at once to prosecute this war. Let us call home our armies, and bring them at once within our own acknowledged limits.

Show Mexico that you are sincere when you say you desire nothing by conquest.

#3: John O' Sullivan Argues for Manifest Destiny (1839)

About this document: Lawyer and journalist John O'Sullivan promotes manifest destiny in his magazine article, "The Great Nation of Futurity."

The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.

...

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles ...

...

For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure in existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?

#4: Massachusetts Senator Condemns the War (1847)

About this document: Senator Charles Sumner, a pacifist and impassioned enemy of slavery, disputes the annexation of Texas and calls the war against Mexico unjust.

Resolved, That the present war with Mexico has its primary origin in the unconstitutional annexation to the United States of the foreign state of Texas while the same was still at war with Mexico; that it was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President, to General Taylor, to take military possession of territory in dispute between the United States and Mexico,

and in the occupation of Mexico; and that it is now waged ingloriously—by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor—unnecessarily and without just cause, at immense cost of treasure and life, for the dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest of a portion of her territory, from which slavery has already been excluded, with the triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the "Slave Power," and of obtaining the control of the Free States, under the Constitution of the United States.