

# U.S.–Mexico War Tea Party:

## “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God”

BY *BILL BIGELOW*

TODAY’S BORDER WITH MEXICO is the product of invasion and war. Grasping some of the motives for that war and some of its immediate effects begins to provide students the kind of historical context that is crucial for thinking intelligently

about the line that separates the United States and Mexico. The tea party activity introduces students to a number of the individuals and themes they will encounter in Howard Zinn’s “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God.”

### Materials Needed:

- Tea party roles, cut up. One for every student in the class.
- Blank nametags. Enough for every student in the class.
- Copies of “The War with Mexico: Questions” for every student.
- Copies of “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God” for every student.
- Copies of U.S.-Mexico map on p. 10 of the article “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God,” found on the Zinn Education Project website at <http://www.zinnedproject.org/>.
- Copies of the student handout, “The War with Mexico.”

### Time Required:

- One class period for the tea party. Time for follow-up discussion.
- A portion of one class period to assign “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God,” and a portion of another to discuss.
- A portion of one class period to read and critique “The War with Mexico” textbook excerpt.

### Suggested Procedure:

1. Explain to students that they are going to do an activity about the U.S. war with Mexico, 1846-1848. Distribute one tea party role to each student in the class. There are only 21, so in most classes, some students will be assigned the same historical character. (Most but not all of the roles are based on individuals included in Zinn’s “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God,” as the tea party is intended as a pre-reading activity. A couple are drawn from the chapter, “Foreigners in Their Own Land: Manifest Destiny in the Southwest,” in Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror*; others are based on material in Milton Meltzer’s *Bound for the Rio Grande*, Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera’s *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*, Elizabeth Martínez’s *500 Años del Pueblo Chicano/500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, and Deena J. González’s “The Widowed Women of Santa Fe: Assessments on the Lives of an Unmarried Population, 1850-1880” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds.)

2. Have students fill out their nametags, using the name of the individual they are assigned. Tell students that in this activity you would like each of them to attempt to become these people from history. Ask students to read their roles several times and to memorize as much of the information as possible. Encourage them to underline key points. Sometimes it helps if students turn over their roles and list three or four facts about their characters that they think are most important.
3. Distribute a copy of “The War with Mexico: Questions” to every student. Explain their assignment: Students should circulate through the classroom, meeting other individuals from the U.S.-Mexico War. They should use the questions on the sheet as a guide to talk with others about the war and to complete the questions as fully as possible. They must use a different individual to answer each of the eight questions. (This is not the *Twilight Zone*, so students who have been assigned the same person may not meet themselves.) Tell them that it’s not a race; the aim is for students to spend time hearing each other’s stories, not just hurriedly scribbling down answers to the different questions. I like to begin this activity by asking for a student volunteer to demonstrate with me an encounter between two of the individuals, so that the rest of the class can sense the kind of interaction I’m looking for.
4. Ask students to stand up and begin to circulate throughout the class to meet one another and to fill out responses on the U.S.-Mexico War questions student handout.
5. Afterwards, ask students to share some of their findings with the whole class. This needn’t be exhaustive, as students will learn a lot more about these issues when they read the excerpt from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*.

Possible questions:

- What surprised you about this activity?
- Who found someone with opinions different than your character’s opinions?
- What were some of the different points of view you found on why the United States and Mexico went to war?
- Why do you think the United States and Mexico went to war?
- What were some results of the war?
- What questions does this activity leave you with?

### “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God”

6. As follow-up, assign Howard Zinn’s “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God” and the U.S.-Mexico map. Another reading to consider using is Milton Meltzer’s chapter focusing on the U.S. soldiers from Ireland who went over to the Mexican side as the San Patricio Battalion, “Traitors—or Martyrs,” from his book *Bound for the Rio Grande*. Similarly, I’ve used the song, “San Patricio Brigade,” included on *New York Town*, a CD by the Irish-American rock group Black 47 to talk with students about the Irish resistance to the war. Black 47 can at first-listen sound odd, but my students seemed to enjoy hearing this raucous song about a “boy from the green fields of Galway.” A poignant song/powerpoint is David Rovics’ “Saint Patrick’s Battalion,” posted on YouTube.
7. Ask students to complete a “talk-back” journal with the Zinn reading. They should locate at least five passages from the reading that they found amusing, important, startling, moving, confusing, outrageous, or odd. They should write out each quote and their detailed reaction to it. You might ask students to find material that they can connect with information they learned in the tea party, events that relate somehow to their own lives or things going on today. Also encourage students to raise at least two questions that they would like to discuss with the rest of the class.
8. In addition to students’ own questions, here are some questions for further discussion or writing:

- Why did the United States government want to obtain California?
- What is meant by the term Manifest Destiny?
- What were the pressures on the United States government to push for expansion?
- What if you believed the war with Mexico was immoral, but both major parties, Democratic and Whig, supported it? What would you do to try to bring an end to the war?
- Re-read Abraham Lincoln's quote on p. 3 of the article "We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God," found on the Zinn Education Project website at <http://www.zinnedproject.org/> Lincoln believes that even though Whigs opposed the war before it began, that once the war began they should allocate money to support the war. Explain why you agree or disagree.
- Comment on the belief of some Americans: The Mexican War was a good thing, because it gave the blessings of liberty and democracy to more people.
- In what ways could it be said that the Mexican War was a racist war? Give examples.
- Describe the resistance to the war. How effective was the opposition?
- From a Mexican standpoint, given the origins and nature of the U.S.-Mexico War, how might people today respond to the efforts to exclude Mexicans from U.S. territory, and treat them as criminals once they are here?
- In his essay "On Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau writes that what is *legal* is not necessarily what is *right*. Do you agree? Can you think of any examples from history or current events?
- The Reverend Theodore Parker said that Mexicans must eventually give way, as did the Indians. What similarities do you see between the Mexican War and the wars against the Indians?
- Why might ordinary citizens—workers or farmers, with no slaves and no plans to move onto Mexican territory—support

the U.S. war against Mexico? Does war itself hold attraction for people, or was it the Mexican War in particular that excited some Americans?

- As was the case with the organized opposition to Indian Removal in the 1820s and 1830s, racism infected the movement against the war with Mexico. Give some examples. Why do you think this racism existed?
- If the U.S. Army was supposed to bring liberty and civilization to Mexico, why do you think rape and mistreatment of Mexicans was so widespread?
- Who benefited from the Mexican War?

## Textbook Critique

*Textbooks may have useful background information, photos, maps, and graphs. But often they contain biases and omissions. This activity asks students to question how one major U.S. history textbook covers the U.S. war with Mexico.*

1. Distribute to students the selection from Glencoe McGraw-Hill's *American Odyssey*, a high school text, on p. 11 of the article "We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God," found on the Zinn Education Project website at <http://www.zinnedproject.org/> Although the main focus of this 1,010-page textbook is the 20th century, the book includes 249 pre-20th century pages. Note that this two-paragraph section is the book's entire discussion of the U.S.-Mexico War. (As an alternative to using the excerpt provided, you might ask students to use their own textbooks, or distribute several different texts so they can compare coverage.)
2. Ask students to read the textbook excerpt individually and to consider the accompanying questions. Encourage them to use these questions as a guide, but tell them that you're interested in whatever insights they generate. Also encourage students to write comments and questions on the excerpt itself—to "talk back" to the textbook. I find that when students begin marking up a passage it can have an empowering effect; it affirms their right to have an opinion that differs from that of the

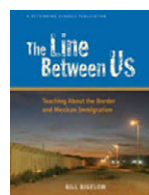
“authority.” And they realize that they know important things that a text may have omitted or distorted.

3. Ask students to turn to one or two students around them and share their thoughts about the reading.
4. Bring students back together to discuss. Some questions in addition to the two on the handout:
  - If everything that students knew about the U.S. war with Mexico came from this textbook, do you suppose they’d think the war was right or wrong? Explain.
  - How does this account differ from what they learned in the tea party and in Howard Zinn’s account in “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God”?
  - In the textbook excerpt, what do you learn about the *causes* of the war with Mexico? What *doesn’t* the book tell you about the causes?
  - What does the textbook tell about the many American citizens who opposed U.S. involvement in the war? What difference does it make when textbooks fail to tell students about individuals and movements in history that opposed government policies?
  - What does the textbook include about the experiences or activities of African Americans, Mexicans, Native Americans, or women?
  - Why do you think this textbook leaves out important information?
  - In the Glencoe McGraw-Hill text, the entire section on the U.S.-Mexico War consists of two paragraphs. What message might that send to readers?
5. You might allow students to act on what they find. They could write letters to a textbook company or a school district textbook selection committee, rewrite sections of the text or write critiques to be left in the book for the following year’s students, and/or lead workshops with other students and young children about the omissions they uncovered.

## Some Additional Activities and Projects:

- Design a monument or memorial exhibit to commemorate the U.S. war with Mexico. Consider what symbols might best represent this war. Given that your audience is likely to know little about the war, what essential points should you teach? Perhaps design the commemoration from a Mexican standpoint.
- Read Henry David Thoreau’s “On Civil Disobedience” and write a response.
- Write a diary entry or letter explaining why you are volunteering to fight in Mexico. Or write a diary or letter explaining why you oppose the war and will refuse to fight.
- Write an interior monologue from the point of view of an individual mentioned in the reading or tea party—for example, a California Indian listening to naval officer Revere; a Mexican woman in Santa Fe, as General Kearny’s troops enter; a volunteer U.S. soldier who is experiencing the horrors of war for the first time; one of General Cushing’s men as he speaks to them at their reception dinner in Massachusetts. ■

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# The War with Mexico: Roles

## Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock

I am a professional soldier, graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment. I am an aide to General Zachary Taylor. Like President Polk, Taylor wanted a war with Mexico, and so he moved troops to the Rio Grande—territory claimed by both Mexico and Texas—to provoke the Mexicans. Eventually, the Mexicans did attack, as Taylor and Polk knew they would. And now U.S. leaders have their war. The United States doesn't have any right whatsoever to move into Mexico. The government is looking for war so that it can take over as much of Mexico as it wants. The United States is the aggressor. My heart is not in this war. But I am an officer in the U.S. Army and I must carry out my orders.

## Congressman Abraham Lincoln, Whig Party, Illinois

The Whigs were accused of being opposed to the war against Mexico. Well, that's true or false, depending on how you look at it. It's true that we spoke out in Congress against the war. In a speech, I challenged President Polk to name the exact spot where Mexicans supposedly shed American blood. I was against Polk pushing this war with Mexico. But once the war started, we consistently voted to supply funds to wage the war and support the troops. In fact, I even gave a speech in Congress supporting the candidacy of General Zachary Taylor for president. And Taylor was the first general in charge of waging the war.

## President James K. Polk

I won the presidency by a close vote in 1844 and now I am president of the United States of America. I am a Democrat, and a believer in "Manifest Destiny." It is God's plan that the United States should spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In 1846, I ordered U.S. troops into an area that was claimed both by Texas and Mexico, historically occupied by Mexicans. I knew that it was a provocation. As I confided to my Secretary of the Navy: I want California to be part of the United States. It's part of Mexico and the only way to get it away from them is war. As I'd expected, the Mexicans attacked and I convinced Congress to declare war against Mexico. Some of my opponents say that I want this war only because I own slaves and this is a war to extend slavery to Mexico. Nonsense. There is much more at stake than slavery. This is about defending America's honor and our national interest.

## William Lloyd Garrison, Founder, American Anti-Slavery Society

I oppose the Mexican War, as do all true opponents of slavery. President Polk is a slave owner and like all slave owners, he wants to expand slavery everywhere. That's why this war is being fought: to steal more territory from Mexico so that Mexico can be carved up into new slave states. Mexico abolished slavery in 1829, and the Texans left Mexico and established their own "country" so that they could keep their slaves. Now Texas is entering the United States as a slave state. My organization and I will speak out, organize protest meetings, write articles, publish pamphlets, and do everything legal we can do to oppose this immoral war. In our newspaper, *The Liberator*, we have written that we hope the Mexicans will win this war. It's not a popular statement these days, but when it comes to justice, we cannot compromise.



### Henry David Thoreau

I live in Concord, Massachusetts, where I work as a writer. In order to support this war with Mexico, Massachusetts passed a poll tax. I won't pay it. Simple as that. The government wants to force people into this unjust war to go kill Mexicans or be killed. I won't support that. For my "crime," they put me in jail for a night. My friend, the famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to visit me in jail. He said, "What are you doing in there?" I replied, "What are you doing out there?" Against my wishes, friends of mine paid my tax and I was released. But I have come to believe that the way to stop injustice is not merely to speak out against it, but also to refuse to obey unjust laws.

### Reverend Theodore Parker

I am a Unitarian minister in Boston, Massachusetts, with a congregation of 7,000. I oppose this war with Mexico because this is a war to expand slavery. Slavery should be ended not expanded. I am not opposed to the war because I like the Mexicans. As I have written, they are "a wretched people; wretched in their origin, history and character." We Americans are vastly superior, but we must not take them over by force. We should resist this war. I urge young men not to enlist, bankers should refuse to lend money for the war, ship owners should refuse to let their ships be used for the war; manufacturers should refuse to produce cannons, swords, and gunpowder for the war. Let the government prosecute me as a traitor. I answer only to God.

### María Josefa Martínez, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Two years ago, in 1846, the United States invaded Mexico. That summer, Colonel Stephen W. Kearny of the United States Army marched into Santa Fe to take control. Up until that moment, I was a Mexican woman. Since then, I have been a conquered Mexican woman. There are about 25,000 to 30,000 women in New Mexico. The white male conquerors treat us badly. They have contempt for all Mexicans, especially women. As a woman, under Mexican law I was allowed to own property in my maiden name, and sell or give it away without my husband's signature. I could even farm my own land apart from my husband's land or land that we owned together. U.S. women don't have these rights. Unlike the invaders, I speak Spanish not English. But English is the language used by lawyers, judges, and tax assessors. I worry that the U.S. authorities will use my lack of English to take away my rights and property.

### Sgt. John Riley, San Patricio Battalion, Formerly U.S. Army

Originally, I'm from a small town in Ireland. I joined the U.S. Army and became a drillmaster at West Point, training men to be soldiers. Now the Army considers me a deserter and a traitor. That's not how I see it. I was sent to invade Mexico with the Army. The U.S. had no right to be there. It was like the British occupying Ireland. Mexicans were treated cruelly. The Mexicans appealed to me to leave the U.S. Army and to join theirs. And I did. I became a lieutenant and about 260 U.S. soldiers joined me fighting on the Mexican side. In Boston and Philadelphia, the Protestants had burned our Catholic churches. The Mexicans are Catholic too. But now, we are captured. Most of us have been sentenced to death by hanging. The "lucky" ones are to be given 50 lashes with a whip, forced to dig the graves for our friends who will be executed, and then branded on our cheeks with the letter "D" for deserter.

### **Frederick Douglass**

I was born a slave. When I was about 20 years old, I ran away from my so-called master, and came to live in the north, where I have become famous speaking and writing against slavery. I publish an anti-slavery journal called the *North Star*. This war with Mexico is disgraceful and cruel. Mexico is a victim of those white people of America who love to push around people who aren't white. Unfortunately, even many abolitionists (people who are working to end slavery) have continued to pay their taxes and do not to resist this war with enough passion. It's time that we risk everything for peace.

### **U.S. Naval Officer**

I'm a lucky man. I got to sail into California to seize that territory for the United States of America. It's ours now, not the Mexicans'. Here's what I wrote in my diary when I sailed up from South America and landed in Monterey, California: "Asia will be brought to our very doors. Population will flow into the fertile regions of California. The resources of the entire country will be developed. The public lands lying along the route of railroads will be changed from deserts into gardens, and a large population will be settled." This is where I'm going to settle after we defeat the Mexicans once and for all.

### **General Stephen Kearny**

I command the United States Army in the West. I had the honor of winning New Mexico for the United States during the war with Mexico. The high point for me was taking the city of Santa Fe. I wanted to conquer but not to kill. I sent word that if the people didn't fight us we wouldn't fight them. We marched into Santa Fe with our bayonets and knives out, hoping that we would frighten the residents, so they would not fight us. And they didn't. We raised the American flag and fired our cannon in a glorious salute to the United States of America. Apparently this had a strong effect on the town's women because many of them let loose a "wail of grief," as one of my officers described it. The sound of their crying rose above the noise of our horses as we rode along.

### **U.S. Army Officer**

I thought the war was going to be a lot of fun. How could the Mexicans put up much of a fight when they were up against the powerful United States? But soon enough the reality of war set in. As we moved up the Rio Grande, it was incredibly hot, hotter than I'd ever experienced. The water was bad and many of my men got diarrhea, dysentery, and other diseases. It was awful. We lost a thousand men just from sickness. I watched some men do horrible things. As I wrote in my diary: "We reached Burrity about 5 p.m., many of the Louisiana volunteers were there, a lawless drunken rabble. They had driven away the inhabitants, taken possession of their houses, and were emulating [copying] each other in making beasts of themselves." They raped many women there.

### **Oregon Trail, Wagon Train Member**

In 1844, I took a wagon train from Missouri to the Oregon territory, but someone said there was better farmland in California, and warmer weather. So I headed south to the San Joaquin Valley. It's a part of Mexico, but there are more and more people arriving all the time from the United States. And now war has broken out. Soon this won't be Mexico anymore. It will be the United States of America. Manifest Destiny is what they call it, and from sea to shining sea, soon it will be filled with free, white, English-speaking farmers and ranchers. Too bad it's going to take a war to make it happen, but the Mexicans wouldn't sell California, and then they attacked us. So fair's fair.

### **Cochise, Chiricahua Apache leader**

Some of the whites think that my land belongs to the United States. Some think it belongs to Mexico. They are all wrong. My land belongs to my people, the Apaches. We roam the lands that Mexico calls Sonora and that the United States considers New Mexico and Arizona. First, Spain claimed this land, then the Mexicans, now the Americans. Over the years, we've fought them all—the European invaders—and we will continue to fight. Before this latest war, the Mexicans paid Americans to help track us down. In fact, a group of them killed my father. When I was young I walked all over this country, east and west, and saw no other people than the Apaches. Now the invaders are everywhere. Mexicans, Americans: I want them all gone from my land.

### **Jefferson Davis, Mississippi**

I'm one of the largest plantation owners in the United States. Every year, it seems that the people against slavery just get louder and louder. They're trying to keep slavery out of the Western territories like Kansas and Nebraska. And now, like a gift from God, along comes this war against Mexico. Think of all the new territory we can conquer for freedom—the freedom to take our slaves wherever we like. First Mexico, then Cuba, and then Nicaragua. I can see the day when the United States could rule all of Mexico and Central America, and all that territory will be added to our country—new states, new slave states. This is a great war. Thank heavens the Mexicans attacked us first. Justice is on our side.

### **General Mariano Vallejo**

I live in California, a part of Mexico. I am a wealthy man. I own 175,000 acres. This is where my 16 children were born. I have always been very kind to visitors who come from the United States, and some even say that I am famous for the hospitality I show my guests. In the 1840s, more and more people from the United States began arriving. Unbelievably, most of them looked down on Mexicans, and called us "greasers," and an inferior race—we who were born here and built wealthy *ranchos*. Now that war has broken out, it is clear what the North Americans are looking for: They want to steal California away from Mexico and make it a part of the United States. Before the war, they wanted to buy California from Mexico, but Mexico wouldn't sell. So now they are making war on us so that they can take it away. I fear that I will lose everything I've worked so hard for.

### **Doña Francesca Vallejo**

I live in California, a part of Mexico. I am a wealthy woman, a wealthy *Mexican* woman. With my husband, I own 175,000 acres. I have numerous servants. I have two for my own personal service. Four or five servants grind corn for tortillas, for we entertain so many guests that three servants could not feed them all. About six or seven work in the kitchen. Five or six are continually occupied washing the clothes of my 16 children and the rest are employed in the house; and finally, nearly a dozen attend to the sewing and spinning. This is where my children were born. I have always been very friendly to visitors who come from the United States, and some even say that I am famous for the hospitality I show my guests. And now there is a war. The United States will try to take California away from Mexico, but they have no right, and we won't let them.



### Lieutenant, U.S. Army Infantry

In a place called Huamantla, the Mexicans killed one of our officers, a man by the name of Walker. He was a friend of General Lane. The general told us to “avenge the death of the gallant Walker, to take all we could lay hands on.” And we did. We broke open liquor stores and got drunk. Then we went after the women and girls. They were stripped of their clothing and terrible outrages were committed against them. We shot dozens of men and ransacked their churches, stores and houses. We even killed the Mexicans’ horses. Drunken U.S. soldiers were everywhere, yelling, screeching, breaking open houses or chasing Mexicans who ran for their lives. As I wrote my parents, “Such a scene I never hope to see again. It made me for the first time ashamed of my country.”

### Francisco Márquez, Mexican Cadet

I am a cadet, studying at a military school in Mexico City. The school is in a castle high up on a hill in the beautiful Chapultepec region of the city. I love my country and I want to defend it from the invading U.S. Army. Why are they attacking my country? Because they want to bring back slavery to Mexico? Because they want to steal California and other territories of Mexico? Why? They have done brutal things to my people. I will fight to the death. We have been ordered by our officers to leave the military school because we are too young to fight as soldiers. But I will stay and fight. I will fight until I am the last one alive, and then I will wrap myself in the Mexican flag and jump to my death before allowing myself to be captured by the Americans.

### Padre Antonio José Martínez

In the struggle between the rich and the poor, I stand with the poor. In fact, I am called the Padre (Father) of the Poor. I founded the first school for boys and girls in the entire Southwest and also began one of the first newspapers in the region. And I opposed the U.S. invaders when recently they came to take over our territory in New Mexico. Even though I am a priest, many believe that I was a leader of the Revolt of Taos in 1847. On January 19, 1847, 2,000 Indians and *Mexicanos* together rose up and killed the U.S.-installed governor in his mansion as well as other U.S. officials who were stealing our land. The rebels marched through the snow and took refuge in a Catholic church in the Taos pueblo, thinking they would be safe. They weren’t. The U.S. Army destroyed the church with cannon fire. The U.S. authorities put six leaders on trial and found them guilty in 15 minutes. The six men were hanged, holding hands as they died.

### Wotoki, Miwok Indian, California

I live in northern California, in Sonoma. No matter who wins this war between Mexico and the United States, nothing changes the fact that this is *Miwok* land—*our* land—that they are fighting over. First, the Spaniards took over, then the Mexicans. Now the Americans are taking over. But they all mistreated the Miwok people. Our land is now owned by one of the richest men in California, the Mexican General Mariano Vallejo. They say he and his wife, Doña Francesca, are kind to visitors. But he is not kind to his Indian workers. I work on his land. Vallejo treats us almost like slaves. And the Americans here are no better. An American named Captain Sutter orders “his” Indians to eat out of four-foot-long troughs, as if Indians are pigs. Sutter whips them when they disobey. I have no idea what this war between Mexico and the United States is about. To me, it looks like Americans and Mexicans killing each other so that they can steal our land.

# The War with Mexico: Questions

1. Find someone who fought in the war—on either side. Who is the person? What was their experience like?
2. Find someone who supports the U.S. war with Mexico. Who is the person? Why do they support the war?
3. Find someone who opposes the U.S. war with Mexico. Who is the person? Why do they oppose the war?
4. Find someone who has an opinion on why the United States is at war with Mexico. Who is the person? What is their opinion about why the United States is at war?
5. Find someone who saw things in the war that shocked them. Who is the person? What shocked them?
6. Find someone who lives in a different part of the country than you do—or lives in another country. Who is the person? What do you agree on about the war? What do you disagree on?
7. Find someone who stands to gain from the war. Who are they? How might they benefit?
8. Find someone who stands to lose from the war. Who are they? How might they suffer?