

# 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, p. 20.
- 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. 13. Lincoln believes that even though Whigs opposed the war before it began, 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.*

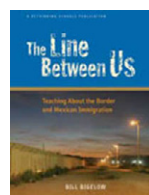
1. Distribute to students the selection from Glencoe McGraw-Hill's *American Odyssey*, a high school text, p. 21. Although the main focus of this 1,010-page textbook is the 20th century, the book includes 249 pre-20th century pages. Note that this two-paragraph section is the book's entire discussion 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. ■

**Bill Bigelow** (bill@rethinkingschools.org) is the curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.



This article was previously published in *The Line Between Us*, a publication of Rethinking Schools. To order *The Line Between Us*, visit <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/> or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools ([office@rethinkingschools.org](mailto:office@rethinkingschools.org)) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
[www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

**Teaching for Change**  
[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

# 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 Burrita 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?

# We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God

By HOWARD ZINN

COL. ETHAN ALLEN HITCHCOCK, a professional soldier, graduate of the Military Academy, commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, a reader of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Hegel, Spinoza, wrote in his diary:

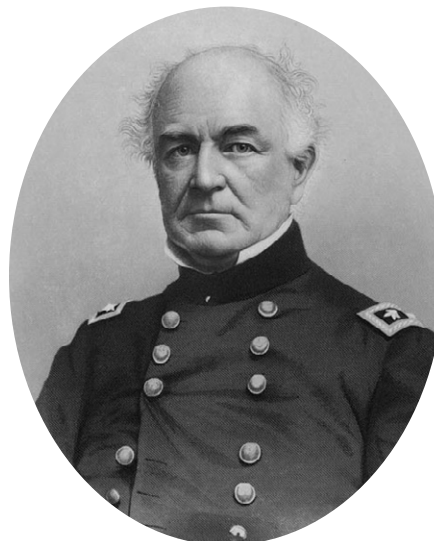
*Fort Jesup, La., June 30, 1845. Orders came last evening by express from Washington City directing General Taylor to move without any delay to ... take up a position on the banks of or near the Rio Grande, and he is to expel any armed force of Mexicans who may cross that river. Bliss read the orders to me last evening hastily at tattoo. I have scarcely slept a wink, thinking of the needful preparations. ... Violence leads to violence, and if this movement of ours does not lead to others and to bloodshed, I am much mistaken.*

Hitchcock was not mistaken. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase had doubled the territory of the United States, extending it to the Rocky Mountains. To the southwest was Mexico, which had won its independence in a revolutionary war against Spain in 1821. Mexico was then an even larger country than it is now, since it included what are now Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, and part of Colorado. After agitation, and aid from the United States, Texas broke off from Mexico in 1836 and declared itself the "Lone Star

Republic." In 1845, the U.S. Congress brought it into the Union as a state.

In the White House now was James Polk, a Democrat, an expansionist, who, on the night of his inauguration, confided to his secretary of the Navy that one of his main objectives was the acquisition of California. His order to General Taylor to move troops to the Rio Grande was a challenge to the Mexicans. It was not at all clear that the Rio Grande was the southern boundary of Texas, although Texas had forced the defeated Mexican general Santa Anna to say so when he was a prisoner. The traditional border between Texas and Mexico had been the Nueces River, about 150 miles to the north, and both Mexico and the United States had recognized that as the border. However, Polk, encouraging the Texans to accept annexation, had assured them he would uphold their claims to the Rio Grande.

Ordering troops to the Rio Grande, into territory inhabited by Mexicans, was clearly a provocation. Taylor's army marched in parallel columns across the open prairie, scouts far ahead and on the flanks, a train of supplies following. Then, along a narrow road, through a belt of thick chaparral, they arrived, March 28, 1846, in cultivated fields and thatched-roof huts hurriedly abandoned by the Mexican occupants, who had fled across the river to the city of Matamoros. Taylor set up camp, began construction of



Col. Ethan Allen Hitchcock

Getty Images/Hulton Archive

a fort, and implanted his cannons facing the white houses of Matamoros, whose inhabitants stared curiously at the sight of an army on the banks of a quiet river.

## ‘Our Manifest Destiny’

The *Washington Union*, a newspaper expressing the position of President Polk and the Democratic party, had spoken early in 1845 on the meaning of Texas annexation: “Let the great measure of annexation be accomplished, and with it the questions of boundary and claims. For who can arrest the torrent that will pour onward to the West? The road to California will be open to us. Who will stay the march of our western people?”

It was shortly after that, in the summer of 1845, that John O’Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, used the phrase that became famous, saying it was “Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Yes, manifest destiny.

All that was needed in the spring of 1846 was a military incident to begin the war that Polk wanted. It came in April, when General Taylor’s quartermaster, Colonel Cross, while riding up the Rio Grande, disappeared. His body was found eleven days later, his skull smashed by a heavy blow. It was assumed he had been killed by Mexican guerrillas crossing the river.

The next day (April 25), a patrol of Taylor’s soldiers was surrounded and attacked by Mexicans, and wiped out: sixteen dead, others wounded, the rest captured. Taylor sent a dispatch to Polk: “Hostilities may now be considered as commenced.”

The Mexicans had fired the first shot. But they had done what the American government wanted, according to Colonel Hitchcock, who wrote in his diary, even before those first incidents:

*I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors. ... We have not one par-*

*ticle of right to be here. ... It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses. ... My heart is not in this business ... but, as a military man, I am bound to execute orders.*

On May 9, before news of any battles, Polk was suggesting to his cabinet a declaration of war. Polk recorded in his diary what he said to the cabinet meeting:

*I stated ... that up to this time, as we knew, we had heard of no open act of aggression by the Mexican army, but that the danger was imminent that such acts would be committed. I said that in my opinion we had ample cause of war, and that it was impossible ... that I could remain silent much longer ... that the country was excited and impatient on the subject. ...*

The country was not “excited and impatient.”

But the president was. When the dispatches arrived from General Taylor telling of casualties from the Mexican attack, Polk summoned the cabinet to hear the news, and they unanimously agreed he should ask for a declaration of war. Polk’s message to Congress was indignant: “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American

blood upon the American soil. ...”

Congress then rushed to approve the war message. The bundles of official documents accompanying the war message, supposed to be evidence for Polk’s statement, were not examined, but were tabled immediately by the House. Debate on the bill providing volunteers and money for the war was limited to two hours, and most of this was used up reading selected portions of the tabled documents, so that barely half an hour was left for discussion of the issues.

The Whig party also wanted California, but preferred to do it without war. Nevertheless,

---

*“It is our manifest  
destiny to overspread  
the continent allotted  
by Providence for the  
free development of  
our yearly multiplying  
millions.”*

---

they would not deny men and money for the operation and so joined Democrats in voting overwhelmingly for the war resolution, 174 to 14. In the Senate there was debate, but it was limited to one day, and the war measure passed, 40 to 2, Whigs joining Democrats. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, who originally voted with “the stubborn 14,” later voted for war appropriations.

Abraham Lincoln of Illinois was not yet in Congress when the war began, but after his election in 1846 he had occasion to vote and speak on the war. His “spot resolutions” became famous—he challenged Polk to specify the exact spot where American blood was shed “on the American soil.” But he would not try to end the war by stopping funds for men and supplies. Speaking in the House on July 27, 1848, he said:

*If to say “the war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President” be opposing the war, then the Whigs have very generally opposed it. ... The marching an army into the midst of a peaceful Mexican settlement, frightening the inhabitants away, leaving their growing crops and other property to destruction, to you may appear a perfectly amiable, peaceful, unprovoking procedure; but it does not appear so to us. ... But if, when the war had begun, and had become the cause of the country, the giving of our money and our blood, in common with yours, was support of the war, then it is not true that we have always opposed the war. With few individual exceptions, you have constantly had our votes here for all the necessary supplies. ...*

A handful of antislavery Congressmen voted against all war measures, seeing the Mexican

campaign as a means of extending the southern slave territory. One of these was Joshua Giddings of Ohio, a fiery speaker, physically powerful, who called it “an aggressive, unholy, and unjust war.”

After Congress acted in May of 1846, there

were rallies and demonstrations for the war in New York, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and many other places. Thousands rushed to volunteer for the army. The poet Walt Whitman wrote in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in the early days of the war: “Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised! ... Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!”

Accompanying all this aggressiveness was the idea that the United States would be giving the blessings of lib-

erty and democracy to more people. This was intermingled with ideas of racial superiority, longings for the beautiful lands of New Mexico and California, and thoughts of commercial enterprise across the Pacific. *The New York Herald* said, in 1847: “The universal Yankee nation can regenerate and disenthral the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country.”

The *Congressional Globe* of February 11, 1847, reported:

*Mr. Giles, of Maryland—I take it for granted, that we shall gain territory, and must gain territory, before we shut the gates of the temple of Janus. ... We must march from ocean to ocean. ... We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific ocean, and be bounded only by its roaring wave. ... It is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. ...*

---

*“I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors ... It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses.”*

---





Presidential candidate Gen. Zachary Taylor sits atop a mound of skulls in this 1848 cartoon criticizing his role in the U.S. war against Mexico.

## Anti-War Sentiment

The American Anti-Slavery Society, on the other hand, said the war was “waged solely for the detestable and horrible purpose of extending and perpetuating American slavery throughout the vast territory of Mexico.” A 27-year-old Boston poet and abolitionist, James Russell Lowell, began writing satirical poems in the *Boston Courier* (they were later collected as the *Biglow Papers*). In them, a New England farmer, Hosea Biglow, spoke, in his own dialect, on the war:

*Ez fer war, I call it murder —  
— There you hev it plain an’ flat;  
I don’t want to go no furdur  
— Than my Testymnt fer that. ...  
They jest want this Californy  
— So’s to lug new slave-states in*

*To abuse ye, an’ to scorn ye,  
— An’ to plunder ye like sin.*

The war had barely begun, the summer of 1846, when a writer, Henry David Thoreau, who lived in Concord, Massachusetts, refused to pay his Massachusetts poll tax, denouncing the Mexican war. He was put in jail and spent one night there. His friends, without his consent, paid his tax, and he was released. Two years later, he gave a lecture, “Resistance to Civil Government,” which was then printed as an essay, “Civil Disobedience”:

*It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right. ... Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers ... marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.*

His friend and fellow writer Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed, but thought it futile to protest. When Emerson visited Thoreau in jail and asked, “What are you doing in there?” it was reported that Thoreau replied, “What are you doing out there?”

The churches, for the most part, were either outspokenly for the war or timidly silent. The Reverend Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister in Boston, combined eloquent criticism of the war with contempt for the Mexican people, whom he called “a wretched people; wretched in their origin, history and character,” who must eventually give way as the Indians did. Yes, the United States should expand, he said, but not by war, rather by the power of her ideas, the pressure of her commerce, by “the steady advance of a superior race, with superior ideas and a better civilization. ...”

The racism of Parker was widespread. Congressman Delano of Ohio, an antislavery Whig, opposed the war because he was afraid of Americans mingling with an inferior people who “embrace all shades of color ... a sad compound of Spanish, English, Indian, and negro bloods ...

and resulting, it is said, in the production of a slothful, ignorant race of beings.”

As the war went on, opposition grew. The American Peace Society printed a newspaper, the *Advocate of Peace*, which published poems, speeches, petitions, sermons against the war, and eyewitness accounts of the degradation of army life and the horrors of battle. Considering the strenuous efforts of the nation’s leaders to build patriotic support, the amount of open dissent and criticism was remarkable. Antiwar meetings took place in spite of attacks by patriotic mobs.

As the army moved closer to Mexico City, the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* daringly declared its wishes for the defeat of the American forces: “Every lover of Freedom and humanity, throughout the world, must wish them [the Mexicans] the most triumphant success. ...”

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and an extraordinary speaker and writer, wrote in his Rochester newspaper the *North Star*, January 21, 1848, of “the present disgraceful, cruel, and iniquitous war with our sister republic. Mexico seems a doomed victim to Anglo Saxon cupidity and love of dominion.” Douglass was scornful of the unwillingness of opponents of the war to take real action (even the abolitionists kept paying their taxes):

*No politician of any considerable distinction or eminence seems willing to hazard his popularity with his party ... by an open and unqualified disapprobation of the war. None seem willing to take their stand for peace at all risks; and all seem willing that the war should be carried on, in some form or other.*

Where was popular opinion? It is hard to say. After the first rush, enlistments began to dwindle. Historians of the Mexican war have

---

*“We must march from  
Texas straight to the  
Pacific ocean, and be  
bounded only by its  
roaring wave. ... It is the  
destiny of the white race,  
it is the destiny of the  
Anglo-Saxon race. ...”*

---

talked easily about “the people” and “public opinion.” Their evidence, however, is not from “the people” but from the newspapers, claiming to be the voice of the people. The *New York Herald* wrote in August 1845: “The multitude cry aloud for war.” The *New York Morning News* said “young and ardent spirits that throng the cities ... want but a

direction to their restless energies, and their attention is already fixed on Mexico.”

It is impossible to know the extent of popular support of the war. But there is evidence that many organized workingmen opposed the war. There were demonstrations of Irish workers in New York, Boston, and Lowell against the annexation of Texas. In May, when the war against Mexico began, New York workingmen called a meeting to oppose the war, and many Irish workers came. The meeting called the war a plot by slave owners and asked for the withdrawal of American troops from disputed territory. That year, a convention of the New England Workingmen’s Association condemned the war and announced they would “not take up arms to sustain the Southern slaveholder in robbing one-fifth of our countrymen of their labor.”

Some newspapers, at the very start of the war, protested. Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1846:

*We can easily defeat the armies of Mexico, slaughter them by thousands. ... Who believes that a score of victories over Mexico, the “annexation” of half her provinces, will give us more Liberty, a purer Morality, a more prosperous Industry, than we now have? ... Is not Life miserable enough, comes not Death soon enough, without resort to the hideous enginery of War?*

## The Recruits

What of those who fought the war—the soldiers who marched, sweated, got sick, died? The Mexican soldiers. The American soldiers. We know little of the reactions of Mexican soldiers. We know much more about the American army—volunteers, not conscripts, lured by money and opportunity for social advancement via promotion in the armed forces. Half of General Taylor's army were recent immigrants—Irish and German mostly. Their patriotism was not very strong. Indeed, many of them deserted to the Mexican side, enticed by money. Some enlisted in the Mexican army and formed their own battalion, the San Patrio (St. Patrick's) Battalion.

At first there seemed to be enthusiasm in the army, fired by pay and patriotism. Martial spirit was high in New York, where the legislature authorized the governor to call 50,000 volunteers. Placards read "Mexico or Death." There was a mass meeting of 20,000 people in Philadelphia. Three thousand volunteered in Ohio.

This initial spirit soon wore off. One young man wrote anonymously to the *Cambridge Chronicle*:

*Neither have I the least idea of "joining" you, or in any way assisting the unjust war waging against Mexico. I have no wish to participate in such "glorious" butcheries of women and children as were displayed in the capture of Monterey, etc. Neither have I any desire to place myself under the dictation of a petty military tyrant, to every caprice of whose will I must yield implicit obedience. No sir-ee! ... Human butchery has had its day. ... And the time is rapidly approaching when the professional soldier will be placed on the same level as a bandit, the Bedouin, and the Thug.*

There were extravagant promises and outright lies to build up the volunteer units. A man who wrote a history of the New York Volunteers declared: "Many enlisted for the sake of their families, having no employment, and having been offered 'three months' advance,' and were promised that they could leave part of their pay for their families to draw in their absence. ... I boldly pronounce, that the whole Regiment was got up by fraud."

By late 1846, recruitment was falling off, so physical requirements were lowered, and anyone bringing in acceptable recruits would get two dollars a head. Even this didn't work. Congress in early 1847 authorized 10 new regiments of regulars, to serve for the duration of the war, promising them 100 acres of public land upon honorable discharge. But dissatisfaction continued.

---

*"The universal Yankee nation can regenerate and disenthral the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country."*

---

## The Reality of Battle

And soon, the reality of battle came in upon the glory and the promises. On the Rio Grande before Matamoros, as a Mexican army of 5,000 under General Arista faced Taylor's army of 3,000, the shells began to fly, and artilleryman Samuel French saw his first death in battle. John Weems describes it: "He hap-

pened to be staring at a man on horseback nearby when he saw a shot rip off the pommel of the saddle, tear through the man's body, and burst out with a crimson gush on the other side."

When the battle was over, 500 Mexicans were dead or wounded. There were perhaps 50 American casualties. Weems describes the aftermath: "Night blanketed weary men who fell asleep where they dropped on the trampled prairie grass, while around them other prostrate men from both armies screamed and groaned in agony from wounds. By the eerie light of torches the surgeon's saw was going the livelong night."

Away from the battlefield, in army camps, the romance of the recruiting posters was quickly



forgotten. The 2nd Regiment of Mississippi Rifles, moving into New Orleans, was stricken by cold and sickness. The regimental surgeon reported: "Six months after our regiment had entered the service we had sustained a loss of 167 by death, and 134 by discharges." The regiment was packed into the holds of transports, 800 men into three ships. The surgeon continued:

*The dark cloud of disease still hovered over us. The holds of the ships ... were soon crowded with the sick. The effluvia was intolerable. ... The sea became rough. ... Through the long dark night the rolling ship would dash the sick man from side to side bruising his flesh upon the rough corners of his berth. The wild screams of the delirious, the lamentations of the sick, and the melancholy groans of the dying, kept up one continual scene of confusion. ... Four weeks we were confined to the loathsome ships and before we had landed at the Brasos, we consigned 28 of our men to the dark waves.*

Meanwhile, by land and by sea, Anglo-American forces were moving into California. A young naval officer, after the long voyage around the southern cape of South America, and up the coast to Monterey in California, wrote in his diary:

*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. ...*

It was a separate war that went on in California, where Anglo-Americans raided Spanish settlements, stole horses, and declared California separated from Mexico—the "Bear Flag Republic." Indians lived there, and naval officer Revere gathered the Indian chiefs and spoke to them (as he later recalled):

---

*"It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right."*

---

*I have called you together to have a talk with you. The country you inhabit no longer belongs to Mexico, but to a mighty nation whose territory extends from the great ocean you have all seen or heard of, to another great ocean thousands of miles toward the rising sun. ... Our armies are now in Mexico, and will soon conquer the whole country. But you have nothing to fear from us, if you do what is right ... if you are faithful to your new rulers. ... I hope you will alter your habits, and be industrious and frugal, and give up all the low vices which you practice. ... We shall watch over you, and give you true liberty; but beware of sedition, lawlessness, and all other crimes, for the army which shields can assuredly punish, and it will reach you in your most retired hiding places.*

General Kearny moved easily into New Mexico, and Santa Fe was taken without battle. An American staff officer described the reaction of the Mexican population to the U.S. Army's entrance into the capital city:

*Our march into the city ... was extremely warlike, with drawn sabers, and daggers in every look. ... As the American flag was raised, and the cannon boomed its glorious national salute from the hill, the pent-up emotion of many of the women could be suppressed no longer ... as the wail of grief arose above the din of our horses' tread, and reached our ears from the depth of the gloomy-looking buildings on every hand.*

That was in August. In December, Mexicans in Taos, New Mexico, rebelled against American rule. The revolt was put down and arrests were made. But many of the rebels fled and carried on sporadic attacks, killing a number of Americans, then hiding in the mountains. The American army pursued, and in a final desperate battle, in

which 600 to 700 rebels were engaged, 150 were killed, and it seemed the rebellion was now over.

In Los Angeles, too, there was a revolt. Mexicans forced the American garrison there to surrender in September 1846. The United States did not retake Los Angeles until January, after a bloody battle.

General Taylor had moved across the Rio Grande, occupied Matamoros, and now moved southward through Mexico. But his volunteers became more unruly on Mexican territory. Mexican villages were pillaged by drunken troops. Cases of rape began to multiply.

As the soldiers moved up the Rio Grande to Camargo, the heat became unbearable, the water impure, and sickness grew—diarrhea, dysentery, and other maladies—until 1,000 were dead. At first the dead were buried to the sounds of the “Dead March” played by a military band. Then the number of dead was too great, and formal military funerals ceased. Southward to Monterey and another battle, where men and horses died in agony, and one officer described the ground as “slippery with ... foam and blood.”

The U.S. Navy bombarded Veracruz in an indiscriminate killing of civilians. One of the Navy’s shells hit the post office, another a surgical hospital. In two days, 1,300 shells were fired into the city, until it surrendered. A reporter for the *New Orleans Delta* wrote: “The Mexicans variously estimate their loss at from 500 to 1,000 killed and wounded, but all agree that the loss among the soldiery is comparatively small and the destruction among the women and children is very great.”

Colonel Hitchcock, coming into the city, wrote: “I shall never forget the horrible fire of our mortars ... going with dreadful certainty ... often in the centre of private dwellings—it was awful. I shudder to think of it.” Still, Hitchcock, the dutiful

soldier, wrote for General Scott “a sort of address to the Mexican people” which was then printed in English and Spanish by the tens of thousands saying “we have not a particle of ill-will towards you ... we are here for no earthly purpose except the hope of obtaining a peace.”

It was a war of the American elite against the Mexican elite, each side exhorting, using, killing its own population as well as the other. The Mexican commander Santa Anna had crushed rebellion after rebellion, his troops also raping

and plundering after victory. When Col. Hitchcock and Gen. Winfield Scott moved into Santa Anna’s estate, they found its walls full of ornate paintings. But half his army was dead or wounded.

General Scott moved toward the last battle—for Mexico City—with 10,000 soldiers. They were not anxious for battle. Three days’ march from Mexico City, at Jalapa, seven of his eleven regiments evaporated, their enlistment times up, the real-

ity of battle and disease too much for them.

On the outskirts of Mexico City, at Churubusco, Mexican and American armies clashed for three hours and thousands died on both sides. Among the Mexicans taken prisoner were sixty-nine U.S. Army deserters.

As often in war, battles were fought without point. After one such engagement near Mexico City, with terrible casualties, a marine lieutenant blamed Gen. Scott: “He had originated it in error and caused it to be fought, with inadequate forces, for an object that had no existence.”

In the final battle for Mexico City, Anglo-American troops took the height of Chapultepec and entered the city of 200,000 people, General Santa Anna having moved northward. This was September 1847. A Mexican merchant wrote to a friend about the bombardment of the city: “In some cases whole blocks were destroyed and

---

*“I shall never forget  
the horrible fire of our  
mortars ... going with  
dreadful certainty ... often  
in the centre of private dwell-  
ings — it was awful.  
I shudder to think of it.”*

---



a great number of men, women and children killed and wounded.”

General Santa Anna fled to Huamantla, where another battle was fought, and he had to flee again. An American infantry lieutenant wrote to his parents what happened after an officer named Walker was killed in battle:

*General Lane ... told us to “avenge the death of the gallant Walker” ... Grog shops were broken open first, and then, maddened with liquor, every species of outrage was committed. Old women and girls were stripped of their clothing—and many suffered still greater outrages. Men were shot by dozens ... their property, churches, stores, and dwelling houses ransacked. ... It made me for the first time ashamed of my country.*

One Pennsylvania volunteer, stationed at Matamoros late in the war, wrote:

*We are under very strict discipline here. Some of our officers are very good men but the balance of them are very tyrannical and brutal toward the men. ... [T]onight on drill an officer laid a soldier’s skull open with his sword. ... But the time may come and that soon when officers and men will stand on equal footing. ... A soldier’s life is very disgusting.*

On the night of August 15, 1847, volunteer regiments from Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina rebelled in northern Mexico against Col. Robert Treat Paine. Paine killed a mutineer, but two of his lieutenants refused to help him quell the mutiny. The rebels were ultimately exonerated in an attempt to keep the peace.

Desertion grew. In March 1847 the army reported over a thousand deserters. The total number of deserters during the war was 9,207 (5,331 regulars and 3,876 volunteers). Those who did not desert became harder and harder to manage. General Cushing referred to 65 such men in the 1st Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry as “incorrigibly mutinous and insubordinate.”

The glory of victory was for the president and the generals, not the deserters, the dead, the wounded. The Massachusetts Volunteers had started with 630 men. They came home with 300 dead, mostly from disease, and at the reception dinner on their return their commander, General Cushing, was hissed by his men.

As the veterans returned home, speculators immediately showed up to buy the land warrants given by the government. Many of the soldiers, desperate for money, sold their 160 acres for less than 50 dollars.

Mexico surrendered. There were calls among Americans to take all of Mexico. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed February 1848, just took half. The Texas boundary was set at the Rio Grande; New Mexico and California were ceded. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million, which led the *Whig Intelligencer* to conclude that “we take nothing by conquest. ... Thank God.” ■

**Howard Zinn** is author of *A People’s History of the United States*.

*Used by permission of Howard Zinn. This reading is excerpted from A People’s History of the United States (teaching edition), by Howard Zinn (New York: The New Press, 1997).*

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
www.rethinkingschools.org  
800-669-4192

**Teaching for Change**  
www.teachingforchange.org  
800-763-9131

## Mexico in 1830



## Land Mexico Lost to the United States



# War with Mexico

IN 1836 WHEN TEXAS DECLARED its independence from Mexico, white Southerners hoped to acquire Texas as a new slave state. Northerners feared that the admission of Texas to the Union would not only increase the South's power in Congress but would also embroil the United States in a war with Mexico. Nevertheless by 1845 enough politicians were caught up in the fervor of westward expansion—believing that it was the destiny of the nation to reach from shore to shore—that white Southern politicians were able to prevail in getting Texas admitted to the Union as the twenty-eighth state. Mexico was outraged at this action. After a border skirmish between American troops and Mexican troops, the United States declared war on Mexico in May 1846.

On February 2, 1848, after almost two years of fighting, the nations ended the war by signing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This treaty gave the United States vast new regions that today include California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The fear that these territories would organize into states intensified the sectional conflict between the North and the South. Many Northerners opposed the extension of slavery even into the newly acquired lands that lay south of the line established by the Missouri Compromise. ■


—from *American Odyssey* (2003). Glencoe/McGraw-Hill

---

## Reading Questions

1. What important perspectives are missing from this textbook passage?
2. How might this coverage of the war affect how students think about history or the world today?

**Teach this lesson remotely with online handouts, including readings, mixer lesson role assignments, and question sheets.**



## ZINN EDUCATION PROJECT

A collaboration between Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change.

**Remote Instruction Materials for U.S.–Mexico War Tea Party: “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God,” by Bill Bigelow**

<https://www.zinnproject.org/materials/us-mexico-war-tea-party/>

**Lesson Role Assignments for Mixer**

[Click to make a copy of the Role Assignments Template](#) (with links to view-only roles and handouts)


**“We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God” By Howard Zinn**

[Click to make a copy of the handout for \*A People’s History\* excerpt](#)

**War with Mexico Textbook Excerpt and Questions**

[Click to make a copy of the handout for analyzing a textbook excerpt](#)

**Maps ([link](#))**



Role Assignments for the lesson U.S.–Mexico War Tea Party: “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God”  
© Zinn Education Project (Coordinated by Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change) [zinnproject.org](http://zinnproject.org)

[Click here](#) to make a copy of the Google Doc, pictured above, with links to the online materials. Then, share the specific materials you want to use with your students for synchronous or asynchronous learning.