The Mexican American War of 1846

Essential Question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

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**Understanding the Question**

1. What is the essential question asked by this assignment?

2. What is the meaning of "justified"?

3. Rewrite the question in your own words.
Hook Exercise: Mexican-American War

Directions: Examine the map below and answer the questions that follow.

Questions

1. What river did Texas and the US believe was the proper border between Mexico and Texas?

2. What river did Mexico believe was the proper border between Texas and Mexico?

3. Where were General Zachary Taylor’s and Captain Thornton’s soldiers attacked?

4. Imagine that you are a journalist reporting on the Thornton Affair the week after it happened. Discuss with a partner how you will report the incident differently if you are a:
   - pro-American journalist
   - pro-Mexican journalist

Source: Map created from various sources.

Note: On April 25th, 1846, Captain Seth Thornton of the US Army and his 70 soldiers were attacked by a much larger Mexican force. The incident occurred in the disputed territory north of the Rio Grande, and reports suggest that 16 Americans were killed. The number of Mexican soldiers killed is unknown.
Background Essay

Was the United States Justified in Going to War With Mexico?

America’s wars have often been controversial. The American Revolution had the support of only one-third of the American colonists. The War of 1812 caused several New England states to threaten secession. Entry into World War I was vigorously opposed. More recently, Vietnam, and then Iraq, divided the nation. It should come as no surprise, then, that America’s war with Mexico had both its supporters and its critics.

In 1821, Mexico declared itself free from its mother country, Spain. Mexico was huge. It stretched from Guatemala to Oregon and was equal in size to the United States.

Mexican leaders were aware of the near emptiness of their northern lands. One way to increase the population was to welcome settlers from the United States. A special effort was made to encourage American farmers to settle in the Mexican province of Texas.

For Mexico, this turned out to be a bad idea. Mexico was Catholic, anti-slavery, and wanted to keep Texans under their control. The American settlers were mostly Protestant, pro-slavery, and largely ignored Mexican authority. It did not take long for these differences to boil into revolt. Following bloody encounters at places like the Alamo, the Texans won their independence from Mexico in 1836.

Two times over the next nine years, Texas applied to the United States Congress for annexation. Both times Congress said “no.” Some Congressmen did not want to anger Mexican officials who still regarded Texas as part of their country. Other Congressmen, especially in the Northeast, did not want a large slave territory to be added to the United States.

Then things changed. In late 1844, James K. Polk was elected President of the United States. Polk was a strong supporter of Manifest Destiny. He believed it was God’s plan that America extend its territory all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Polk did not just want to annex Texas. He also had his eye on California.

After Polk’s election, but before he took office, Congress reversed itself and voted to annex Texas. Polk was delighted. In July 1845 he sent American troops under General Zachary Taylor into the disputed area of southern Texas. He also sent John Slidell, a special envoy, to Mexico City to try to buy California. The combination of American troops at the Rio Grande and the attempt to buy a large part of their country angered the Mexican government.

Slidell was asked to leave Mexico City.

Polk saw Mexico’s treatment of Slidell as an opportunity. He felt America’s honor had been challenged. When word arrived on May 9, 1846, that Mexican soldiers had fired upon Americans on the “Texas side” of the Rio Grande, President Polk had a reason for going to war.

Examine the four documents that follow. Then answer the question of this Mini-Q: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
Background Essay Questions

1. In what year did Mexico win its independence from Spain?

2. In what year did Texas win its independence from Mexico?

3. Define or explain each of these items.
   a. Catholic
   b. Protestant
   c. annexation
   d. Manifest Destiny

4. Why would Mexican officials have been upset by the annexation of Texas by the United States?
It is time for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease. Texas is now ours. Let their reception into the “family” be frank, kindly, and cheerful.

(O)ther nations have undertaken … hostile interference against us, … hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence (God) for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

California will, probably, next fall away from (Mexico). Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country. The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on (California’s) borders … armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. All this (will happen) in the natural flow of events.

**Document Analysis**

1. How does John O’Sullivan feel about the United States annexing Texas?

2. In your own words, what does O’Sullivan mean when he says it is “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence”?

3. After Texas, what is the next likely candidate for American annexation?

4. What does O’Sullivan have to say about Mexico’s ability to govern?

5. What do you suppose O’Sullivan means by “the Anglo-Saxon foot”?

6. How can this document be used to justify America’s going to war with Mexico?

7. How can this document be used to argue against America going to war with Mexico?
To the Senate and House of Representatives:

(In an earlier message) I informed you that ... I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position “between the Nueces and the Del Norte (Rio Grande).” This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces.... The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined ... to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

... The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic.... The country between that river and the Del Norte ... is now included within one of our congressional districts.... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country....

(On the 24th of April) a party ... of sixty-three men and officers, were ... dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its (North) bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed, or were preparing to cross, the river.... (They) became engaged with a large body of these (Mexican) troops, and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen (Americans) were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, ... Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.

Note: War Vote, May 13, 1846:
US Senate: 40 Yes, 2 No
House of Rep: 174 Yes, 14 No

Document Analysis

1. What river did Texas and President Polk regard as the Texas-Mexico border?

2. Would Mexico have viewed a Mexican advance north of the Rio Grande an invasion of the US?

3. Where did the April 24 fight between Mexican and American soldiers occur?

4. What was the response of Congress to Polk’s war message?

5. How does this document help answer the Mini-Q question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. US historians refer to this event as “The Mexican War,” while in Mexico we prefer to use the term “The U.S. Invasion.” ...

From Mexico’s point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it … would consider such an act “a declaration of war.” …

(In early 1846, on Polk’s orders) the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Río Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation…. In the eyes of the (Mexican) government, the mobilization of the US army was an outright attack on Mexico…. As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Río Grande and the Nueces River – an order which led to the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.…

… (One article) in the daily *El Tiempo* … stated: “The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveler.”

**Document Analysis**

1. Whose point of view is held by the author of this document?

2. How did the Mexican government feel about the annexation of Texas by the United States?

3. According to the author, why did a Mexican force attack Zachary Taylor’s troops when they arrived at the Río Grande River?

4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?
Mexico, on achieving her independence of the Spanish Crown ... decreed the abolition of human slavery within her dominions, embracing the province of Texas....

At this period, citizens of the United States had already begun to (move) into Texas.... The idea was ... that this extensive province ought to become a part of the United States....

A current of emigration soon followed from the United States. Slaveholders crossed the Sabine (river between Louisiana and Texas) with their slaves, in defiance of the Mexican ordinance of freedom. Restless spirits, discontented at home ... joined them.... The work of rebellion sped. Our newspapers excited the lust of territorial robbery in the public mind.... Certainly (Mexico) ... might justly charge our citizens with disgraceful robbery, while, in seeking extension of slavery, (our own citizens denied) the great truths of American freedom....

Note: According to an early Texas census, there were 103,000 whites and 38,000 slaves in the state in 1847.

Document Analysis
1. After achieving independence from Spain in 1821, did Mexico make slavery legal or illegal?

2. Sumner mentions a “disgraceful robbery.” Who robbed what from whom?

3. Did Charles Sumner have the support of the people of Massachusetts? Provide evidence and explain your thinking.

4. How does this document help answer the question: Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?