By 1844, control of Oregon and the annexation of Texas had become major political issues. After the annexation of Texas, the border between the United States and Mexico was in dispute. The United States declared war on Mexico and took Mexico’s northern territories.

The Lingering Question of Texas

MAIN Idea  In 1844 James K. Polk was elected president and promised to annex Texas and Oregon and to buy California from Mexico.

HISTORY AND YOU Can you remember a slogan from a recent election campaign? Find out what “Fifty-four Forty or Fight” referred to and why it is still remembered.

Territorial disputes between the United States and Mexico began as far back as 1803, when the United States claimed Texas as part of the Louisiana Purchase. The United States renounced that claim in the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, but the idea of Manifest Destiny and of acquiring Mexican territory had strong popular support.

Tensions increased during the administration of John Tyler, who hoped to bring Texas into the Union. Because Texas already had a large population of Southerners who had taken slaves into Texas, Texans were certain to support the cause of slavery. Antislavery leaders in Congress, therefore, opposed annexation. Moreover, Mexico had never recognized the independence of Texas. Although militarily unable to regain control over Texas, Mexico still regarded the Republic of Texas as Mexican territory.

Texas and Oregon Enter the Union

In early 1844, after spearheading a publicity campaign in favor of annexation, President Tyler brought the matter before the Senate. He blundered, however, by including in the supporting documents a letter written by Secretary of State John C. Calhoun that contained a fierce defense of slavery. Outraged Northerners pointed to the letter as evidence that annexation was nothing but a pro-slavery plot, and by a count of 35 to 16, the Senate voted against annexation. The maneuver that Tyler believed would win him a second term instead destroyed his chances of retaining the presidency.

The Election of 1844  As the presidential race began later that year, the front-runners for the nomination were Whig Senator Henry Clay and former Democratic president Martin Van Buren. Although
Analyzing VISUALS

1. Comparing and Contrasting How are the two cartoons alike and how are they different?

2. Identifying What states did Clay win in the election of 1844?

politicians on both sides of the annexation issue pressed the candidates to state their positions, both responded cautiously to avoid losing supporters.

Van Buren’s indecision cost him the Democratic nomination. His party instead chose James K. Polk, a former member of Congress and governor of Tennessee. Polk promised to annex not only Texas but also the contested Oregon Territory in the Northwest. In addition, he vowed to buy California from Mexico. This ambitious platform appealed to both Northerners and Southerners because it expanded the country while promising to maintain the delicate balance between free and slave states.

The Democrats’ unity on annexation caused Clay to backpedal. Reversing a statement made in the spring of 1844 against immediate annexation, Clay now supported annexation of Texas as long as it was done without causing war with Mexico. This so angered anti-slavery Whigs in his party that they threw their support to the Liberty Party—a small third party that supported abolition. With the Whig vote split, Polk won the election.
**The Oregon Question** Polk took a strong stance on what came to be known as the Oregon Question. Despite British claims to the region, which had been established in the Convention of 1818, Polk and the Democrats held that the United States had a “clear and unquestionable” right to all of the Oregon Country, including the region north of the 49th parallel that is today known as British Columbia. Their rallying cry, “Fifty-four Forty or Fight,” declared that the United States should control all of Oregon below the line of 54° 40’ north latitude.

Despite such slogans, few Americans wanted to fight the British to gain control of Oregon. After lengthy debates in Congress, Polk agreed to use diplomatic negotiations to settle the Oregon Question. In June 1846, as the United States fought with Mexico, and Great Britain was dealing with problems in Ireland, the two nations negotiated the Oregon Treaty to settle the dispute. In this agreement, the United States received all of Oregon south of 49° north latitude and west of the Rocky Mountains, except for the southern tip of Vancouver Island. In exchange, the British were guaranteed navigation rights on the Columbia River.

**The Annexation of Texas** Even before Polk took office, outgoing President Tyler pushed an annexation resolution through Congress in February 1845, and Texas joined the Union that year. As predicted, Mexico was outraged and broke diplomatic relations with the United States government. Matters worsened when the two countries disputed the location of Texas’s southwestern border. Mexico said it was at the Nueces River. Texans, and then the United States, claimed the Rio Grande, about 150 miles (240 km) farther west and south, as the boundary. The Texas–United States claim covered far more territory than the Mexican claim.

Polk’s intentions in California added to the growing strife with Mexico. In November 1845 he sent John Slidell as a special envoy, or representative, to Mexico City to try to purchase the territory. Mexico’s new president, José Joaquín Herrera, refused even to meet with Slidell.

**Herrera’s snub ended any realistic chance of a diplomatic solution.** Polk ordered troops led by General Zachary Taylor to cross the Nueces River—in Mexico’s view, an invasion of its territory. Polk wanted Mexican soldiers to fire the first shot. If he could say that Mexico was the aggressor, he could more easily win popular support for a war.

Finally, on May 9, 1846, news reached him that a force of Mexicans had attacked Taylor’s
men. In an address to Congress, Polk declared that the United States was at war “by the act of Mexico herself.” Hoping to incite the public’s indignation, he added that “American blood has been shed on the American soil!”

Many Whigs opposed the war as yet another plot to extend slavery. Some cautioned that as many as five new slave states could be carved out of Texas. Most Washington politicians, though, recognized that, no matter how questionable Polk’s actions were, the United States was committed to war. On May 13 the Senate voted 40 to 2 and the House voted 174 to 14 in favor of war.

**Calling All Volunteers**

Polk and his advisers developed a three-pronged military strategy. Taylor’s troops would continue to move south, crossing the Rio Grande near the Gulf of Mexico. A separate force to the northwest would capture Santa Fe, an important trading center and now the capital of New Mexico, and then march west to take control of California with the help of the American navy. Finally, U.S. forces would advance on Mexico City and force Mexico to surrender.

To implement the ambitious plan, the United States needed to expand its army. Congress authorized the president to call for 50,000 volunteers, and men from all over the country rushed to enlist. Almost 73,000 answered the call.

Undisciplined and unruly, the volunteers proved to be less than ideal soldiers. As one officer observed, “They will do well enough to defend their own firesides, but they can not endure the fatigue incident to an invading army.”

---

**YES**

**James K. Polk**

U.S. President

**Primary Source**

“Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as [Mexico], thought proper to unite its destinies with our own, [Mexico] has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. . . . But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has . . . invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. . . .

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.”

—from The Congressional Globe, May 11, 1846

---

**NO**

**Frederick Douglass**

American Abolitionist

**Primary Source**

“The war . . . was [begun] with no higher or holier motive than that of upholding and propagating slavery. In 1829 Mexico . . . had declared the entire abolition of slavery in her territories. The consequence was a decrease in the value of slaves in the border states of America, . . . What was the desperate purpose of the United States? . . . [T]hey stirred up a revolt against Mexico in Texas, which, . . . ultimately severed from the mother country. Their next step was kindly to recognise the independence of Texas, and in 1844 it was annexed to the Union. An army of men was sent to protect the Texians [sic]; . . . and the Mexicans firing at the invaders, the United States at once recognised a war, . . .”

—from The Frederick Douglass Papers

---

**DBQ Document-Based Questions**

1. **Paraphrasing** According to President Polk, what was the United States’s attitude toward war with Mexico before Mexican forces attacked?

2. **Specifying** What reasons does Polk give for declaring war on Mexico?

3. **Summarizing** According to Frederick Douglass, what steps did the United States take to incite the war?

4. **Identifying Central Issues** What does Douglass say is the true reason for the war with Mexico?
Other officers saw similar problems. One bemoaned in a half-comical way that the green recruits constantly demanded his attention:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“[O]ne wanted me to read a letter he had just received; another wanted me to write one for him; another wanted me to send his money home; another wanted me to keep it for him...[O]ne complained that his uniform was too large, another that his was too small.”

—From *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer*

**The Fighting Begins**

In early May, several days before Polk signed the declaration of war, Taylor’s troops defeated Mexican forces, first at Palo Alto and then at Resaca de la Palma. Taylor then moved south, defeating Mexican forces at Matamoros. By late September, he had marched about 200 miles (322 km) west from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and captured Monterrey.

In the meantime, Colonel Stephen W. Kearny led troops from Fort Leavenworth, west of Missouri, toward Santa Fe. The march through the dry countryside was brutal, but
when Kearny’s men reached the city in August, the Mexican force there had already fled. With Santa Fe secured, Kearny led a small U.S. force into California.

Before Kearny arrived, and even before war with Mexico was officially declared, settlers in northern California led by American General John C. Frémont had begun an uprising. The official Mexican presence in the territory had never been strong, and the settlers had little trouble overcoming it. On June 14, 1846, they declared California independent of Mexico and renamed the region the Bear Flag Republic. A few weeks later, the Bear Flag Republic came to an end when American naval forces arrived and took possession of California for the United States.

**To Mexico City**

Despite having lost vast territories, Mexico’s leaders refused to surrender. Polk decided to force things to a conclusion by sending soldiers on ships to the Mexican port of Veracruz. From there they would march west and capture the Mexican capital, Mexico City.

Polk, seeing Taylor as a potential rival in the 1848 election, eased him out of the war by placing General Winfield Scott, a member of the Whig Party, in command of this campaign. In March 1847 Scott’s force landed at Veracruz, which his forces took after a three-week siege. Having taken control of this strategic port, the American troops then headed for Mexico City, fighting vicious and bloody battles with Mexican forces along the way. On September 14, after storming Chapultepec Castle, which guarded the city, they finally captured the capital after a hard fight at the city gates. With the Americans in control of the capital, a group of city leaders finally surrendered to General Scott unconditionally. American forces went on to establish a formal occupation of Mexico.

**The Peace Treaty**

On February 2, 1848, Mexican leaders signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In the agreement, Mexico ceded, or gave up, more than 500,000 square miles (1,295,000 sq. km) of territory to the United States. Mexico also accepted the Rio Grande as the southern border of Texas. In exchange, the United States paid Mexico $15 million and agreed to take over $3.25 million in debts Mexico owed to American citizens.

With Oregon and the former Mexican territories now under the American flag, the dream of Manifest Destiny was finally realized: the United States now stretched from ocean to ocean. Valuable ports on the West Coast opened up new markets to the Pacific nations of Asia. The question of whether the new lands should allow slavery, however, would soon lead the country into a bloody civil war. The experience that such men as Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant gained during the war with Mexico would soon be used to lead Americans in battle against each other.

**Summarizing** What was President Polk’s military strategy in the war with Mexico?
Causes of Western Expansion

- The idea of Manifest Destiny influences many political leaders who believe the nation is destined to expand across the continent.
- The Preemption Act of 1830 gives settlers the right to claim land.
- New technology, including plows and reapers, enables settlers to farm the Midwest.
- Lush soil and moderate climate lures settlers to Oregon Territory and northern California.
- Christian beliefs lead missionaries to head west to try to convert Native Americans.
- Trailblazers map paths across the plains and mountains, making it easier for settlers to head west safely in long wagon trains.
- Treaty of Fort Laramie limits attacks by Native Americans on settlers and wagon trains heading west.
- Religious persecution leads Mormons to migrate west to Utah, where they can practice their religion freely.
- Mission system had already brought Spanish to the Southwest in the 1600s and 1700s.
- Hispanics move to California to establish large ranches.
- Mexico lures settlers to Texas with the National Colonization Act, giving large tracts of cheap land to empresarios and granting settlers exemption from taxes for 10 years.

Effects of Western Expansion

- Texas becomes American in culture, and Texans grow frustrated with Mexican laws, specifically the tariffs on trade with the United States, the ban on slavery, and the requirement that settlers become Catholic.
- Led by Stephen Austin and Sam Houston, Texans rebel against Mexico, declare independence, and defeat the Mexican forces led by Santa Anna.
- Americans in Texas and Oregon want to join the United States.
- The debate over Texas triggers a sectional crisis—Northerners believe the South wants Texas in order to expand slavery.
- James K. Polk campaigns, promising to get both Texas and Oregon, and wins the presidency.
- Britain and the United States agree to divide the Oregon territory.
- Congress approves the annexation of Texas.
- After fighting begins between American and Mexican forces on the Texas border, the United States declares war and invades Mexico.
- In the peace treaty, Mexico cedes much of its northern territory to the United States, including California and the American Southwest.