Who Started the War?

The notion that the United States invaded Mexico often offends Euro-Americans. I remember the late University of California Santa Barbara historian Robert L. Kelley in 1992 accusing me of lying because I wrote that the United States invaded Mexico. More recently Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne was pressed about why Occupied America was banned and answered that it was because it said that the United States had invaded Mexico. According to Kelley and Horne, I lied. However, contemporaries of the war, such as U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885), share my opinion that the United States was an aggressor in these wars. Grant wrote, "For myself, I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war (with Mexico) . . . one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory." Grant added, "Texas was originally a state belonging to the republic of Mexico. . . . [The American] colonists paid very little attention to the supreme government, and introduced slavery into the state almost from the start, though the constitution of Mexico did not, nor does it now, sanction that institution." Of the annexation of Texas, Grant said, "The occupation, separation and annexation were, from the inception of the movement to its final consummation, a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union." Grant concluded, "Even if the annexation itself could be justified, the manner in which the subsequent war was forced upon Mexico cannot."
The Invasion of Mexico

Another continuing myth is that the United States won the war in a fair fight—and, therefore, has no culpability. The reality is that in the mid-1840s, the U.S. population of 17 million people of European extraction and 3 million slaves was much larger than Mexico’s 7 million, of which 4 million were indigenous, and 3 million mestizo, Afro-mestizo, and European. The United States acted arrogantly in foreign affairs, partly because it had a homogeneous people who believed in their cultural and racial superiority. On the other hand, financial problems, internal ethnic conflicts, poor leadership, and anarchy plagued Mexico and retarded the nation’s development.41

The war with Mexico pushed the border further south, crossing people, rivers, and other resources. The U.S. admission of Texas on March 1, 1845, was a provocation for war. Even if Mexico had accepted the loss of Texas, there was the question of the border.

The Manufactured War

By 1845 war with Mexico over Texas and the Southwest was only a matter of time. James K. Polk, who strongly advocated the annexation of Texas and expansionism in general, won the presidency by only a small margin, but he interpreted his election as a mandate for national expansion. Outgoing President Tyler called upon Congress to annex Texas by joint resolution; Congress passed the measure a few days before the inauguration of Polk. He accepted the annexation, and in December 1845, Texas became a state. Mexico promptly broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, and Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor into Texas to “protect” the border, whose location both sides disputed. Mexico claimed the Nueces River that was 150 miles north of the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande) as Mexican. Using the Treaty of Velasco of 1836 as its authority, the United States claimed the Rio Grande as the boundary. The United States pushed for the war that cost Mexico more than 500,000 square miles of territory.42

In November 1845, Polk sent John Slidell on a secret mission to Mexico to negotiate for the disputed area. The presence of Euro-American troops between the Nueces and the Rio Grande and the annexation of Texas made negotiations an absurdity. The Mexican government refused to accept Polk’s minister’s
credentials, although they did offer to give him ad hoc status. Slidell declined anything less than full recognition and returned to Washington in March 1846, convinced that Mexico would have to be “chastised” before it would negotiate. By March 28, Polk ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande with an army of 4,000. Polk was incensed at Mexico’s refusal to meet with Slidell on his terms and at General Mariano Paredes’s reaffirmation of his country’s claims to all of Texas. When the president learned of the Mexican attack on Taylor’s troops in the disputed territory, he seized the opportunity and began to draft a declaration of war, which claimed among other things that Mexico had attacked the United States and had “shed American blood upon the American soil.” On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war and authorized the recruitment and supplying of 50,000 troops.