Manifest Destiny and Its Legacy, 1841–1848

If you will take all the theft, all the assaults, all the cases of arson, ever committed in time of peace in the United States since the settlement of Jamestown in 1608 [1607], and add to them all the cases of violence offered to woman, with all the murders, they will not amount to half the wrongs committed in this war for the plunder of Mexico.

_Theodore Parker, abolitionist clergyman, 1848_

**Prologue:** Hereditary British-American antipathy came to a head in 1846 over extreme American demands for the boundary line of 54° 40' in the Oregon Country. The dispute was settled later that year by a compromise on the line of 49°. Meanwhile, the overconfident Mexicans, not unwilling to fight and encouraged by the prospect of an Anglo-American conflict over Oregon, were threatening the United States with war over the annexation of the revolted province of Texas. President James K. Polk, unable to buy coveted California from the Mexicans or to adjust other disputes with them, forced a showdown in 1846 by moving U.S. troops provocatively close to the Mexican border. In the ensuing war, the Americans were everywhere victorious—General Zachary Taylor in northern Mexico at Monterrey and Buena Vista, General Winfield Scott at Cerro Gordo and elsewhere in his spectacular drive toward Mexico City. By the terms of peace, Polk finally secured California—and an aggravated slavery problem to boot.

**A. The Debate over Oregon**

1. **Senator George McDuffie Belittles Oregon (1843)**

_British critics aimed their shafts at alleged Yankee land-grabbing, which was highlighted by the Anglo-American dispute over the vast Oregon Country. The controversy came to a boil in 1843, when Congress heatedly debated but finally rejected a_
A. The Debate over Oregon

bill to fortify the overland route to Oregon and grant land to the Americans settling there. Senator George McDuffie of South Carolina, an impassioned proslavery orator, vehemently opposed the acquisition of free-soil Oregon, although he had favored the annexation of slave-soil Texas. In what respects were his foresight and his geographical knowledge faulty? Or was he just overstating his case?

What do we want with this [Oregon] territory? What are we to do with it? What is to be the consequence of our taking possession of it? What is the act we are called on now to do? Why, it is neither more nor less than an act of colonization, for the first time proposed since the foundation of this government.

If this were a question of gradual, and continuous, and progressive settlement—if the territory to which our citizens are invited were really to become a part of the Union, it would present a very different question. But, sir, does any man seriously suppose that any state which can be formed at the mouth of the Columbia River, or any of the inhabitable parts of that territory, would ever become one of the states of the Union?

I have great faith ... in the power of the representative principle to extend the sphere of government. But I confess that, even in the most sanguine days of my youth, I never conceived the possibility of embracing within the same government people living five thousand miles apart.

But, sir, the worthy Senator from New Hampshire [Mr. Woodbury] seems to have discovered a principle much more potent than the representative principle. He refers you to steam, far more potent. I should doubt very much whether the elements or powers, or organization of the principles of government, will ever be changed by steam.

Steam! How are you to apply steam in this case? Has the Senator examined the character of the country? What is the character of the country?

Why, as I understand it, that about seven hundred miles this side of the Rocky Mountains is uninhabitable, where rain scarcely ever falls—a barren sandy soil. On the other side—we have it from a very intelligent gentleman [John Frémont?], sent to explore that country by the State Department, that there are three successive ridges of mountains extending towards the Pacific, and running nearly parallel; which mountains are totally impassable, except in certain parts, where there are gaps or depressions, to be reached only by going one hundred miles out of the direct course.

Well, now, what are we to do in such a case as this? How are we going to apply steam? Have you made anything like an estimate of the cost of a railroad running from here to the mouth of the Columbia? Why, the wealth of the Indies would not be sufficient. You would have to tunnel through mountains five hundred or six hundred miles in extent. It is true they [the British] have constructed a tunnel beneath the Thames, but at a vast expenditure of capital. With a bankrupt Treasury and a depressed and suffering people, to talk about constructing a railroad to the western shore of the continent manifests a wild spirit of adventure which I never expected to hear broached in the Senate of the United States. . . .

Why, sir, of what use will this be for agricultural purposes? I would not for that purpose give a pinch of snuff for the whole territory. I wish to God we did not own it. I wish it was an impassable barrier to secure us against the intrusion of others.
2. Senator Edward Hannegan Demands 54° 40′ (1846)

The Democratic party, when nominating Polk for the presidency at Baltimore in 1844, had demanded the annexation of the republic of Texas and the acquisition of Oregon all the way to 54° 40′. Texas entered the Union as a slave state in 1845. A year later, Congress, before acquiescing in the Oregon compromise line of 49°, was debating resolutions proclaiming U.S. ownership of all the territory to the line of 54° 40′. Senator Hannegan, an intemperate orator (and drinker) from Indiana, was the most bellicose spokesman for the free-soil Northwest. How does his Senate speech—reported in the third person—help to explain the existing upsurge of nationalism?

Now, if the adoption of the [Oregon] resolutions, which contained the immutable principles of truth, should bring war on us, let war come! What American was there who, through fear of war, would hesitate to declare the truth in this Chamber? He [Hannegan] also was for peace. He shrunk back from the thought of war as much as could the Senator from South Carolina [John Calhoun]. He loved peace; but if it were only to be maintained on degrading and dishonorable terms, war, even of extermination, would be far preferable. . . .

There had been a singular course pursued on this Oregon question, and with reference to which he must detain the Senate a moment. It contrasted so strangely, so wonderfully, with a precisely similar question—the annexation of Texas. Texas

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and Oregon were born the same instant, nursed and cradled in the same cradle—the Baltimore Convention—and they were at the same instant adopted by the Democracy throughout the land. There was not a moment's hesitation, until Texas was admitted. But the moment she was admitted, the peculiar friends of Texas turned, and were doing all they could to strangle Oregon!

But the country were not blind or deaf. The people see, they comprehend, and he trusted they would speak. It was a most singular state of things. We were told that we must be careful not to involve ourselves in a war with England on a question of disputed boundary. There was a question of disputed boundary between us and Mexico. But did we hear, from the same quarter, any warning against a collision with Mexico when we were about to consummate the annexation of Texas? We were told by those who knew something of these matters that the Nueces [River] was the proper boundary of Texas! And how did they find the friends of Texas moving on that occasion? Did we, for a single instant, halt on the banks of the Nueces? No; at a single bound we crossed the Nueces, and the blasts of our trumpets, and the prancing of our war-horses, were heard on the banks of the Rio del Norte [Rio Grande], one hundred miles beyond. Nearly one hundred miles of disputed territory gives no cause for a moment's hesitation!

There was no negotiation then, so far as Mexico was concerned: we took all. But when Oregon is brought into question, we are called on, as an act proper and right, to give away a whole empire on the Pacific, if England desire it. He never would consent to a surrender of any portion of the country north of 49°, nor one foot, by treaty or otherwise, under 54° 40'.

3. Two Pioneers Describe Oregon (1847)

While statesmen debated, settlers continued to pour into the Oregon Country. They did not all have the same reaction to the virgin wilderness they encountered. In these two descriptions of the new territory, what observations are made by both writers? On what do they disagree? How might their different perceptions be explained?

Hezekiah Packingham to his Brother,
Willamette Valley, March 1, 1847

I arrived in the Wallamette Valley on the 30th of September, and my calculations are all defeated about Oregon. I found it a mean, dried up, and drowned country. The Yam Hill is a small valley, destitute of timber. I soon got sick of this place, and then went to the mouth of the Columbia river. I can give Oregon credit for only one or two things, and these are, good health and plenty of salmon, and Indians; as for the farming country there is none here—wheat grows about the same as in Illinois; corn, potatoes, and garden vegetables cannot grow here without watering. The nights are too cold here in summer. The soil is not as good as in Illinois—the face of the country is hilly, and high mountains covered with snow all summer, and small valleys—the mountains and hills are covered with the heaviest timber that I ever

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saw. We have had a very hard winter here, snow fell two feet deep, and lay three weeks, by reason of which hundreds of cattle have died of starvation. The thermometer fell to three degrees above zero.—Prairie grass here is the same as in Illinois. There is no timothy nor clover. Mechanics are very numerous here. Of the ships that sailed from New York last April, but one arrived, and she was ice bound for 50 days, in latitude 50 1-2. It is supposed the other has gone to her long home. A United States man-of-war [Shark] was recently wrecked at the mouth of the Columbia. Money is very scarce here—and they have a kind of currency here (orders on stores and scrip)—they value property very high, but if they would put things at cash prices, they would be about the same as they are in the States. Oregon is rapidly filling up with young men, (but no girls,) of whom two-thirds are dissatisfied and many would return to the States if they were able, but the road is long and tedious, and it is hard for families to get back; my trip was pleasant until I got to the South Pass—after that the country was rugged, and bad roads. Tell young men if they intend coming to Oregon, to drive no teams unless it is their own. We were uninjured by the Indians, though they were very saucy—they have no manners; they worship idols [totem poles?], and I saw one of their gods at the mouth of the river. There is no society here except the Camelines [Campbellites—a liberal Protestant group first organized in Pennsylvania in 1810]. I shall return to the States next spring. Don’t believe all that is said about Oregon, as many falsehoods are uttered respecting the country.

Richard R. Howard to a Friend in Illinois,
"Oregon Territory," April 6, 1847

We arrived safe in Oregon City on the 12th of September last. We reached Fort Laramie in 42 days from Independence; Fort Hall in 33 days more; the Dalles in 37 days more; and Oregon City in 16 days more—making in all 128 days. Our journey was two weeks longer than necessary had we lost no time. We met with no serious obstructions on our journey. We had to raise the front of our wagon beds two or three inches in crossing the Laramie Fork to keep the water out; sometimes we had long drives to find a good place for camping, with water and grass. [The writer gives a long detail of the necessary outfit for the journey and cautions to be used on the road—which we omit. Illinois Journal] No single man should come to this country. One third of the men in Oregon at this time are without wives. Nothing but men of families are wanted here to till the soil, to make this one of the greatest countries in the world. This country does not get so muddy as Illinois. There is no dust in summer here. The good land in this country is more extensive than I expected to find it. The hills are not so high as represented. From the Cascade mountains to the Pacific, the whole country can be cultivated. The natural soil of the country, especially in the bottoms, is a black loam, mixed with gravel and clay. We have good timber; but there appears to be a scarcity of good building rock. The small streams furnish us with trout the year round.

My wife to the old lady—Greeting; says she was never more satisfied with a move in her life before; that she is fast recovering her health; and she hopes you will come to Oregon, where you can enjoy what little time you have remaining in health.
The roads to Oregon are not as bad as represented. Hastings in his history* speaks of the Falls of Columbia being 50 feet and roaring loud, making the earth tremble, &c. The falls are about like that of a mill-dam. Every thing in this country now is high, except molasses, sugar and salt; but when we raise our wheat crop to trade on, we will make them pay for their high charges. I think no place where a living is to be made out of the earth can be preferable to Oregon for that purpose—and let people say what they may—all agree that it is healthy. It is certainly the healthiest country in the world, disease is scarcely known here, except among the late emigrants, ninety-nine out of a hundred of them get well the first season. I have heard of only two deaths since I have been in Oregon; one of them was a man who came here diseased and in one year died; the other was a woman who it is said was near dead ten years before she came here.

Richard R. Howard

4. A British View of the Oregon Controversy (1846)

Many Britons were bemused that the upstart Yankees were in such a bellicose mood over Oregon. This cartoon, entitled “What? You Young Yankee-Noodle, Strike Your Own Father!” is from the British magazine Punch, and pokes fun at the Americans. What did the cartoonist find most amusing about the American position? Why is the American figure rendered as a southerner, with a slave driver’s whip in his pocket?

*The reference is to L. W. Hastings, Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California (1845), a standard guidebook for travelers on the Oregon and California Trails.

*Punch (London), 1846.
B. Provoking War with Mexico

I. Charles Sumner Assails the Texas Grab (1847)

Boston-bred and Harvard-polished Charles Sumner, soon to be a U.S. senator, was one of the most impressive orators of his day. Six feet four inches in height and blessed with a powerful voice, he could sway vast audiences. An earnest foe of war, he preached arbitration; an impassioned enemy of slavery, he demanded abolition; a devoted champion of race equality, he fought the Massachusetts law forbidding marriages between whites and blacks. In 1847, in the midst of the war with Mexico, the Massachusetts legislature adopted this document, which Sumner had prepared, blasting the annexation of Texas. Although he overplayed the slave conspiracy accusation, he made a number of telling points. Assuming that his facts are correct, how many genuine grievances did Mexico have against the United States?

The history of the annexation of Texas cannot be fully understood without reverting to the early settlement of that province by citizens of the United States.

Mexico, on achieving her independence of the Spanish Crown, by a general ordinance worthy of imitation by all Christian nations, had 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 remove into Texas, hardly separated, as it was, by the River Sabine from the slaveholding state of Louisiana. The idea was early promulgated that this extensive province ought to become a part of the United States. Its annexation was distinctly agitated in the Southern and Western states in 1829; and it was urged on the ground of the strength and extension it would give to the “Slave Power,” and the fresh market it would open for the sale of slaves.

The suggestion of this idea had an important effect. A current of emigration soon followed from the United States. Slaveholders crossed the Sabine with their slaves, in defiance of the Mexican ordinance of freedom. Restless spirits, discontented at home, or feeling the restraint of the narrow confines of our country, joined them; while their number was swollen by the rude and lawless of all parts of the land, who carried to Texas the love of license which had rendered a region of justice no longer a pleasant home to them. To such spirits, rebellion was natural.

It soon broke forth. At this period the whole [Texan] population, including women and children, did not amount to twenty thousand; and, among these, most of the older and wealthier inhabitants still favored peace. A Declaration of Independence, a farcical imitation of that of our fathers, was put forth, not by persons acting in a Congress or in a representative character, but by about ninety individuals—all, except two, from the United States—acting for themselves, and recommending a similar course to their fellow citizens. In a just cause the spectacle of this handful of adventurers, boldly challenging the power of Mexico, would excite our sympathy, perhaps our admiration. But successful rapacity, which seized broad and fertile

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1Old South Leaflets (Boston, 1904), vol. 6, no. 132, pp. 2–4.
lands while it opened new markets for slaves, excites no sentiment but that of abhorrence.

The work of rebellion sped. Citizens of the United States joined its fortunes, not singly, but in numbers, even in armed squadrons. Our newspapers excited the lust of territorial robbery in the public mind. Expeditions were openly equipped within our own borders. Advertisements for volunteers summoned the adventurous, as to patriotic labors. Military companies, with officers and standards, directed their steps to the revolted province.

During all this period the United States were at peace with Mexico. A proclamation from our government, forbidding these hostile preparations within our borders, is undeniable evidence of their existence, while truth compels us to record its impotence in upholding the sacred duties of neutrality between Mexico and the insurgents...

The Texan flag waved over an army of American citizens. Of the six or eight hundred who won the [decisive] battle of San Jacinto, scattering the Mexican forces and capturing their general [Santa Anna], not more than fifty were citizens of Texas having grievances of their own to redress on that field.

The victory was followed by the recognition of the independence of Texas by the United States; while the new state took its place among the nations of the earth...

Certainly our sister republic [Mexico] might feel aggrieved by this conduct. It might justly charge our citizens with disgraceful robbery, while, in seeking extension of slavery, they repudiated the great truths of American freedom.

Meanwhile Texas slept on her arms, constantly expecting new efforts from Mexico to regain her former power. The two combatants regarded each other as enemies. Mexico still asserted her right to the territory wrested from her, and refused to acknowledge its independence.

Texas turned for favor and succor to England. The government of the United States, fearing it might pass under the influence of this power, made overtures for its annexation to our country. This was finally accomplished by joint resolutions of Congress, in defiance of the Constitution [?], and in gross insensibility to the sacred obligations of amity with Mexico, imposed alike by treaty and by justice, "both strong against the deed." The Mexican minister regarded it as an act offensive to his country, and, demanding his passport, returned home.

2. President James Polk Justifies the Texas Coup (1845)

The United States had tried to wrest Texas from Spain under the vague terms of the Louisiana Purchase, but had at last abandoned such claims in the swap that netted the Floridas in 1819. The Texan Americans finally staged a successful revolt against Mexico in 1835-1836, but for nine years thereafter lived in constant apprehension of a renewed Mexican invasion. Three days before President Polk took office on

\footnote{J. D. Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of the Presidents (1897), vol. 4, pp. 379–381.}
March 4, 1845, President John Tyler had signed a joint resolution of Congress offering the republic of Texas annexation to the United States. All that remained was for the Texans to accept the terms, and they formally did so on June 23, 1845. The tension was heightened by the keen interest of Britain and France in making Texas a satellite, with the consequent dangers of involving the United States in war. Polk, a purposeful and persistent expansionist, justified the annexation as follows in his inaugural address. Which of his arguments was the most convincing from the standpoint of the United States? Which was the least convincing from the standpoint of Mexico? Did he handle the slavery issue persuasively?

The Republic of Texas has made known her desire to come into our Union, to form a part of our Confederacy and enjoy with us the blessings of liberty secured and guaranteed by our Constitution. Texas was once a part of our country—was unwise ceded away to a foreign power [in 1819]—is now independent, and possesses an undoubted right to dispose of a part or the whole of her territory, and to merge her sovereignty as a separate and independent state in ours... 

I regard the question of annexation as belonging exclusively to the United States and Texas. They are independent powers, competent to contract; and foreign nations have no right to interfere with them or to take exception to their reunion... Foreign powers should therefore look on the annexation of Texas to the United States, not as the conquest of a nation seeking to extend her dominions by arms and violence, but as the peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own, by adding another member to our Confederation, with the consent of that member, thereby diminishing the chances of war and opening to them new and ever-increasing markets for their products.

To Texas, the reunion is important because the strong protecting arm of our government would be extended over her, and the vast resources of her fertile soil and genial climate would be speedily developed, while the safety of New Orleans and of our whole southwestern frontier against hostile aggression, as well as the interests of the whole Union, would be promoted by it...

None can fail to see the danger to our safety and future peace if Texas remains an independent state, or becomes an ally or dependency of some foreign nation more powerful than herself. Is there one among our citizens who would not prefer perpetual peace with Texas to occasional wars, which so often occur between bordering independent nations? Is there one who would not prefer free intercourse with her, to high duties on all our products and manufactures which enter her ports or cross her frontiers? Is there one who would not prefer an unrestricted communication with her citizens, to the frontier obstructions which must occur if she remains out of the Union?

Whatever is good or evil in the local [slave] institutions of Texas will remain her own, whether annexed to the United States or not. None of the present states will be responsible for them any more than they are for the local institutions of each other. They have confederated together for certain specific objects. Upon the same principle that they would refuse to form a perpetual union with Texas because of her local institutions, our forefathers would have been prevented from forming our present Union.
3. The Cabinet Debates War (1846)

The expansionist Polk, fearing that so-called British land-grabbers would forestall him, was eager to purchase California from Mexico. But the proud Mexicans, though bankrupt, refused to sell. They also threatened war over the annexation of Texas and defaulted on their payment of claims to Americans for damages during their recent revolutionary disturbances. Polk made a last-hope effort to buy California and adjust other disputes when he sent John Slidell to Mexico as a special envoy late in 1845, but the Mexicans refused to negotiate with Slidell. Polk then ordered General Taylor to move his small army from Corpus Christi on the Nueces River (the traditional southwest border of Texas) to the Rio Grande del Norte (which the Texans extravagantly claimed as their new boundary). Still the Mexicans did not attack the provocative Yankee invader. Polk thereupon recommended to his cabinet a declaration of war, presumably on the basis of unpaid damage claims and Slidell’s rejection. Both were rather flimsy pretexts. From this passage in his diary, was the president really trying to avoid a fight? Were his grounds for war valid, even after sixteen American soliders were killed or wounded?

Saturday, 9th May, 1846.—The Cabinet held a regular meeting today; all the members present.

I brought up the Mexican question, and the question of what was the duty of the administration in the present state of our relations with that country. The subject was very fully discussed.

All agreed that if the Mexican forces at Matamoros committed any act of hostility on Gen’l Taylor’s forces, I should immediately send a message to Congress recommending an immediate declaration of war.

I stated to the Cabinet that up to this time, as they 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 we could stand in statu quo, or that I could remain silent much longer; that I thought it was my duty to send a message to Congress very soon and recommend definitive measures. I told them that I thought I ought to make such a message by Tuesday next; that the country was excited and impatient on the subject; and if I failed to do so, I would not be doing my duty.

I then propounded the distinct question to the Cabinet, and took their opinions individually, whether I should make a message to Congress on Tuesday, and whether in that message I should recommend a declaration of war against Mexico.

All except the Secretary of the Navy [George Bancroft] gave their advice in the affirmative. Mr. Bancroft dissented, but said if any act of hostility should be committed by the Mexican forces, he was then in favor of immediate war. Mr. Buchanan [Secretary of State] said he would feel better satisfied in his course if the Mexican forces had or should commit any act of hostility, but that as matters stood we had ample cause of war against Mexico, and he gave his assent to the measure.

It was agreed that the message should be prepared and submitted to the Cabinet in their meeting on Tuesday.

About 6 o’clock P.M. Gen’l R. Jones, the Adjutant General of the Army, called and handed to me despatches received from Gen’l Taylor by the Southern mail which had just arrived, giving information that a part of [the] Mexican army had crossed . . . the [Rio Grande] Del Norte, and attacked and killed and captured two companies of dragoons of Gen’l Taylor’s army, consisting of 63 officers and men. . . .

I immediately summoned the Cabinet to meet at 7½ o’clock this evening. The Cabinet accordingly assembled at that hour; all the members present. The subject of the despatch received this evening from Gen’l Taylor, as well as the state of our relations with Mexico, were fully considered. The Cabinet were unanimously of opinion, and it was so agreed, that a message should be sent to Congress on Monday laying all the information in my possession before them, and recommending vigorous and prompt measure[s] to enable the Executive to prosecute the war.

4. The President Blames Mexico (1846)

The hundred-mile-wide expanse between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, virtually uninhabited except for tens of thousands of wild horses, was clearly in dispute between the United States and Mexico, although the Mexicans still claimed all of re-

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J. D. Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of the Presidents (1897), vol. 4, pp. 441–442.
B. Provoking War with Mexico

The blunt truth is that the Mexican title to the disputed area was then the stronger. The Whigs and other antislavery foes of the Democratic Polk, regarding him as a willing tool of the expansionist southern "slavocracy," condemned him as a liar ("Polk the Mendacious") for his allegations that Mexico, rather than the United States, had provoked the war. In the president's war message to Congress, given here with italics we have added, what grounds are there to support this accusation? Did the United States have just grounds for war?

The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens throughout a long period of years remain unredressed, and solemn [claims] treaties pledging her public faith for this redress have been disregarded. A government either unable or unwilling to enforce the execution of such treaties fails to perform one of its plainest duties.

Our commerce with Mexico has been almost annihilated. It was formerly highly beneficial to both nations, but our merchants have been deterred from prosecuting it by the system of outrage and extortion which the Mexican authorities have pursued against them, while their appeals through their own government for indemnity have been made in vain. Our forbearance has gone to such an extreme as to be mistaken in its character. Had we acted with vigor in repelling the insults and redressing the injuries inflicted by Mexico at the commencement, we should doubtless have escaped all the difficulties in which we are now involved.

Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own, she 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.

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the [Rio Grande] Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

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.

5. A British View of the Mexican War (1847)

The cartoon on page 392 criticizes America's imperial ambitions in the war against Mexico. In what ways did the British artist agree with opponents of the war in the United States?

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5Punch, December 4, 1847.
C. Opposition to the War

I. Massachusetts Voices Condemnation (1847)

The killing or wounding of sixteen American soliders on American (?) soil precipitated war with Mexico. But the abolitionists and the free-soil Whigs of the North, resenting an alleged grab for more slave territory, gradually increased their clamor for peace. The following mid-war resolution, drafted by the orator Charles Sumner and passed by the Massachusetts legislature in 1847, betrayed an ugly frame of mind. In what respects is this statement sound in describing the outbreak of war? In what respects is it unsound? In what respects does it verge on treason?

\footnote{Old South Leaflets (Boston, 1904), vol. 6, no. 132, pp. 10-11, 30-31.}
This was the state of things when... General Taylor was directed, by the President of the United States, to occupy the east bank of the Rio Grande, being the extreme western part of the territory claimed by Texas, the boundaries of which had been designated as an "open question," to be determined by "negotiation." General Taylor broke up his quarters at Corpus Christi on the 11th March, and, proceeding across this disputed territory, established his post, and erected a battery, directly opposite the Mexican city of Matamoros, and, under his directions, the mouth of the Rio Grande was blockaded, so as to cut off supplies from the Mexican army at Matamoros...

These were acts of war, accomplished without bloodshed. But they were nevertheless acts of unquestioned hostility against Mexico. Blockade! and military occupation of a disputed territory! These were the arbiters of the "open question" of boundary. These were the substitutes for "negotiation."

It is not to be supposed that the Mexican army should quietly endure these aggressive measures, and regard with indifference cannon pointed at their position... On the 26th of April a small body of American troops, under the command of Captain Thornton, encountered Mexican troops at a place twenty miles north of General Taylor's camp. Here was the first collision of arms. The report of this was hurried to Washington. Rumor, with a hundred tongues, exaggerated the danger of the American army under General Taylor, and produced an insensibility to the aggressive character of the movement...

It was under the influence of this feeling that the untoward act of May 13th was pressed through Congress, by which it was declared that "war exists by the act of Mexico."... The passage of this act placed the whole country in hostile array against Mexico, and impressed upon every citizen of the United States the relation of enemy of every citizen of Mexico. This disastrous condition still continues. War is still waged; and our armies, after repeated victories achieved on Mexican soil, are still pursuing the path of conquest...

Resolved. Concerning the Mexican War, and the Institution of Slavery.

Resolved, That the present war with Mexico has its primary origin in the unconstitutional annexation to the United States of the foreign state of Texas while the same was still at war with Mexico; that it was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President, to General Taylor, to take military possession of territory in dispute between the United States and Mexico, and in the occupation of Mexico; and that it is now waged ingloriously—by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor—unnecessarily and without just cause, at immense cost of treasure and life, for the dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest of a portion of her territory, from which slavery has already been excluded, with the triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the "Slave Power," and of obtaining the control of the Free States, under the Constitution of the United States.

Resolved, That such a war of conquest, so hateful in its objects, so wanton, unjust, and unconstitutional in its origin and character, must be regarded as a war against freedom, against humanity, against justice, against the Union, against the Constitution, and against the Free States; and that a regard for the true interests and the highest honor of the country, not less than the impulses of Christian duty, should arouse all good citizens to join in efforts to arrest this gigantic crime, by withholding supplies, or other voluntary contributions, for its further prosecution; by
calling for the withdrawal of our army within the established limits of the United States; and in every just way aiding the country to retreat from the disgraceful position of aggression which it now occupies towards a weak, distracted neighbor and sister republic.

Resolved, That our attention is directed anew to the wrong and "enormity" of slavery, and to the tyranny and usurpation of the "Slave Power," as displayed in the history of our country, particularly in the annexation of Texas and the present war with Mexico. . . .

2. Abolitionists Libel General Zachary Taylor (1848)

One of the foulest murders of the century occurred in 1830. Captain Joseph White, a wealthy merchant of Salem, Massachusetts, was found dead in his bed with a fractured skull and thirteen stab wounds. The murderer was Dick Crowningshield, who had been offered $1,000 by two expectant heirs. Henry C. Wright, an abolitionist and pacifist, compared the current war hero, General Zachary Taylor, to Crowningshield. After reading Wright's tirade, entitled "The Assassin and the Soldier," what conclusions can you draw about the nature of the opposition to the Mexican War by the pacifist-abolitionist extremists? Is this attack too overdrawn to be effective?

Zachary had millions of employers; the assassin had but two.
Zachary killed thousands; the assassin killed one.
Zachary's sword, balls, and bombshells were accounted Christian weapons to slay men; the assassin's bludgeon and dirk were considered un-Christian.
Zachary broke the limbs and tore the flesh of his victims, and left them to die in protracted agony; the assassin killed his instantly and without protracted pain.
Zachary's deeds are said by the priest and churches to be God-approved and Christlike; the assassin's are denounced by them as evil and only evil.
Zachary is hailed as a Christian patriot; Dick is shunned by all.
Zachary, as he returns from Monterrey, his face, his hands, and garments dripping with the blood of innocent women and children, is welcomed "by the smiles and kisses of his countrywomen"; they shrink from Dick with horror.
Zachary is held up by mothers, by teachers, by priests, and politicians, as an example of piety and patriotism; Dick is held up by them to execration.
Zachary is made a life-member of a Missionary Society; Dick is cast out as a heathen.
Zachary is counted worthy of all honor by a professedly enlightened, civilized republican and Christian people, and is by them elevated to the Presidency; Dick, by the same people, is elevated to the gallows.
Such are the different results of killing one at the bidding and for the benefit of two, and killing thousands for the benefit and at the bidding of millions.

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I. Polk Submits the Trist Treaty (1848)

Hoping to win California with a minimum of bloodshed, President Polk sent special envoy Nicholas Trist to Mexico. There he was to join General Scott's army driving toward Mexico City. Trist bungled an attempt to bribe Santa Anna, the slippery Mexican dictator, and Polk recalled his negotiator in disgust. But Trist, who now saw a temporary opening, concluded a treaty anyhow. Polk, though furious at such defiance, finally decided to submit Trist's Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo to the Senate. By its terms, Mexico formally yielded Texas, California, and the intervening territory; the United States bound itself to pay $18,250,000, including $3,250,000 in the damage claims owing to U.S. citizens. In Polk's diary account, what argument for the treaty seems strongest? Which one seems to carry the most weight with him?

Monday, 21st February, 1848.—I saw no company this morning. At 12 o'clock the Cabinet met; all the members present. I made known my decision upon the Mexican Treaty, which was that under all the circumstances of the case, I would submit it [to] the Senate for ratification...

I assigned my reasons for my decision. They were, briefly, that the treaty conformed on the main question of limits and boundary to the instructions given to Mr. Trist in April last; and that though, if the treaty was now to be made, I should demand more territory, perhaps to make the Sierra Madre* the line, yet it was doubtful whether this could be ever obtained by the consent of Mexico.

I looked, too, to the consequences of its rejection. A [Whig] majority of one branch of Congress [the House] is opposed to my administration; they have falsely charged that the war was brought on and is continued by me with a view to the conquest of Mexico. And if I were now to reject a treaty made upon my own terms, as authorized in April last, with the unanimous approbation of the Cabinet, the probability is that Congress would not grant either men or money to prosecute the war. Should this be the result, the army now in Mexico would be constantly wasting and diminishing in numbers, and I might at last be compelled to withdraw them, and thus lose the two provinces of New Mexico and Upper California, which were ceded to the United States by this treaty.

Should the opponents of my administration succeed in carrying the next presidential election, the great probability is that the country would lose all the advantages secured by this treaty. I adverted to the immense value of Upper California and concluded by saying that if I were now to reject my own terms, as offered in April last, I did not see how it was possible for my administration to be sustained.

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*A mountain range bordering the central plateau of Mexico.
2. A Whig Journal Accepts the Pact (1848)

The Daily National Intelligencer, *an opposition Whig newspaper, wry-facedly supported the Trist draft as an unsatisfactory way out of a bad mess. One reason for a speedy acceptance was the mounting popular clamor for all of Mexico rather than the one-half actually taken. What were the main objections to annexing still more Mexican territory?*

We regard with distrust and apprehension the proposed vast acquisition of territory by the United States. So far from paying twenty millions of dollars for it, we have not the smallest doubt that the acquisition of it will entail mischiefs upon this country which no supposed advantages to be derived from it will compensate, now or ever. Were these territories to be whelmed in the Pacific Ocean, instead of being incorporated in our Union, far better, in our opinion, would it be for the welfare and prosperity of the present population of the United States. . . .

That the annexation of the whole of Mexico to the United States would be fatal to this government, whoever may doubt it, we are well convinced. Add to our Senate the representation of some fifteen or twenty Mexican states, and the conservative character of that body will be destroyed. The increased representation in the other branch of the national legislature might, at first, be less injurious; but its evils cannot now be computed. Would our commercial, manufacturing, and agricultural states be content to be governed by Mexican generals, who are ignorant of civil government, and who could not understand the principles of our Constitution? Pronunciamientos at the head of a military array constitute the basis of their political knowledge. The Union of these states has withstood the shocks of war and of internal excitement, but it would be dissolved by the annexation of Mexico.

We would take the treaty, then, as it is, to avoid a greater national evil. We cannot reject it and continue our opposition to the war. Payment of the debts which Mexico owed our citizens at the commencement of the war is now hopeless; her means are exhausted. Her territory with its population will entail upon us increased expenditures, and evils moral and political. But it is all that Mexico can give. There can be no indemnity for the war expenses. We had better, then, as we have said, stop where we are; for if we go further, we shall only increase the evil.

The crisis should be met with firmness. By the continued prosecution of the war, we should in three months expend a larger sum than the treaty requires us to pay to our own citizens and to the Mexican government. And where is the individual so lost to a sense of justice and to the common sympathies of our nature who would not rather pay the money than to expend even that much (more likely ten times as much) in prosecuting the war to the annihilation of the Mexican government and name?

3. Democrats Hail a Glorious Achievement (1848)

*A staunch pro-Polk newspaper, the Democratic Washington Daily Union, took sharp issue with its rival, the Whig Daily National Intelligencer. It hailed the outcome of the*

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2Washington Daily Union, March 16, 1848.
war as a magnificent triumph. What does it seem to regard as the greatest intangible gain? the greatest tangible gain? How would the treaty benefit both the security and the commerce of the United States?

It is true that the war has cost us millions of money, and, what is far more precious, the lives of some of our noblest citizens. But what great advantages has it not obtained for us? It has covered us with glory. It has extended our fame to the remotest corners of the earth. If the treaty be ratified, it will extend the area of freedom to the Southern Pacific.

The National Intelligencer, indeed, denies that it has "accomplished any one of the ostensible objects of the war." Yet surely nothing but the blindest party spirit could have made this extravagant assertion.

Have we not driven back the insolent enemy, who invaded Texas and shed the blood of our citizens upon our own soil? Have we not pursued him into the heart of his own country, seized all his strongholds upon the coast, and occupied his capital? Have we not subdued that vainglorious and arrogant spirit which has been productive of so many insults and so many aggressions? What has become of all those idle threats to drive us from Texas—of the silly boast of Santa Anna that he would gather his laurels upon the banks of the Sabine [River]!*

The London Times, in 1845, flattered the national vanity of the Mexicans with the hope that we should not be able to send men enough to encounter their troops. They were under the impression that our army dared not enter Mexico, or, if we made the attempt, that we should be driven back like chaff before the whirlwind. Their vanity deceived them; but their government flattered their arrogance and increased their infatuation.

Now they are tamed. Now they have consented to negotiate for peace, without requiring our ships to leave their coast and our troops to desert their territory. These changes in the popular sentiment have been produced by the brilliant achievements of Buena Vista and of Cerro Gordo, the capture of their castle and of their capital. Does anyone now believe that their spirit is not humbled, and that the sense of their own inferiority will not induce them to refrain from a repetition of the insults and aggressions which they had so repeatedly perpetrated upon us?

They will be stripped, too, of a large portion of their territory. They may be stripped of more, if they should wantonly insult us again. Will not the lessons they have learned operate as a "security for the future"? Will not the moral force we have gained, and the military genius we have exhibited, go beyond Mexico, and produce their impression upon the other nations of the earth?

With ample "indemnity for the past," then, and with such "security for the future"—with achievements in arms which any nation might envy—with an extension of territory to the Pacific, which gives us some of the finest harbors in the world (for one of which alone—the bay of San Francisco—Gen. Jackson was willing to give five millions of dollars)—with an immense commerce opening upon us with the richest nations of Asia—with every facility secured for our whalers in the Pacific, and with the other advantages which we will have secured—with all these, we can

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*The southwestern border of Louisiana.
truly say that we have every reason to be proud of the war, and proud of the peace which it has obtained us.

4. Mexico Remembers the Despoilers (1935)

Patriotic Mexicans can never forget the catastrophe that cost them about half of their country. Their resistance was weakened by internal political turmoil, amounting almost to civil war. The teenage boys of the military academy of Chapultepec, near Mexico City, perished heroically; legend has several throwing themselves suicidally from the battlements. In 1935, after some of the bitterness had subsided, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico City published an elementary survey of Mexican history in which there appears the following account of the war and the treaty—with a before-and-after map. What is revealed of the weakness of Mexican resistance, and the grievances against the United States? Which one seems to rankle most deeply?

In the war with the United States, and in the military operations incidental thereto, we are unable to find a single outstanding figure to represent the defense of Mexico, in the form of a hero or military leader. Invasion first of all took place from the north, and the American troops defeated our armies, not beneath them in courage, but due to interior organization, armaments, and high command. The classes that controlled material resources, and the groups at the head of the political situation, failed to rise to the occasion in that desperate situation.

A chronicle of the march of invasion makes painful reading. Our soldiers were defeated at Matamoros, at Resaca de Guerrero, and Monterrey, in spite of the sacrifices of the troops. . . .

When one follows, event by event, the military operations and the political happenings of this period, one's feelings are harrowed by the details.

In this swift historical sketch, we shall be content to mention, if no great captain representative of defense, the youthful heroes who saved the honor of Mexico: the cadets of the Military College [at Chapultepec], who fell on September 13, 1847, when the school was stormed by the invading troops, then on the point of occupying the capital of the Republic. The glorious deaths of Francisco Marquez, Agustin Melgar, Juan Escutia, Fernando Montes de Oca, Vicente Suarez, and Juan de la Barrera, in an unequal contest, without hope, crushed by an overwhelming force, are as it were a symbol and image of this unrighteous war.

To Mexico, the American invasion contains a terrible lesson. In this war we saw that right and justice count but little in contests between one people and another, when material force, and organization, are wanting.

A great portion of Mexico's territory was lost because she had been able to administer and settle those regions, and handed them over to alien colonization [Texas].

There is no principle nor law that can sanction spoliation. Only by force was it carried out, and only by force or adroit negotiation could it have been avoided. That

which Spain had been unable to colonize, and the [Mexican] Republic to settle, was occupied by the stream of Anglo-American expansion.

The war of 1847 is not, so far as Mexico is concerned, offset by anything but the courage of her soldiers. At Matamoros, at Resaca de Guererro, at La Angostura [Buena Vista], at Vera Cruz, at Cerro Gordo, at Padierna, at Churubusco, and at Chapultepec, victory was won by a well-organized and instructed General Staff; by longer-range rifles and cannon, better-fed soldiers, abundance of money and ammunition, and of horses and wagons. . . .

The American invasion cost Mexico the total loss of Texas, whose boundaries were, without the slightest right, brought down to the Rio Grande; the Province of New Mexico and Upper California; and an outpouring of blood, energy, and wealth, offset only by material compensation in the amount of fifteen million pesos, by way of indemnity.

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**Thought Provokers**

1. Why should Britain and America have been on friendly terms in the 1830s and 1840s, and why were they not?
2. Why was there such a lack of interest in Oregon during the early 1840s?
3. Polk claimed that no other power similarly situated would have refused the annexation of Texas. Do you agree or disagree? Explain how each side, at the outbreak of the Mexican War, could claim that the other was the aggressor. Were the annexation of Texas and the sending of General Taylor to the Rio Grande unconstitutional, as the abolitionists claimed? If England had held Mexico, as it did Canada, how would matters have been worked out differently?
4. Should a democratic government permit the kind of criticism that was indulged in by the Whigs and the abolitionists during the Mexican War? Compare the attitude of Massachusetts toward the War of 1812 with its attitude toward the Mexican War.
5. Did the advantages to the United States from the Mexican War outweigh the ultimate disadvantages? Emerson remarked that victory would be a dose of arsenic. Comment. Mexicans claim they would now be a rich nation if they had not been robbed of the oil and other riches of California and Texas. Comment.