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# The causes of the Mexican War: A survey of changing interpretations

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THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR  
A SURVEY OF CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS

by  
Augustus Cerillo, Jr.

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of the Department of History  
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## PREFACE

The Mexican War, which resulted in a vast expansion of the national domain, has had a small place in the annals of American history. Treated as either the climax to the great expansionist movement of the 1840's, or as the first step leading to civil war, the war with Mexico has been studied as an adjunct to these more popular themes. Probably partial blame can be placed on the abolitionist writers who savagely condemned the war as part of a great slave conspiracy which ultimately brought on the American Civil War.

However, those historians favorable to America's cause in its war with Mexico are not blameless. A large majority of these nonabolitionist writers were veterans of the Mexican War. Quite naturally they were extremely biased against the Mexican people and nation. America--God's chosen nation--could do no wrong. The military aspects of the war and the personal achievements of favored leaders had a prominent place in these histories. Consequently, their value to the present-day student, who seeks a reasonably impartial account that analyzes the general causes and results, is at a minimum.

Since the publication of President Polk's diary in 1910 and Justin Smith's important two volume study in 1919, the Mexican War has gained in prominence. Polk, himself, gradually emerged from obscurity to become the object of several biographies and monographs dealing at least in part with the Mexican War. Controversies over Polk's role in bringing on the war also gave impetus to the writing of several articles either defending or criti-

cizing both Polk and the war.

While this small renaissance in Mexican War historiography has been helpful in better understanding a most important decade in America's national past, the field is still wide open for several new monographs and syntheses. Also, it seems a most pertinent time for new interpretations of America's nationalistic war. Possibly, by reinterpreting and better understanding a decade so permeated with nationalism, where Manifest Destiny and the lure of new land called Americans from all walks of life to round out America's continental boundaries, Americans could better understand the nationalistic forces at work in the world today.

It is the purpose of this thesis to trace the varied and changing interpretations that American historians have developed in trying to understand the causes of the Mexican War. These interpretations have not been studied in a vacuum; an effort has been made to account for those changes in interpretation by trying to understand the various "climates of opinions" that have produced them. The social, political, and economic forces involved can necessarily only be suggested. Human nature precludes mathematical precision in understanding direct causation.

This thesis has been undertaken at the suggestion of Professor Thomas N. Bonner of the University of Omaha. His help, guidance and inspiration from the inception of the research to the final rewrite have been deeply appreciated and valued. Also, I can not fail to express special thanks to my wife, Dolores, who has not only made helpful suggestions in every step of the writing, but who has also done all of the preliminary typing.



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## I. THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

### A CONFUSION OF VOICES

On the afternoon of May 9, 1846, President Polk, in conference with his cabinet, brought up the "Mexican question." Relations between the United States and Mexico, already strained to the point of conflict, were the subject of a lengthy discussion.<sup>1</sup> The cause of these hostile relations lay partly in the terms of the Adams-Onís treaty of 1819. In this treaty with Spain, the United States had renounced its claim to Texas and agreed to the Sabine River as the western boundary of Louisiana. But no treaty could long stand in the way of the restless Americans; in 1821 Connecticut-born Moses Austin received a charter from the Spanish government to settle two hundred families in Texas. Death prevented him from going, but his son, Stephen Austin, carried out the settlement scheme after obtaining confirmation of the land grant from newly independent Mexico. Little did the new republic realize the floodgate it had opened. In subsequent years thousands of restless settlers crossed the border into Texas to find new lives and fortunes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Milo Milton Quaife (ed.), The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1910), Vol. I, p. 384.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Allen Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steel Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, [c. 1956]), pp. 116-122; William C. Binkley, The Texas Revolution (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), p. 12.



Friction became inevitable as Texas became Americanized. The social, religious, and political differences between Texas and Mexico made assimilation improbable. Independent-minded Texans, sure of their social superiority, could not adjust to a government that believed it had the right to interfere in the lives of its people. Matters became worse in 1831 when the Mexican government stationed troops in the Texas settlements. Conflict ensued.<sup>3</sup>

The following year, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna became President of Mexico and attempted to establish centralized control over his subjects north of the Rio Grande River. When the Texans responded by declaring their independence, Santa Anna led an army across the Rio Grande in 1836 to subdue the rebellious Texans. But the Texans had other plans. Pledging to fight until they had gained independence, the Texans fought hard. Savage losses at the Alamo and at Goliad did not dampen their spirits. Rather, these very losses became rallying cries for future battles. A break soon came. Santa Anna was camped with his army near the San Jacinto River. At noon, as was the Latin custom, the Mexican army took its siesta. For many it was a permanent one. With shouts of "Remember the Alamo" and "Remember Goliad," General Sam Houston and his troops stormed in among Santa Anna's army and utterly destroyed it; Santa Anna himself was captured a few days later. Rather than kill him, the Texans decided to use Santa Anna to political advantage; at Velasco they had him sign treaties recognizing Texan independence and the Rio Grande as the boundary

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<sup>3</sup>Billington, loc. cit.; Binkley, op. cit., pp. 119, 129.

line. Infuriated, the Mexican government disavowed the terms of the treaties. Santa Anna, back in Mexico at the grace of the Texans, also repudiated the treaties and vowed to reconquer Texas. Hostile attitudes on both sides produced a quasi-state of war between Mexico and its former department.<sup>4</sup>

The American government had previously made several attempts to purchase Texas from Mexico. In 1825, President John Quincy Adams instructed his Minister to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, to offer Mexico one million dollars for all of Texas. It was refused. When Adams' successor, Andrew Jackson, raised the price to five million, it was also refused. Mexico had no intention of selling Texas. These insistent demands for purchase, along with the Texas revolution, caused many Mexicans to imagine a connection between the two events and to suspect that the United States had fomented the revolution.<sup>5</sup>

America also had its grievances. Mexico, from the time of its independence, had been plagued by unstable governments. Revolution followed revolution; one Mexican military leader after the other "pronounced" against the existing government and proceeded to establish a new one. These upheavals naturally affected the lives and property of Americans in Mexico. Claims for damage, backed by the American government, were

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<sup>4</sup>Billington, op. cit., pp. 125-142; Eugene C. Barker, "The Influence of Slavery in the Colonization of Texas," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XI (June, 1924), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Eugene C. Barker, "President Jackson and the Texas Revolution," American Historical Review, XII (July, 1907), p. 803; Billington, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

submitted by injured Americans for redress to the Mexican government. These were ignored by Mexico. Infuriated, President Jackson, in a speech before Congress, declared that the claims question would justify immediate war. Even after a claims commission in 1839 established the sum owed legitimate claimants, Mexico defaulted on its payments.<sup>6</sup>

A further sore spot in United States-Mexican relations was the Texans' desire for annexation to the United States. This move was thwarted by opposition from the Whigs and abolitionists who viewed the Texas settlements as part of a conspiracy to extend slave power and territory. Jackson, who recognized the power of this opposition, would only extend official recognition to Texas. Not until John Tyler became President in 1841 did an American administration seriously consider annexing Texas. When Tyler's Secretary of State, Abel P. Upshur, arranged for a treaty of annexation with Texas, the Mexicans became so riled that Santa Anna notified the United States that annexation was equivalent to war. This threat had little effect on the Tyler administration.

John C. Calhoun, who became Secretary of State after the accidental death of Upshur, immediately negotiated a treaty. The Senate voted it down. But Tyler and Calhoun were not to be stopped so easily. With only a short time left before the next presidential election, Tyler and Calhoun decided to try for annexation by joint resolution of Congress. Before it could be brought to a vote, however, the session ended. Congress

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<sup>6</sup>Justin M. Smith, The War With Mexico (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), Vol. I, pp. 70-81; Billington, op. cit., pp. 168-169.

did not convene again until after James Knox Polk was elected President on an expansionist platform. Tyler, interpreting Polk's election as a mandate to annex Texas, pressed for the joint resolution in the closing days of his administration. He succeeded. In February, 1845, both houses voted for annexation. Immediately, the Mexican minister to Washington, General Juan N. Almonte, packed his bags and left for Mexico, officially breaking all diplomatic relations between the two nations.<sup>7</sup>

Doubtless the British advice to Mexico to recognize the independence of Texas, provided that Texas did not accept American annexation, had some effect on the attitude of the American Congress. Southern spokesmen, who had always supported annexation, feared England's attempts at abolishing slavery in Texas. This move, they felt, would endanger slavery in the American South.

The weak, feebly-held Mexican state of California had also been prey to American expansionist desires. The Mexican government feared that California would be plucked from its fading empire. These fears were increased when the Jackson administration attempted to purchase California. As with Texas, the offer was refused. Jackson had hoped

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<sup>7</sup> Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steel Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, [c. 1959]), pp. 180, 191, 213-214; Justin H. Smith, The Annexation of Texas (corrected edition; New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., [c. 1911]), pp. 394, 413; William Montgomery Keigs, The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1917), Vol. II, p. 299; Ephraim Douglass Adams, British Interests and Activities in Texas, 1838-1846 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1910), pp. 147, 229-230; Billington, op. cit., pp. 133-154; Eugene C. Barker, "The Annexation of Texas," Southwestern Historical Quarterly, I (July, 1946), p. 50.

to use the California ports as a sop to the North to gain its support for the annexation of Texas.

During the Tyler administration, Secretary of State Daniel Webster had tried to purchase the part of San Francisco, only to have negotiations terminated because of an unfortunate incident in Monterey, California. On October 9, 1842, Commodore Thomas Ap Catesby Jones, thinking war had broken out between Mexico and the United States, had stormed into the Monterey harbor, sent men ashore, and raised the stars and stripes. Although apologies were made to Mexico by the American government, and the Mexican flag replaced, the harm was done and Mexican fears were further inflamed.<sup>8</sup>

To get California, more subtle methods were necessary now that negotiations had failed. Fortunately, the political chaos in California played into American hands. In 1836 a group of Californians, aided by several Americans, had revolted against the Mexican authorities and succeeded in driving out the Mexican troops. General Jose Castro and others assumed control of the province. In 1843 Santa Anna had sent soldiers under General Micheltorena to restore national supremacy. This proved fruitless, as the Mexicans were again defeated. Mexico, realizing its helplessness, recognized the new government by appointing Pio Pico, the senior member of the provincial assembly, as governor at Los Angeles and Castro as comandante in charge of the customs house at Monterey.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Billington, op. cit., pp. 159-160; Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup>Billington, op. cit., p. 161; Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 319.

This division of authority only succeeded in producing further chaos as Castro sought to usurp full control of the province. Discontent among the Californians was rampant. The political and economic conditions of the province were no better than they had been under direct Mexican rule. Therefore, native Californians desired independence from Mexican rule, either under British or French protection, or by annexation to the United States.<sup>10</sup>

This was the situation when Polk became President, and he immediately set his eyes on California as well as Texas. To get California he had a two-fold policy: one was simply to purchase the territory; the other, if purchase was unsuccessful, was one of watchful waiting until the Californians revolted and asked for American help. Polk was sure annexation would immediately follow any move for independence by California.<sup>11</sup>

To lessen the period of watchful waiting, and to guard against a possible English or French move in California, Polk issued instructions to Thomas O. Larkin, American businessman and special agent at Monterey, telling him to use his influence in a peaceful way to help convince the Californians that separation from Mexico and annexation to the United States would be welcomed by the American government.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 320.

<sup>11</sup>Van Deusen, Jacksonian Era, p. 217; Eugene I. McCormac, James K. Polk: A Political Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1922), pp. 386-387.

<sup>12</sup>Billington, op. cit., p. 162; McCormac, op. cit., p. 387; Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 325; Reuben L. Underhill, From Cowhides to Golden Fleece: A Narrative of California, 1832-1858 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1939), p. 70.

Orders were also sent by Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft to Commodore John D. Sloat, who was cruising with a squadron near Mazatlan on the west coast of Mexico. Sloat was told to be ready to sail for California and to give any assistance Larkin might need.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, John Charles Frémont, the adventurous explorer and son-in-law of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, was sent to California with a group of explorers on a scientific exploration. But very soon these armed explorers turned to a more exciting occupation: fighting the Mexicans. It seems that shortly after Frémont was ordered to leave California by General Castro, he was met near the Oregon border by Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie, who had been sent from Washington with instructions for Larkin. Along with these instructions, Gillespie carried personal family letters from Senator Benton to Frémont. Very likely, Gillespie informed Frémont of the mounting tension and probable war between the United States and Mexico.

Frémont, whether ordered to or not, decided to return to California to be available should war break out. His opportunity for action and adventure soon came. A group of Frémont's adventurers, under Ezekiel Merritt, "a tall, rawboned, tobacco-chewing illiterates," stole a group of horses being taken to General Castro. Not content with stealing, these men captured the town of Sonoma the following day and raised the Bear Flag on June 15, 1846, declaring California independent.<sup>14</sup> Frémont soon

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<sup>13</sup>Van Dusen, Jacksonian Era, p. 217.

<sup>14</sup>Billington, op. cit., pp. 162-167; Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 332; For conflicting viewpoints on whether Frémont had any secret instructions see Richard Steenberg, "Folk and Frémont, 1845-1846," Pacific Historical Review, VII (1936), pp. 211-227; George Tays, "Frémont had No Secret Instructions," Pacific Historical Review, IX (1940), pp. 157-171; Allan Nevins, Frémont, Pathfinder of the West (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1955), pp. 202-251.

came to Sonoma, quickly took over, and then pursued General Castro until a battle commenced. He then learned that war between the United States and Mexico had broken out. The Bear Flag revolt merged into the larger movement to conquer California by the United States.<sup>15</sup>

While Frémont's adventures were taking place, President Polk, wishing to forestall British colonization in California, reasserted the Monroe Doctrine. Polk's corollary to the doctrine warned European nations against interference with America's expansionist aims. Though officially the British government had no plan for colonization in California, Polk's fear of such a scheme played a large part in the shaping of his expansionist policy.<sup>16</sup>

Still preferring to get California by purchase, Polk attempted to reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico. In the same ship that carried the Mexican Minister Almonte back to Mexico, Polk sent a secret agent, William S. Parrott, formerly a resident dentist in Mexico, to ascertain the Mexican government's attitude toward reopening diplomatic relations. Immediately he reported to the President that an envoy would be received. On the basis of this message, and the word of two American consuls in Mexico, Polk chose John Slidell of Louisiana as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Mexico.

Slidell's instructions were that he was to do all he could to restore amicable relations between Mexico and the United States; he was also

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<sup>15</sup>Billington, op. cit., pp. 165-167.

<sup>16</sup>Van Densen, Jacksonian Era, p. 210; Congressional Globe, 29 Congress, 1st Session, p. 4; Dexter Perkins, A History of the Monroe Doctrine (revised edition; Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1935), pp. 67, 75-77.



to counter any foreign influence in Mexico. More specifically, he was instructed to settle the claims debts owed American citizens by Mexico. The method of payment suggested was for America to assume the debt upon a grant of territory from Mexico. This territory had to be either New Mexico or California, as Polk considered the territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers a closed question. To make the negotiations flexible, Slidell was informed of three possibilities that would be acceptable to the United States. For a boundary running from the mouth of the Rio Grande to its source and then north to the forty-second parallel, the United States would assume the Mexican debt; as a second alternative, five million dollars more would be paid for the rest of New Mexico. A third, and hoped-for alternative, was the cession of California south to Monterey for twenty-five million dollars. In order to keep the negotiations pacific, Slidell was instructed to use tact in dealing with the sensitive Mexicans. Polk made it clear that he would settle for the Rio Grande boundary and American assumption of the claims as the minimum price to maintain peace with Mexico.<sup>17</sup>

These instructions were to no avail. When news of Slidell's mission became known in Mexico, popular excitement and fear of a revolution prevented the government of President José Joaquín Herrera from receiving Slidell. Officially, the Mexican government claimed it had agreed to receive only a commissioner with limited powers to settle the Texas question.

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<sup>17</sup>Van Duzee, Jacksonian Era, pp. 219-221; McGermon, op. cit., p. 384; Robert Sulph Henry, The Story of the Mexican War (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950), p. 30.

not a minister plenipotentiary with power to discuss claims and a new boundary. But Polk was not sitting idly while Slidell was in Mexico. Perturbed by Mexican clamor for war, Polk ordered General Taylor to station troops on or near the Rio Grande to protect Texas from a possible invasion. Taylor camped at Corpus Christi just west of the Nueces River. When official news of Slidell's failure reached Washington, Taylor was ordered to the Rio Grande, a move that posed a serious problem. Mexico had refused to accept the Rio Grande boundary, maintaining that Texas' historic boundary to the west was the Nueces River. Polk, bent on expansion and with one eye on the almost-severed Mexican state of California, refused to budge in his insistence on the Rio Grande as the proper and legitimate boundary of Texas.<sup>18</sup>

Polk's cabinet, in session that spring afternoon of May 9, 1846, unanimously agreed that should Mexico commit any hostile act toward General Taylor's troops on the Rio Grande, war should be declared. But the President was a step ahead of his cabinet. Sure that hostilities would eventually begin, Polk felt that it was his duty to break the status quo.<sup>19</sup> More than likely, Polk had in mind a conversation he had had the previous February with Colonel A. J. Atocha, a friend of the former President and dictator of Mexico, Santa Anna, who was at the time residing in Havana. Atocha informed Polk that Santa Anna was in favor of a treaty between Mexico and the United States that would cede to the United States all

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<sup>18</sup>Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, pp. 102-116, 139; Brainerd Dyer, Zachary Taylor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), pp. 152-153; Van Dusen, Jacksonian Era, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup>Polk, Diary, Vol. I., p. 384.

the territory east of the Rio Grande and north of the Colorado River for a sum of thirty million dollars. Atecha also informed Polk that due to conditions in Mexico, the Mexican government would be forced to agree to such a treaty by military pressure from the United States. Polk was also told that Santa Anna would return to Mexico to help enforce such a treaty.<sup>20</sup>

Polk believed that the United States already had ample cause for war against Mexico. Refusing to remain silent on the subject, he suggested to the cabinet that he deliver a war message to Congress the following Tuesday. All concurred except George Bancroft, Secretary of the Navy. It was not war that Bancroft feared; rather, he suggested it would be better to wait until Mexico committed some act of hostility. Little did he realize the prophetic nature of his wish.

The cabinet adjourned at two o'clock in the afternoon. By six that same evening dispatches from General Taylor were received containing information that Mexican troops had crossed the Rio Grande and attacked two companies of dragoons belonging to Taylor's army. All the Americans were either killed or captured. An hour later the cabinet was again seated in session. This time both President and cabinet were in step; all agreed Polk should send a message to Congress recommending prosecution of the war. Even Bancroft now had no reservations.<sup>21</sup>

Declaring Mexico the aggressor, Polk, in his message to Congress,

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<sup>20</sup> Polk, Diary, Vol. I., pp. 228-229; Van Deusen, Jacksonian Era, p. 221.

<sup>21</sup> Polk, Diary, Vol. I., pp. 384-386; Dyer, op. cit., p. 169; Fayette Copeland, Reminiscences of the Pizarro (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), p. 154.

stressed the numerous grievances of the United States against Mexico. Among them were Mexico's failure to regard its treaty obligations to pay claims owed American citizens, the extortion and pillage of American commerce, and Mexican threats of war prompted by the American annexation of Texas. Polk emphasized that in spite of all these wrongs, the United States had tried vainly to negotiate. But now, he stated, "the cup of forbearance had been exhausted. . . . Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil." War, in the President's opinion, existed by a definite act of Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

But did it? Many of Polk's contemporaries did not agree. The day after the President's speech, a groundswell of conflicting opinion arose as to the "true" origin and cause of the war. So diverse was opinion that for fifty years Mexican War historiography wavered little, except in volume, from the avenues of causation laid down by Polk's contemporaries.

One of Polk's most bitter attackers was the Whig representative from Ohio, Joshua R. Giddings. In a blistering speech the day following Polk's war message, Giddings labeled the war as one of aggression and conquest. The disputed territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande River, Giddings declared, belonged to Mexico as the inhabitants were still loyal to the Mexican government. No act of the Texan government could change the boundary. Taylor's movement to the Rio Grande,

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<sup>22</sup>Dorothy Burne Osobel, (ed.), American Foreign Policy: A Documentary Survey, 1776-1960 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961), pp. 86-87.

Giddings was sure, was "for the purpose and with full intention of bringing on a war with Mexico without consulting Congress." And the reason for the war, he believed, was to conquer California and New Mexico. Still farther, Giddings charged, the basic motive behind conquest was the plan to extend slavery.<sup>23</sup>

Following Giddings' lead, the Whigs, for the duration of the war, bitterly criticized Polk. Vividly recalling the opprobrium brought on the Federalist Party because of its opposition to the War of 1812, the Whigs, in spite of their opposition, did vote for supplies and arms. It was their dilemma to have to support the war, and yet to hold Polk and the Democrats accountable.<sup>24</sup>

Among the Whig members in Congress who violently opposed Polk's war were Ohio Senator Thomas Corwin, Representatives George Ashmun and Robert C. Winthrop, both of Massachusetts, and Columbus Delano of Ohio. Corwin probably delivered the most violent of all Whig speeches. Calling the war unjust, he maintained it had resulted from the annexation of Texas. He also questioned the constitutionality of the war, as Congress had not declared war; rather, he felt, Polk had forced the war on Mexico. Agreeing with Giddings, he believed the land between the Nueces and Rio Grande belonged not to the United States, but to Mexico. In taking possession of the land, the United States invaded Mexican territory to provoke a war to gain possession of San Francisco Bay, the best port on the

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<sup>23</sup>Congressional Globe, 29 Congress, 1st Session, pp. 641-644.

<sup>24</sup>Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, p. 276.

Pacific Ocean.<sup>25</sup>

Both Ashman and Winthrop accepted the view that Polk forced the war for conquest and colonization. Winthrop, though he believed Texas annexation was the primary cause of the war, leaned toward the abolitionist viewpoint that the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico were pressed by the advocates of slavery for the purposes of strengthening and perpetuating their peculiar institution. Polk was considered a key figure in the plot.<sup>26</sup> Ashman was silent on slavery, but he accused Polk of violating the constitution in initiating the war. He listed as the immediate cause of war Taylor's unnecessary movement from the Gueces River to the Rio Grande River, a move made to scare Mexico into accepting Slidell's demands. It was, he felt, an unnecessary military demonstration in aid of diplomacy. Negotiation, not military endeavor, should have been Polk's method.<sup>27</sup> To another Whig and fighting abolitionist, Columbus Delano, the war was "unholy, unrighteous, and damnable."<sup>28</sup>

Polk was not without his defenders. Answering Whig blasts, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas cried out:

Is there not treason in the heart that can feel, and poison  
in the breath that can utter such sentiments against our own

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<sup>25</sup>Richard L. Grossman (ed.), Bold Voices (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), pp. 194-205.

<sup>26</sup>Robert G. Winthrop, Jr., A Memoir of Robert G. Winthrop (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1897), p. 61.

<sup>27</sup>Congressional Globe, 29 Congress, 1st Session, pp. 809-812.

<sup>28</sup>Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, [c. 1928]), Vol. I, p. 416.

country, when forced to take up arms in self-defense to repel the invasion of a brutal and perfidious foe.<sup>29</sup>

Representative Howell Cobb of Georgia and Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan also strongly backed Polk, agreeing that Mexico was the aggressor. Cass felt that Mexico did cross the American boundary, but for the sake of argument suggested that Mexico, as well as the United States, could have a claim to the disputed territory; yet, the nature of the aggression would not be changed as the United States had possession of the territory. Only by war could Mexico dispute that possession. The claim for title, moreover, was a matter of diplomatic negotiation, not armed conflict, and until the problem was resolved, America had every right to be there. Any attempt by Mexico to dislodge the United States could be considered an act of war.<sup>30</sup>

Cobb argued differently. It was necessary, he maintained, to take into account the ten years' humiliation and frustration the United States had suffered because Mexico would not pay its claims debt. Also, it seemed to Cobb, the anti-Polk forces forget the Mexican declaration that the annexation of Texas by the United States was equivalent to war. Did not this threat justify the movement of Taylor's troops to the Texas border? Furthermore, at the same time that Taylor's troops were moved to the Rio Grande, Polk sent John Slidell to Mexico to try to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Rather than negotiate, Cobb stated, Mexico indignantly rejected the United States minister. It seemed obvious to Cobb that Mexico wanted war, and it

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 416-417.

<sup>30</sup>Congressional Globe, 29 Congress, 1st Session, pp. 466-467.

was also obvious and correct that Polk should want to gain possession of the disputed area so as to defend it. Was it Polk's place, he added, not to send soldiers and allow Mexico to gain the possession?<sup>31</sup> A clear title was immaterial.

Conflicting opinion on the origins of the war was not confined to Congress alone. George Gordon Meade, stationed with Taylor's troops on the Rio Grande, wrote on April 21, 1846, almost one month before Polk's declaration of war, that he believed it was Polk's desire to have a war with Mexico so as to get California.<sup>32</sup> Linking the conquest of California to a plan to extend slavery, James Russell Lowell, the abolitionist poet, summed up northern feeling through the words of Hanes Siglow: "They just want this California/Go's to lug new slave-states in."<sup>33</sup>

Closely allied in his thinking to Lowell was the articulate Horace Greeley, who forcefully expressed himself in the pages of the New York Tribune. In Greeley's opinion, the annexation of Texas by the United States and the resultant Mexican War were part of a plot by southerners to increase the political power of the slave states.<sup>34</sup> This view was also

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 1102-1103.

<sup>32</sup>George Meade, The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, edited by George G. Meade (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), Vol. I, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup>Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, [c. 1960]), p. 185.

<sup>34</sup>Clyde G. Van Deusen, Horace Greeley, Nineteenth-Century Crusader (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), p. 109; William Alexander Linn, Horace Greeley (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903), 146.



shared by another influential New Yorker, Philip Hone. Both Hone and Greeley saw slavery as a great moral issue. Greeley suggested that in fighting the Mexican War, the laws of heaven were suspended and in their place the laws of hell were established.<sup>35</sup> Hone, who characterized "Colonel Polk" during his candidacy in 1844 as General Jackson's "chief cook and bottle washer," criticized those who intimated that individuals opposed to Polk and the war were being disloyal to America. Condemning this supercilious attitude, Hone poked fun at "Pope Polk" and the "infallibility of his bull."<sup>36</sup>

Funnier on Polk's declaration that the war was waged to conquer peace, the Tribune suggested it would be more accurate to say "to conquer a piece of Mexico."<sup>37</sup> So sharp were the denunciations of Polk in Greeley's Tribune that a recent biographer of Greeley, Glyndon Van Deusen, suggested "the Mexicans had no need of an Axis Sally. Greeley did the job, and did it well, if not with great effect."<sup>38</sup> The Tribune, though, was not alone among newspapers in its criticisms of Polk and the war. The Philadelphia North American saw Mexico as the "Poland of America,"<sup>39</sup> while the Nashville

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<sup>35</sup> Van Deusen, Horace Greeley, p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> Bayard Tuckerman (ed.), The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1889) Vol. II, pp. 224, 227.

<sup>37</sup> Miss Register, July 25, 1846, p. 323.

<sup>38</sup> Van Deusen, Horace Greeley, p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> John B. McMaster, A History of the People of the United States From the Revolution to the Civil War (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1929), Vol. VII, p. 498; Congressional Globe, 30 Congress, 1st Session, p. 347.

Gazette wrote that it was a moral treason against the God of heaven for anyone to volunteer or vote a dollar for the war.<sup>40</sup>

Among the newspapers, as in the Congress, Polk had his defenders. The pro-Polk Washington Daily Union declared that Mexico had caused the war by its warlike preparations and wanton attack on American troops stationed on American soil. Even before hostilities had begun, the Jeffersonian Republic of New Orleans expressed the feeling that further forbearance and leniency toward Mexico would only be taken as a sign of weakness. Another New Orleans paper, the Commercial Bulletin, wrote that the United States had borne more "insult, abuse, insolence, and injury from Mexico" than any other nation would have. Only the use of force seemed left.<sup>41</sup> A unique viewpoint as to the cause of the war was stated in the New Hampshire Statesman. Criticizing those who sympathized with Mexico, the paper suggested it was the aid and comfort of the Mexican sympathizers here that caused the war.<sup>42</sup>

Equally divided in opinion on the war during the contemporary period were the American churches. Generally, the Methodist and Southern Baptists favored the war, considering it as God's punishment of the sinful Mexicans. On the other hand, the Disciples of Christ, Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Quakers opposed the war as an invasion of Mexico, a lust for territory, and a desire to extend slavery. The Congregation-

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<sup>40</sup>McMaster, loc. cit.

<sup>41</sup>McMaster, op. cit., p. 446; Smith, War With Mexico, Vol. I, pp. 120-121.

<sup>42</sup>Wales Register, August 28, 1847, p. 411.

list Boston Recorder called it the most infamous war in American history.<sup>43</sup>

From this chaos of diverse opinion during the contemporary period, several lines of causation are distinguishable. That body of opinion favorable to Polk and his role in the coming of the war accepted his claim that Mexico, by its aggressive attitude, its disregard for American debts, and its final attack on Taylor's troops, must bear the blame for the war. The United States, a peace-loving and patient nation, was forced to fight for its honor and rights. Of that body of opinion condemning Polk and the war, the central thesis was that the war resulted from American aggression to conquer territory, especially California. Secondary to this thesis was the belief of many that this lost for land was due to a plot or conspiracy by southern slaveholders to increase the slave territory, thereby increasing the slaveholders' power in the national government.

Another line of argument was that the annexation of Texas caused the war. Here again opinion differed as to the rightness or justification of annexation. Those who believed a slave conspiracy existed also believed this same conspiracy was behind the annexation of Texas. To this group, annexation and war with Mexico were part of one grand conspiracy. Others saw the Texas annexation as perfectly justifiable, but, due to Mexico's unmitigated feeling, still the major cause of the war. These positions became more differentiated and clear in the body of literature written on the war after the conflict had ended.

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<sup>43</sup>C. S. Ellsworth, "American Churches and the Mexican War," American Historical Review, XLV (1940), pp. 312, 315-316.

The most influential writers in the postwar period were the abolitionists. Among this group William Jay and Horace Greeley were the most influential. After the Civil War, the "slave conspiracy" interpretation of the Mexican War was buttressed by the scholarly writings of Hermann von Holst and James Schouler. So influential were these abolitionist historians that their views were virtually unquestioned during the nineteenth century.

One group of historians did write favorably of the American cause. Many of these, such as Roswell Ripley and Edward Mansfield, were veterans of the war. They refused to interpret the war in terms of a slave conspiracy; rather, they believed Mexico, by its aggressive attitude and policy after the annexation of Texas, caused the war. But in the nineteenth century their voices were weak.

A change came with the opening of the twentieth century when historians reacted against the monolithic interpretation of the abolitionists. Historians such as William C. Sinkley, Eugene C. Barker, and Ephraim D. Adams, writing in a period of social reform and at a time of new American expansionism, disassociated westward expansion from slavery extension. Every facet of abolitionist argument was attacked and discredited. The publication of Polk's diary and Justin Smith's two volumes on the war caused the pendulum of interpretation to swing a full half circle. America was vindicated, slavery was rejected as an argument of causation, and Mexico was declared the aggressor.

American expansionism was the dominant theme in interpretations of the Mexican War during the twentieth century. Two schools of opinion emerged that in common recognized expansion as the major force behind the war.

One group of historians felt the war was inevitable, a war brought on by various expansionist forces, be they economic, psychological, or labeled Manifest Destiny. Both Mexico and the United States were helpless. Another group of historians interpreted the war in terms of an aggressive American expansionism. Polk, though not condemned, was accused of combining the sword with the olive branch to force Mexico's hand. Mexican weakness and the westward movement of the American settlers provided an aura of respectability to Polk's actions. Mexican lands were ripe for plucking and who could deny the Americans first pickings? The pendulum of opinion had begun to settle between the extreme nineteenth-century abolitionist view and the ultra-nationalist interpretation of the early twentieth century.

## II. A WAR FOR SLAVE PRIDE

### THE ABOLITIONIST VIEWPOINT

In the decade following the Mexican War, sectional strife increased with the intensification of the slavery issue. The slavery question was redirected from a consideration of its moral, social, and economic aspects only to one concerning its extension into the territory newly acquired from Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Sectional passions were so aroused that the Civil War historian Avery Craven has called the years 1844 to 1850 something of a watershed in the history of American democracy.<sup>2</sup>

These sectional passions were reflected in the first histories written on the war with Mexico. The northern abolitionists became the most influential Mexican War historians. So savage were their attacks on Polk that for the duration of the nineteenth century his name remained ignominiously associated with the extension of slavery. Blinded by an intense hatred of slavery, abolitionists such as William Jay, Abiel Livermore, William Goodell, and Horace Greeley viewed the Mexican War as but one incident in a grand conspiracy by southern slaveholders to extend slavery and increase southern power in the national government.<sup>3</sup> Pre-

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<sup>1</sup>J. G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, [c. 1937]), pp. 113-114.

<sup>2</sup>Avery O. Craven, Civil War in the Making, 1815-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, [c. 1952]), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Horace Greeley, The American Conflict (Hartford, Connecticut: O. D. Case and Company, 1864), Vol. I, pp. 155, 160; William Jay, A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War (Boston: Benjamin B.

occupied with proving that this southern conspiracy caused the war with Mexico, they wrote didactic rather than narrative histories. To prove that slavery, a moral evil, was the cause of the war was more important to them than to relate incidents in an historical sequence. History became a tool of the abolitionists.

The chief apostle of this slavery interpretation of the Mexican War was William Jay. Both Livermore and Goodell, writing after Jay's work appeared, depended largely on his ideas for their own books. Jay, in his A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War, started with the Missouri Compromise of 1820 in his analysis of the war. The Missouri Compromise, which prohibited slavery extension north of the 36° 30' parallel, he maintained, forced the southerners to seek land to the south and west. The first step ". . . in that career of fraud, falsehood, and violence, which ultimately led to the annexation of Texas, and the war against Mexico," began with the unsuccessful attempt by James Long in 1819 to declare Texas independent.<sup>4</sup> Moses Austin then began colonizing Texas with slaveholders, and when the Mexican government outlawed slavery in 1824 slavery appeared doomed, not only in Texas, but also in the American South. The slave states were hemmed in on all sides.<sup>5</sup>

When it became apparent that Texas was too weak to break from Mexican rule, the United States government tried to purchase Texas. Southern

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Mussey and Company, 1840), pp. 18, 31, 45; Abiel Abbot Livermore, The War With Mexico Reviewed (Boston: American Peace Society, 1850), p. 15; William Goodell, Slavery and Anti-Slavery (New York: W. Harrod, 1852), pp. 272-274.

<sup>4</sup>Jay, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 11-12.

slaveholders so liked this scheme, Jay stated, that they began a propaganda campaign to drum up American support for the purchase. Northern opposition, however, forced the South to begin rumors that Great Britain had intentions of possessing Texas,<sup>6</sup> a rumor that had great emotional effect on most Americans.

When President Jackson, whom Jay accused of succumbing to the slave interests, failed in his attempt to purchase Texas, the southern conspirators decided that revolt, separation, and annexation was the only solution.<sup>7</sup> William Goodell, in his Slavery and Anti-Slavery, used an analogy from the Bible to describe the American government's policy: "If the vineyard of Nabath could not be purchased from him for money, he could be killed, and the field taken for nothing."<sup>8</sup> To facilitate the stealing of "Nabath's vineyard" and to prepare the way for annexation, Greeley believed Sam Houston and his friends were pushed into Texas for no other reason than to take advantage of the first opportunity to foment revolution and to expell the Mexican authorities. This plot was carried out to fulfill Calhoun's plans to balance the free and slave states in the national government.<sup>9</sup> On March 2, 1836, when Texas declared independence and wrote a constitution granting perpetual slavery in Texas, the first part of this new southern strategy was accomplished. But the South realized an independent Texas would not give them added political power, explained

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Goodell, op. cit., p. 274.

<sup>9</sup>Greeley, op. cit., p. 150.



Jay; only annexation could do that. A further problem existed: northern opposition must be overcome. The persistent southerners, never lacking in ideas, found a way--war with Mexico. But Mexico must begin it.<sup>10</sup>

Made to order for such a plan was the controversy over Mexican payment of claims owed American citizens. President Jackson, insisted Jay, pushed for the payment of these claims until Mexico's refusal to comply with his wishes allowed the slave-holding minister to Mexico, Pothetan Ellis, to break diplomatic relations. Jackson was ready for war, Jay continued, but only the reluctance of the American people to shed blood over Texas stopped him.<sup>11</sup>

The slaveholders, Jay argued, did not give up. The next move was made by the Texas legislature, which laid claim to all of the territory from the source of the Rio Grande River to its mouth. This, Jay felt, was to get even more potential slave land. A further plan envisioned all of the Mexican territory to the Pacific as slave territory. Jay saw Secretary Upshur's move in sending a fleet to the Pacific as a step in this direction. It was the clear intention of the United States government to force Mexico into war, and thereby annex California. In Jay's opinion, the annexation of Texas was tantamount to a declaration of war against Mexico, made more debased by its slavery motive.<sup>12</sup>

Refusing to concede any guilt on Mexico's part, Jay praised Mexico's

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<sup>10</sup>Jay, op. cit., pp. 18, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 54, 82, 85, 105.

willingness to negotiate in spite of America's annexation of Texas. Ignoring the instability and obstinacy of the Mexican regime, Jay accused Slidell of being unduly stubborn in refusing to heed the Herrera government's request to delay his coming. This was only done, pleaded Jay, to avoid a possible revolution and to help keep Herrera in power.<sup>13</sup> Polk, who in Greeley's opinion was a slaveholder completely sold out to the slave interests,<sup>14</sup> had issued orders sending General Taylor to move on the Rio Grande before he received word of Slidell's rejection. Jay suggested that this was intended to induce Mexico to war and to facilitate the acquisition of California.<sup>15</sup>

Jay, who accepted the Nueces River as the legal and historic boundary of Texas, maintained that Taylor's move to the Rio Grande was in violation of Mexican territory. This action, he felt, converted a probable war into a certainty. The United States, rather than Mexico as Polk had asserted, was the aggressor. When Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande, they were in their own territory to give protection to their own villages and not to invade Texas.<sup>16</sup> Discounting Mexico's threats of war, Livermore suggested they were windy statements for home consumption, and that patience would have healed Mexican wounds over the loss of Texas and negotiation would have solved the boundary problem.<sup>17</sup> But when Taylor purposely

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>14</sup>Greeley, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>15</sup>Jay, loc. cit.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 123, 124, 128, 133, 134.

<sup>17</sup>Livermore, op. cit., p. 55.

blockaded the Rio Grande, Jay wrote, it was to force General Aguila to fire the first shot. And still the Mexicans did not attack. Taylor then sent out small parties of men to destroy the enemy on the eastern side of the river; a skirmish occurred and some Americans were killed. Taylor's troops, Jay stated, actually struck the first blow.<sup>18</sup>

The causes of the war, stripped of verbal falsities, were, in the abolitionists' view, the extension of slavery and the acquisition of California. In California war did not begin until after Fremont arrived. Polk, said Jay, assured Fremont that no reprimand would be given him if he, acting as a representative of the President, excited a riot and insurrection. The Navy also moved in accord with preconceived plans for the seizure of California by the American government. "The dismemberment of another, not the defense of its own country, was the object of the American Government," declared Jay. The aggressive war differed "from murder and robbery only in the stupendous enormity and extent of the crime."<sup>19</sup>

The abolitionist historians' belief in the existence of a slaveholders' plot to extend slavery was further strengthened by the outbreak of the Civil War. They saw this war as the great climax to the slave conspiracy and were therefore convinced of the rightness of their historical interpretation. The abolitionist viewpoint continued to dominate

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<sup>18</sup>Jay, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 135, 156-157, 165, 162.

Mexican War historiography for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

The post-Civil War generation of historians was both nationalistic and opposed to slavery. Dozens of writers passed judgment on the rebellious South for its assault on American nationality and its defense of a decadent civilization.<sup>20</sup> Representing the tradition of Jay and Greeley were Hermann von Holst, James Schouler, and Henry Wilson. Wilson's History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America, published in 1874, was similar to Coedell's history of slavery. Wilson represented the extreme northern antislavery tradition; he had been active in politics since the 1840's, and had gained a wide reputation as a champion of the workingman and an opponent of slavery. Opposed to President Johnson's moderate reconstruction views, he was closely allied to the radical reconstructionists in Congress and secured the vice-presidential spot on Grant's ticket in 1872.<sup>21</sup>

As the title of his book indicates, it deals with the supposed slave power of the antebellum years; historical events are subservient to the central theme of slavery. The claim is made that the slave power controlled the Democratic party and thereby the national government. The conspirators used their power in Congress to pass obnoxious measures that were inconsistent with the principles upon which the United States had been founded.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Kraus, The Writing of American History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas J. Prosser, Americans Interpret Their Civil War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 38-39.

The votes for the annexation of Texas and for prosecuting the Mexican War were just such measures. Polk, Wilson believed, violated the Mexican boundary and precipitated war when he ordered Taylor to invade Mexico. Wilson stated that the judgment of mankind must hold Polk responsible for the war. Furthermore, Polk's primary motive was the acquisition of territory to expand and develop the slaveholders' favorite institution.<sup>22</sup>

Writing early in the 1880's, the German scholar Hermann von Holst condemned the evils of slavery in strong moral terms. He represented, in the words of Michael Kraus, ". . . the fullest flowering of the Federalist-Whig-Republican school of history--nationalist, Northern, anti-slavery."<sup>23</sup> Representative of his scornful judgments on the war was his condemnation of President Polk's war speech: "The very school boys laughed at the fable of the 'urgent necessity' of defending Texas."<sup>24</sup> While von Holst wrote his history at the beginning of the decade, James Schouler, who was also fiercely antislavery and believed slavery wasteful and unrighteous,<sup>25</sup> wrote at its close. His narrative, biased by his strong antislavery feeling, concluded that Texas annexation and the Mexican War were caused by a southern conspiracy to extend slavery.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Henry Wilson, History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America (Boston: James N. Osgood and Company, 1874), Vol. II, pp. 7-13.

<sup>23</sup>Kraus, op. cit., p. 197.

<sup>24</sup>Harvey Wish, The American Historian (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup>Kraus, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>26</sup>James Schouler, History of the United States of America Under the Constitution (Washington, D. C.: William H. Morrison, 1889), Vol. IV, p. 519.

Von Holst dismissed Mexico's war clamor as unimportant because of the weakness of the Mexican nation. He thought it absurd that Mexico should wage war over the loss of Texas to vindicate its national honor. Von Holst also poked fun at General Taylor's inquiry to the administration as to the position of the western boundary of Texas. He saw this as proof that differences of opinion prevailed. Von Holst facetiously conceded a partial truth in the assertion that Texan jurisdiction went beyond the Nueces River--at least to the western bank of the river.<sup>27</sup> Further proofs that Polk distorted the truth concerning the boundary, he wrote, were the duties paid to Mexican officials at Brazzo, a town at the mouth of the Rio Grande, and Taylor's orders not to molest Mexican troops and military posts east of the Rio Grande.<sup>28</sup>

Von Holst further criticized Polk by accusing him of shifting the boundary, which had been purposely left open for negotiation. Polk then argued that he had a right to defend his new boundary, which made a clash inevitable. Polk violated the American Constitution by presenting to Congress a ready-made war.<sup>29</sup> Schouler was even more critical than von Holst of the boundary issue. He criticized the United States for leaving the boundary question open to negotiation. He castigated Tyler for adopting ". . . the fraud of the Texas revolutionists in voting to themselves the whole dominion of Mexico. . ." to the Rio Grande. This meant ". . . that the glut of our slaveholders would not be satiated without a new boundary

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<sup>27</sup>Hermann Eduard von Holst, The Constitutional and Political History of the United States, trans. John J. Lalor and Paul Shorey (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1891), Vol. III, pp. 31, 84.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

line across the continent which would give them New Mexico and . . . California."<sup>30</sup> Suggesting the wolf as America's national emblem, Schouler accused Polk of sending Taylor to the Rio Grande to maintain a "pretentious claim." When the Mexican government refused to be bought, Schouler insisted, Slidell was asked to seek recognition from the Paredes government so as to establish a clear case of refusal to present to Congress as a pretext for more energetic measures.<sup>31</sup> When Slidell returned to the United States, Schouler wrote graphically, ". . . it was left for the wolf to proclaim to the American people how the lamb had polluted the waters."<sup>32</sup>

Von Holst charged that Polk wanted to make the rules he was to play by. In the "ultimatum" presented to Mexico, Slidell demanded that Mexico cede all the land which the United States claimed, or pay the consequences, which, according to von Holst, Polk had already in mind.<sup>33</sup> Evidently, von Holst did not have access to all the documents, for Slidell was actually told in the dispatches that if necessary he was to settle just for the boundary with no other territory. When negotiations failed and Taylor was ordered by General Arista to retreat to the Nueces River, Taylor blockaded the Rio Grande. By not denouncing this provocative act, von Holst declared, Polk shared in its guilt. This act forced hostilities.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Schouler, op. cit., p. 519.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 519, 525.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 527.

<sup>33</sup>Von Holst, op. cit., pp. 107-108.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

But the important question to von Holst was not who fired the first shot or gave the first order, or even on whose soil blood was shed. The most important question was who made it necessary for the first shot to be fired. Von Holst had an unequivocal answer: President Polk.<sup>35</sup> Both von Holst and Schouler believed the President purposely precipitated the war to conquer California and New Mexico, since they could not be gained by purchase.<sup>36</sup> Schouler was convinced Polk's primary motive was to extend the area of slavery and strengthen the southern states against northern encroachment.<sup>37</sup> Von Holst reproached Congress for its share of the guilt in sanctioning Polk's war to extend slavery.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the large histories written by von Holst and Schouler, several other books were written that adhered to the same abolitionist viewpoint. In 1883, Horatio Ladd published his History of the War With Mexico, in which he described the war as a struggle for supremacy by the southern slaveholders. Not lacking in boldness, he succinctly wrote: "The potent cause and ruling motive . . . of the war with Mexico was the purpose to extend human slavery into free territory."<sup>39</sup>

Ladd differed from both Schouler and von Holst, however, in not connecting the slave conspiracy to the desire to annex Texas when the move was first proposed. Rather, he explained how England and France both proposed to limit the territorial advance of the United States. He

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 238, 253.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 253; Schouler, op. cit., p. 526.

<sup>37</sup>Schouler, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup>Von Holst, loc. cit.

<sup>39</sup>Horatio Oliver Ladd, History of the War With Mexico (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, [c. 1883/], p. 29.



maintained that United States-Texas interests were identical and that Texas annexation was essential to the welfare of the nation. But then the slavery question entered into the debate over annexation. Northern Whigs and free-soilers believed annexation would result in war, and the very idea of having to fight a foreign war to extend slavery and to increase slave power was too much for them to accept. Here was the wedge that ignited a contest for political supremacy between slave and free sections of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

Denying the struggle was primarily sectional, Ladd pointed out that it was not a North-South fight because the Democratic party, North and South, upheld the slave institution of the South. Fear of a great slave empire did help to merge Whig and free-soil elements in the North against Texas annexation and war with Mexico. Concealing his aggressive designs against a "weak, miserable and distracted" Mexico, Folk took advantage of the excitement caused by unpaid claims owed American citizens. Ladd saw no justification for war over the claims issue.<sup>41</sup> "It was taking a cowardly advantage of a weak nation. . . ,"<sup>42</sup> forcing it to fight by invading its soil. Taylor's orders, Ladd wrote, were issued by a "war-loving government" to provoke Mexico purposely to war in order to conquer its territory in the interest of slavery.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 26, 28, 33.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 36, 40.

Three other post-Civil War writers who accepted the abolitionist interpretation were Theodore Roosevelt, Ulysses S. Grant, and John Fiske. All three presented the same antislavery arguments. Grant in his memoirs called the war "the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."<sup>44</sup> Writing as an old man, he saw the "Southern Rebellion" as a punishment for the transgressions of the Mexican War.<sup>45</sup>

Roosevelt's biography of Thomas H. Benton is as colorful as it is biased. Castigating the Democrats for inventing new slave states, Roosevelt believed Polk was backed by "rabid Southern fire-eaters and slavery extensionists, who had defied Negro bondage and exalted it beyond the Union, the Constitution, and everything else. . . ."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Fiske, in How the United States Became a Nation, maintained that war with Mexico would have been unthinkable without the machinations of the slaveholders.<sup>47</sup>

The abolitionist interpretation remained strong until the close of the nineteenth century. The extension of slavery was held to be the cause of the war. The United States was condemned as an aggressor, while the Mexicans were praised for their courageous fight. Yet not all historians of the nineteenth century, by any means, accepted this interpretation.

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<sup>44</sup>Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885), Vol. I, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>46</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Hart Benton (in American Statesmen, ed. John T. Morse, Jr. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, [c. 1886]), p. 291.

<sup>47</sup>John Fiske, How the United States Became a Nation (Boston: Cinn and Company, 1887), p. 152.

Many believed that the United States was justified in its war with Mexico, and to their writings we now turn in chapter three.

### III. TO THE HALLS OF PONTEZUMA

#### A WAR OF HONOR

In contrast to the interpretations of the abolitionists were interpretations by historians, many of whom took part in the war, who felt the United States had every right to prosecute war against Mexico. Calling the Mexicans bigoted, cruel, and inhuman, Captain John T. Hughes wrote in 1847 that Mexico seized upon the false pretext of Taylor's march into disputed territory to declare war on the United States. The United States was fully justified, he wrote, in repelling the hostile invasion and vindicating its national honor.<sup>1</sup>

This group of writers held that Mexico's aggressive attitude and actions were the cause of the war. On related questions, such as Texas annexation, the conquest of California, and Polk's policy and diplomacy, close agreement was lacking. In 1849 two books representing the pro-American view, both by former soldiers in the war, were published. Though differing on specific matters, Roswell Ripley's The War With Mexico and Edward D. Mansfield's The Mexican War took similar approaches. Each saw the hand of God leading the destiny of the nation; America's mission to conquer a continent was predetermined by God himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Captain John T. Hughes, Doniphan's Expedition, An Account of the Conquest of New Mexico (Cincinnati: U. P. James, 1847), pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup>Edward D. Mansfield, The Mexican War (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, tenth edition: 1849), pp. 321-323; Roswell Sabin Ripley, The War With Mexico (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1849), Vol. I, p. 26.

Both Ripley and Mansfield accepted the rightness of American action in annexing Texas and castigated the Mexicans for their war-like threats to the American government. Mansfield did criticize the American government for its lack of prudence in neglecting to prepare militarily as Texas annexation was consummated. The Mexican threats of retaliation, he maintained, were meant to be taken literally.<sup>3</sup> When Polk sent Taylor to the Texas frontier, it was a defensive measure in answer to the Mexican threats.<sup>4</sup> Concerning Polk's assertion that the Rio Grande was the proper boundary, however, these two writers differed. Mansfield accepted the stipulation in the resolution of annexation that the territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers was disputable. In order to justify Taylor's movement into the territory, he theorized that it was not the boundary Polk sought to defend, but the state of Texas from Mexican attack. Emphatically he declared Polk did not attempt to defend an imaginary boundary.<sup>5</sup>

Ripley, on the other hand, based the American claim on the Treaty of Velasco of 1836. At that time, Santa Anna, prisoner of the Texans following his defeat at San Jacinto, acknowledged the Rio Grande River as the western boundary of Texas and agreed to remove Mexican troops to the western bank of the Rio Grande. Subsequently, the Mexican government had repudiated the treaty as invalid because Santa Anna was under duress as a prisoner.<sup>6</sup> After Texas was annexed and the boundary became a thorn

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<sup>3</sup>Mansfield, op. cit., pp. 12-16; Ripley, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>Mansfield, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Ripley, op. cit., pp. 35, 36.

to peaceful United States-Mexican relations, the United States, according to Ripley, acted on a de facto state of affairs, regardless of Mexican theory. To prove his contention that Texas controlled the territory to the Rio Grande, Ripley pointed to the proclamation by General Woll ending an armistice between the Texans and the Mexicans in 1844. Woll warned that any individual found a distance of one league from the left bank of the Rio Grande would be considered an accomplice in the usurpation that Texas held possession of the disputed territory. But then Ripley contradicted himself. Texas, he stated, never had undisputed possession of this territory; and its sole claim was not, as he stated previously, based on a de facto situation, but on the treaty made with Santa Anna and his generals.<sup>7</sup>

When peace negotiations were attempted by Slidell, Taylor's march was an American attempt to induce Mexico to listen to Slidell and to remind the Mexicans of the possible results if they refused to negotiate.<sup>8</sup> This effort at negotiation showed that the United States was bending over backwards to placate the Mexicans in spite of their preparation for war. Ripley believed the Mexican people, holding an exaggerated view of their military ability, demanded and clamored for war. This attitude reached fruition in the military coup of Parades; he was obliged to begin hostilities. This was accomplished when Mexican forces crossed the Rio Grande and attacked Taylor's forces.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-84.

Mansfield was somewhat harsher on Slidell. Realizing the Mexican government could not receive him so suddenly because of popular excitement, Slidell, Mansfield stated, by insisting he be received immediately, defeated the peaceful intentions of the Mexican government. Polk, anticipating Slidell's failure, had ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande before he could have received word of Slidell's failure. Rather than emphasize this initiative taken by Polk, Mansfield chose to emphasize the complete lack of war plans in America, which proved to him that the American government had nothing but peaceful intentions. It was the swiftness and apparent weakness of Taylor's forces that inspired courage in the Mexicans to attack the American forces.<sup>10</sup>

Both Ripley and Mansfield agreed that the conquest of California and New Mexico was incidental to the main theater of war; the territory was seized as an indemnity for the wrongs inflicted on the United States by Mexico. To disprove the arguments of those who charged that the conquest of California was the cause of the war, Ripley pointed to the many attempts by the American government to purchase California to gain a port on the Pacific. He explained that the Polk administration's detailed plans for seizing California were further proof of Mexican obstinacy and were formulated to assure an indemnity in case of war.<sup>11</sup>

Mansfield was skeptical of Polk's motives. Polk's subsequent actions, Mansfield believed, gave sufficient proof that permanent conquest

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<sup>10</sup> Mansfield, op. cit., pp. 26-32.

<sup>11</sup> Ripley, op. cit., p. 149.

was intended as a result. That Frémont appeared in California just in time for war was no problem for either historian. They accepted the validity of his scientific mission; Mansfield explained that it was only after Frémont learned of General Castro's plans to attack American settlers at San Francisco that he fought to overthrow the Mexican government.<sup>12</sup>

Also defending Polk from charges that he waged a war of conquest was the historian John S. Jenkins, who soon after the war wrote History of the War Between the United States and Mexico and The Life of James Knox Polk. Dismissing conquest as a cause of the war, Jenkins stated that the annexation of Texas was the original and prime cause. Developing his argument, Jenkins looked to the disreputable character and values of the Mexicans; he pointed also to the many grievances held by United States citizens because of plundered vessels, confiscated goods, and unjust imprisonments. The disavowal of the Treaty of Velasco by the Mexican government was further evidence to Jenkins of the looseness of the Mexican character. As the treaty was made by a chief magistrate exercising dictatorial power, Jenkins argued that good faith on the part of the government should have caused Mexico to ratify Santa Anna's acts.<sup>13</sup>

Jenkins' unique contribution to the historiography of this period was his explanation for the United States' right to the disputed territory and Rio Grande boundary. He acknowledged a quasi-state of war between the

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<sup>12</sup>Mansfield, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>John S. Jenkins, History of the War Between the United States and Mexico (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1852), pp. 23, 37, 48.



United States and Mexico from the time Texas was annexed. The Mexican foreign minister Doanegra announced on August 23, 1843, that annexation would mean war. This threat was reiterated by the Mexican minister in Washington, General Almonte, and by President Santa Anna. To implement this threat, forces were mobilized to reconquer Texas.<sup>14</sup> As no immediate hostile action followed this mobilization, America did not let the threat stop the annexation of Texas. Mexico immediately broke diplomatic relations. In the resolution of annexation, the boundary question was left open for future negotiation, but, Jenkins argued, as all avenues of intercourse were closed by Mexico, there was no recourse left to the United States except to decide the boundary alone, until Mexico was ready to negotiate.<sup>15</sup>

At this point Jenkins invoked his theory of national law: boundaries are always obliterated by a revolution, as in a situation of war between two contiguous countries. On this theory Jenkins built his case. The only obligation on the part of the American government, he stated, was to ascertain how far Texas extended its limits by conquest or occupation or by consent on the part of Mexico.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the only necessary burden of proof lay in showing that the Rio Grande boundary was either conquered from Mexico or assented to by Mexico. Developing his proof, Jenkins explained how at the cessation of hostilities between Mexico and Texas, General Cos retired beyond the Rio Grande; then at

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 44, 212, 213; John S. Jenkins, The Life of James Knox Polk (Auburn: James E. Alden, 1850), p. 245.

<sup>15</sup>Jenkins, History of the War, pp. 40, 41, 47; Jenkins, Life of Polk, p. 245.

<sup>16</sup>Jenkins, Life of Polk, p. 246.

Velasco, Santa Anna, possessing supreme powers, entered into an agreement establishing the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas. Mexico's gain by this acknowledgement was the rescue of its army from disaster and disgrace. Good faith, Jenkins repeated, required Mexico to ratify the treaty.<sup>17</sup>

As further evidence of Texan control of the territory to the Rio Grande, Jenkins wrote how Houston, upon hearing rumors of Mexican attacks, took troops to Corpus Christi and then sent scouts to the Rio Grande. There were no permanent Mexican settlements there except a few herders and smugglers who, upon the arrival of Houston's troops, scattered to the west bank of the river leaving Houston in complete control of all the territory to the Rio Grande River. Houston's control of this territory was taken into consideration when the law in Texas was passed in 1836 setting the boundary of Texas at the Rio Grande. Custom houses, post offices, post roads, and election precincts were all established west of the Nueces. It was only Texan indifference and grace, Jenkins declared, that allowed Mexicans to settle east of the Rio Grande.<sup>18</sup>

Jenkins capped his argument with still further evidence that the Rio Grande was the legitimate boundary of Texas. He found further proof in the way Slidell was rejected by the Herrera government. At no time, he stated, did Herrera use as an excuse not to receive Slidell the fact that the United States occupied the disputed territory with Taylor's troops. Besides, Taylor's movement to the Rio Grande was well known in

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>18</sup>Jenkins, History of the War, pp. 51, 55.

advance by the Mexicans; yet, no preparations were made by Mexico to resist his approach.<sup>19</sup> The occupation of the disputed land was never criticized by Mexico until the question became an issue raised by Folk's political opponents.<sup>20</sup> The origin of the war, as Jenkins saw it, was due to the annexation of Texas. This was Mexico's principle grievance. All else--Taylor's occupation of Corpus Christi, the naval squadron at the Gulf of Mexico, and Taylor's advance to and blockade of the Rio Grande River--was incidental, merely aggravating the primary cause.<sup>21</sup>

Four other books written prior to the Civil War also vindicated the United States. Samuel J. Bayard in his A Sketch of the Life of Commodore Robert F. Stockton emphasized that interest in conquering California began only after war had begun. War was not for the purpose of conquering California.<sup>22</sup> George C. Furber's The Twelve Months Volunteer, an account of a year of service by a soldier, accepted Texas annexation as both morally and legally just; it pointed out the ten years of independence, the recognition of Texas by foreign powers, and, most important, the mutual agreement of peoples to unite. Mexico would not accept these facts, however, and broke diplomatic relations, declaring its intention to reconquer Texas. Texas then rightfully requested the United States army to protect its frontier. Mexico's determination for war reached

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.

<sup>20</sup>Jenkins, Life of Folk, p. 250.

<sup>21</sup>Jenkins, History of the War, pp. 58-59.

<sup>22</sup>Samuel J. Bayard, A Sketch of the Life of Commodore Robert F. Stockton (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), p. 94.

fruition in its attack on Taylor's troops.<sup>23</sup>

John F. Claiborne in his book on the life of General John A. Quitman was even more hostile toward Mexico. He felt Mexico's belligerent attitude justified a war for conquest as the Mexicans were a "bastard and robber race, incapable of self-government and only fit for servitude and military rule."<sup>24</sup> The annexation of Texas, by inciting the Mexicans to begin hostilities, was the prime cause leading to war.<sup>25</sup> Reverend Walter Colton, in his Three Years in California, wrote of the surprise of the Californians at the United States' conquest. Colton believed that justification for United States' conquest could be found in the anarchy and confusion in California.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the dominance of abolitionist interpretation in most histories written after the Civil War, two books did appear which interpreted the war as a just one. The first book, History of the Mexican War, was written in 1892 by General Cadmus M. Wilcox. In his preface Wilcox stated his premise: the war was just and unavoidable and American aims were honest and patriotic. Mexico's ill feelings after the annexation of Texas and its attacks on the rights of American persons and property made the war inevitable. Wilcox was so firm in his belief

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<sup>23</sup>George C. Furber, The Twelve Months Volunteer (Cincinnati: D. P. James, 1857), pp. 16-24.

<sup>24</sup>John Francis Hamtramck Claiborne, Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1860), p. 270.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>26</sup>Reverend Walter Colton, Three Years in California (New York: A. S. Barnes and Burr, 1860), p. 19.

in the inevitability of war that he boldly stated that had the Texas question not existed these belligerent actions by Mexico would have brought on a war anyway.<sup>27</sup> It was only in response to Mexican threats that General Taylor was sent to the Texas border; it was only to purchase Mexican territory in a peaceful way that Slidell was sent to Mexico. There was no thought of conquest, said Wilcox.<sup>28</sup>

A biography of President James Buchanan written by George Ticknor Curtis appeared a few years after Wilcox's history. Curtis, like Wilcox, believed the American cause was just. Polk, acting in behalf of American interests, justifiably sent Taylor to the Rio Grande in face of Mexican threats. Curtis avoided the question of the disputed territory by refusing to acknowledge that any controversy existed. He took it for granted that the territory was American. Therefore, it followed that it was the duty of the American government to defend this territory from invasion. This was especially necessary, Curtis declared, as Mexico had refused to receive Slidell, thereby closing the door to any settlement of disputes between the two countries.<sup>29</sup>

From the paucity of material defending the United States' position in the Mexican War, it is clearly evident that the abolitionist interpretation was completely dominant after the Civil War. Not until the close

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<sup>27</sup> General Cadmus M. Wilcox, History of the Mexican War (Washington, D. C.: The Church News Publishing Company, 1892), pp. 1, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 8, 29.

<sup>29</sup> George Ticknor Curtis, Life of James Buchanan (New York: Harper and Brothers, Franklin Square, 1863), pp. 582, 600.

of the nineteenth century did a revolt against the abolitionist interpretation occur.

Thomas Hart Benton, Carl Schurz, and Hubert Howe Bancroft defy categorization during the period in which they wrote. Denying that slavery was the dominant cause of the Mexican War, yet refusing to accept the view that the United States was justified in the war, these historians, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, foreshadowed interpretations not to appear until the twentieth century.

Benton, combining history and autobiography in his Thirty Years' View,<sup>30</sup> was one of the first to see the American expansionist movement as something different from the movement to extend slavery. He also refused to believe the United States was not guilty in its war against Mexico.<sup>31</sup> Biased by personal hatred, he identified all of the causes of the Mexican War in the person of John C. Calhoun. The ultimate step that led to war, in Benton's view, was Calhoun's promise to send troops to Texas while annexation was pending. Without this plodge, Benton felt, there would have been no war. Mexico and Texas, he optimistically stated, would have made peace and annexation would have been accomplished peacefully.<sup>32</sup> Why did Calhoun make such a promise? Benton found the answer

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<sup>30</sup>Michael Kraus, The Writing of American History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup>Thomas Hart Benton, Thirty Years' View (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), pp. 646, 678.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 639, 643-644.

in Calhoun's presidential aspirations, but did not elaborate on how these aspirations prompted him to make such a promise. He did state that Calhoun was aware that annexation would lead to a war with Mexico.<sup>33</sup> This hardly seems credible in view of Calhoun's vigorous stand against the war when it did come. The main point in Benton's argument that annexation caused the war hinged on his belief that Mexico and Texas were still legally at war. The United States, then, inherited a war when it annexed Texas.<sup>34</sup>

Benton also criticized Polk's reasons for waging war. He believed Mexico had every right to consider American troops on the Rio Grande as aggression; he held that the territory between the Neucos and Rio Grande rivers had always been and still was in the possession of Mexico.<sup>35</sup> He further accused Polk of unconstitutional action in beginning the war as Congress alone had the power to declare war.<sup>36</sup> Nowhere in his arguments against the war did Benton mention slavery as a prime motive, nor did he criticize Polk's California policy. This was hardly possible when his own son-in-law, John C. Frémont, played such a large and controversial part in conquering California. Benton, though refusing to see justice in the manner war was initiated and conducted against Mexico, did not question the need of the United States to expand.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 644, 648.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 643.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 678.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 612.

Also believing that war could have been avoided was Carl Schurz. In his biography of Henry Clay for the American Statesmen series, he maintained that patient negotiations could have negated the need for war. It was only when Polk decided to settle the boundary question by force that trouble began. Schurz, like Benton, believed the United States annexed war when it annexed Texas; but he argued that war could still have been avoided if the United States had been satisfied with Texas as then occupied, seeking at a future date to adjust the Rio Grande boundary by patient negotiation.<sup>37</sup> Polk, however, was interested in California. Schurz insisted that Polk was determined to have it whether Slidell succeeded in purchasing it or not.<sup>38</sup> Again it is significant that Schurz made no mention of a desire on Polk's part to acquire territory to extend slavery.

Likewise, Hubert H. Bancroft, in his A Popular History of the Mexican People, was silent concerning slavery though claiming the war was needless. Passing judgment on both sides, Bancroft said war was begun by the United States with little justification and pressed by Mexico with lack of foresight as to the results. The United States, rather than fighting Mexico, should have helped in building up its republican institution.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Carl Schurz, Life of Henry Clay (in American Statesmen, ed. John T. Morse, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, [c. 1915]), p. 273.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>39</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, A Popular History of the Mexican People (San Francisco: The History Company Publishers, 1867), pp. 449, 450.



Not until the twentieth century was expansion understood as a movement separate from slavery extension. Benton, Schurz, and Bancroft foreshadowed viewpoints that prevailed a generation later. Expansion, without slavery, was later accepted as a primary explanation of the Mexican War. The result of this expansionist theme, of course, was a vindication of the United States from abolitionist charges. The views of Mansfield, Ripley, and Wilcox, though they had little influence in the century in which they were written, reached fruition in the next century when new apologists, such as Justin Smith and James McCormac, took up America's cause.

#### IV. A NEW VINDICATION OF THE WAR

The closing years of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth have often been called a watershed period in American History. In the historiography of the Mexican War, these same years can likewise be called a watershed.

New social, economic, and intellectual forces produced a climate of opinion that sharply affected writing about the war. Agrarianism, once the dominant way of life, gave way to a new industrial America. Industrialism, growing since the close of the Civil War, reached staggering proportions under the leadership of such industrialists as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford. The growth of great cities paralleled the growth of industry: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago became great centers of industrial, business, and financial activity. This growth of urbanism brought a train of new social problems; health, housing, and working conditions became the concern of state and national governments. The turn of the century was also the time of large-scale immigration. After reaching America's shores, these Europeans often settled in eastern cities, where they created further social problems. Language barriers, ghetto living conditions, and poor wages made assimilation of these immigrants more difficult.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Lewis Allen, The Big Change: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950 (New York: Harper and Brothers, [c. 1952?]), pp. 3-8, 27, 51-42; George Edwin Mowry, The Era of Theodore Roosevelt, 1900-1912 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 2, 12-13.

The uneven distribution of wealth made American life sharply stratified. This stratification of social classes was magnified by the crowded, close living conditions in the great cities. In New York City, on fashionable Fifth Avenue, mansions and wealth were found, while a few blocks east there were slums and poverty. These striking differences helped shatter older concepts and social philosophies and brought on a wave of reform. By the early 1900's, a movement known as progressivism took the political stage. It was indicative of the new intellectual and philosophical mood of the country. Rather than a mechanical, deterministic view of nature, a pragmatic, relative philosophy became prevalent. Man was sure he could make change; no longer was he a pawn on the chessboard of nature. Social Darwinism, with its pessimistic view of man's ability to control his environment, was dying. Men could act and progressives were ready to effect important social and political changes.<sup>2</sup>

America also pushed its frontiers beyond the American continent. Commercial expansion and foreign markets were pushed with new zeal by a prosperous and optimistic nation. A war with Spain was fought and won. Overnight America acquired an empire: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines. Providence, it was sometimes argued, had foreordained America to bring enlightenment to inferior people.<sup>3</sup>

This optimistic, expansive spirit produced a new climate for writers of history. In reinterpreting their past, historians viewed the expansionist tendencies of the 1840's in a new perspective. Writing in the American

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<sup>2</sup>Allen, op. cit., pp. 95-101; Mowry, op. cit., pp. 12-15, 18-37.

<sup>3</sup>Mowry, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

Historical Review, Edward G. Bourne paved the way for the expansionist theme. He attempted to disassociate in the minds of Americans the expansionist movement from the movement to extend slavery. Bourne explained that Polk was not an expansionist to extend slavery, but to increase the national domain. Whether Polk wanted or welcomed war with Mexico for the purpose of expansion did not matter. The important thing was to divorce permanently two distinct episodes: expansion and slavery extension.<sup>4</sup>

Not all historians were ready to follow Bourne as yet, however. Some doubt still existed in the minds of John W. Foster and Edwin E. Sparks. Foster, writing in 1901, believed Mexico had been in earnest in its declaration that the annexation of Texas would result in war; and when Taylor advanced beyond the Nueces River, he was begging to be attacked. On the question of the "why" of the war, Foster related the judgment of history that Texas annexation and the Mexican War were brought about for the purpose of strengthening slavery; but he did not leave it at that. Now unsure of the slavery interpretation, he interjected into his final conclusion the idea that the war might have been simply an urge to extend the national domain.<sup>5</sup> Foster's work was at least an attempt to

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<sup>4</sup>Edward G. Bourne, "The Proposed Absorption of Mexico in 1847-48," American Historical Association, Annual Report (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), Vol. I, pp. 158, 159; Edward G. Bourne, "The United States and Mexico, 1847-1848," American Historical Review, V (April, 1900), pp. 492-496.

<sup>5</sup>John W. Foster, A Century of American Diplomacy (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), pp. 314-323.

put the expansionist theme in a category of its own, rather than just a tail to slavery extension.

Sparks' history also mixed slavery and expansion but Sparks was more positive than Foster. Arguing that slavery was not the principle motive for the acquisition of California and New Mexico, he said that geography was against such a view. California, he believed, was destined to be part of the United States; the war merely provided an excuse for more rapid annexation.<sup>6</sup> Public opinion, Sparks held, wanted expansion and Polk bowed to it through his aggressive policy.<sup>7</sup> Sparks, however, did not go so far as to define the war in terms of expansion alone. In summing up, he said, "It was not altogether a war fought for the extension of slavery. It was a war for the extension of American territory."<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting fully the nationalistic tendencies of the twentieth century, Charles H. Owen wrote a kind of lawyer's brief in 1908 to dispute every argument of the abolitionists and to vindicate the United States. Owen was concerned with acquitting the United States of what he called the most serious charge ever made against its honor. He criticized the reasoning and methods of historical research used by various historians in their criticism of America's role in the war against Mexico.<sup>9</sup> His own

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<sup>6</sup>Edwin Eric Sparks, The United States of America (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1904), Vol. II, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 146-147.

<sup>9</sup>Charles H. Owen, The Justice of the Mexican War (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1908), p. iv.

premise was that the Americans, through their election of Polk, expressed favor for the annexation of Texas.<sup>10</sup> To prove this position, he argued that after the war began the people enthusiastically sustained it. He implied that this support proved that the people had favored the war from its inception. Owen further criticized those historians who looked with disdain at these expansionist years. He accused them of being too tender-minded when dealing with a tough-minded, ambitious people. Illustrating, he denied Schouler's charge that the United States was a wolf in its dealing with Mexico's possession. Owen stated that Texas was a legitimate child, and one that the United States could be proud of.<sup>11</sup>

The historian-lawyer then defended the Texas revolution by sharply criticizing Ladd's view that it had been the work of proslavery men. Ladd had complained that the Alamo and Goliad tragedies had unreasonably poisoned the minds of Americans; both the Mexicans and Texans were rough border people, he believed, and had used similar tactics. But Owen argued that Ladd had not used a single authority nor mentioned a single incident of the Texans' breach of the rules of honorable warfare.<sup>12</sup> Defending Texan character against Ladd's charges, Owen emphasized that the Texans, rather than depending on slavery, relied on their own ingenuity and sweat. As Mexico afforded no protection, these industrious, orderly, and agricultural Texans were in effect self-governing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

Owen proceeded to the defense of America's claim to the Rio Grande boundary. He began by mentioning the fight at Goliad in 1835, in which the Mexicans were defeated and compelled to surrender. Upon their parole, the Mexican troops retired west of the Rio Grande. This episode gave Texas the Rio Grande boundary by conquest. If the United States had then annexed Texas and sent an army to the Rio Grande, Owen maintained, not a nation in Europe would have complained.<sup>14</sup>

But Owen did not stop here. The key point in his argument lay in the Velasco treaties. The political conditions at the time of the treaties, Owen maintained, were no different from those at the time the United States recognized the independence of Mexico from Spain. Furthermore, there was never any serious attempt by Mexico to invade Texas or any of the territory east of the Rio Grande. Therefore, the United States had every right to annex Texas with the Rio Grande boundary, though it had not.<sup>15</sup> President Jackson had only extended official recognition to Texas as an independent nation, and even this action had been delayed longer than the United States' recognition of Mexican independence from Spain. Furthermore, Spain had had military posts and ports in Mexico when the United States had recognized Mexico's independence; in 1837 every military post and port in Texas was in the hands of the Texans.<sup>16</sup> Summarizing his position on the boundary dispute, Owen concluded that there was no reason

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 109-110.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 126-127, 130-131.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 138-139.

for any United States official to question the American claim to the Rio Grande boundary.<sup>17</sup>

The next two issues Owen dealt with were the slavery and claims issues. Owen felt the causes of the war were so intricate and interrelated that it was extremely difficult to interpret the real causes of the war. Because of this difficulty, Owen wrote, historians, seeking an easy solution, had attributed the cause of the war to slavery.<sup>18</sup> A group of slaveholders, led by Calhoun, did favor southwestern expansion and they took advantage of every opportunity to secure popular favor for their goals. But, Owen maintained, their power had limitations. "They did not and could not create the conditions; they found them existing and only controlled results as far as possible."<sup>19</sup> John Quincy Adams' charge of a slave plot, Owen felt, did not hold to facts. President Tyler had disavowed any intrigue to annex Texas and, if anything, had tried to view annexation as an American rather than a sectional problem. Webster, Tyler, and Henry Clay all had tried to keep the solution of the Texas question out of politics.<sup>20</sup>

Owen enumerated other reasons for the American desire to annex Texas: American kinship with the Texan people, sympathy for the Texan cause, and indignation at Mexican barbarities. Stressing the close kinship, Owen wrote that "Remember the Alamo" meant as much to Americans as

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 145-150.



the later cry of "Remember the Fairies."<sup>21</sup> Slavery extension, rather than a prime factor in hastening annexation and war, only hindered them; had it not been for the slavery question, Texas probably would have been annexed after the Mexican barbarities at Collied.<sup>22</sup>

In defending the American claims position, Owen attacked sharply Schouler's charge that the United States had demanded indemnity in an undiplomatic and offensive manner. Owen compared the American method of settling the claims question with those of the English and French.<sup>23</sup> England, he pointed out, had threatened to send an admiral with a squadron to collect its claims and was successful. France had send a fleet and bombed the castle of San Juan de Ulna and was successful. In contrast, the United States had agreed to arbitrate its claims and was unsuccessful.<sup>24</sup> Owen also defended the legitimacy of the American claims. He criticized those historians who condemned the claims as fraudulent and excessive and who pointed out that of the eight million dollars demanded, the claims commission had only granted three million dollars. Refusing to acknowledge fraud, Owen maintained that three million dollars represented 40 per cent of the total, which was an unusually large amount to recover in damages asked in complaints.<sup>25</sup>

Another source of irritation to Owen was the historians' interpre-

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 164-165.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

tation of the Slidell mission as part of a conspiracy "to force a war and capture California" of which Polk was the chief leader.<sup>26</sup> This interpretation, Owen declared emphatically, was based only on the report of one witness who claimed that Polk once said he had four great objectives for his administration, one of which was the acquisition of California. This witness was George Bancroft, who, writing to Schouler in 1887, claimed that Polk had made this statement in a private conversation forty-two years before. There was no proof, Owen argued, that Polk's method of acquiring California would have been other than purchase or negotiation. War could have been brought on easily without Slidell's peace mission.<sup>27</sup> In conclusion, Owen vindicated Polk and expressed belief that Polk's war message was correct: the Mexican attack had occurred in a tax district of the United States and indeed shed American blood on American soil.<sup>28</sup>

In 1910 a significant set of books was published that did much to influence interpretation on every phase of the Mexican War and to disassociate permanently expansion and slavery. This was Milo Milton Quaife's publication of Polk's diary. Polk's diary has been used extensively ever since by historians anxious to look behind the scenes and peer more closely into the mind of Polk himself.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>29</sup> Milo Milton Quaife (ed.), The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1910), Vol. I, p. xii.

What effect did Polk's diary have on the historiography of the Mexican War? Four years after its publication, Robert M. McElroy wrote that the older abolitionist view that Polk wanted bigger pens for slaves in his expansionist policy must be completely abandoned in light of Polk's diary and the records of the cabinet meetings.<sup>30</sup> In his The Winning of the Far West, McElroy gave one of the first accounts of the background of the war that virtually ignored slavery. America's record of expansion was a proud one, he wrote, and free of fraud and violence. Stressing Polk's desires for peace, McElroy defended Taylor's movement to the Rio Grande as shrewd policy. Polk, he claimed, acted on a time-worn maxim: "In time of peace prepare for war."<sup>31</sup> The historian felt Polk had a duty to defend every facet of the disputed territory until a boundary could be negotiated. "The die was cast," wrote McElroy, "and the American nation had begun its imperial march westward."<sup>32</sup>

Historians agreed with the new expansionist interpretation revolted rapidly against the abolitionist view of the Mexican War. Several volumes and essays appeared which discussed various aspects of Mexican-United States relations and American politics. An interesting study of English interest in Texas during the Mexican War period was made by the historian Ephraim D. Adams. He shattered the abolitionist contention

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<sup>30</sup> Robert McElroy, The Winning of the Far West (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), p. 136.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 132, 134-135.

that the rumor of English influence in Texas was a big lie cooked up by southern slaveholders to convince Americans that Texas was necessary to protect the commercial interest of the whole nation. In his book, British Interests and Activities in Texas, 1838-1846, Adams wrote that the traditional British policy had been to support Mexico as a barrier against the United States. British commercial relations with Mexico had grown and a large part of the Mexican debt was held by British landholders. It was natural for Britain to favor the reconquest of Texas by Mexico after the revolution, but this did not necessarily imply any active steps had been taken by the British foreign office to further this aim.<sup>33</sup>

The two main concerns of British policy in the area, said Adams, were slavery and American commercial supremacy should the United States annex Texas.<sup>34</sup> British attempts to secure the abolition of slavery while at the same time pursuing a policy to prevent the American annexation of Texas, caused the American government to be suspicious. This suspicion was increased when the Aberdeen ministry denied that such was the British government's policy.<sup>35</sup> Adams made it perfectly clear that England had a perfect right to oppose annexation and use her influence to abolish slavery, but in denying that such was its policy the "... judgment of history may discover a justification for extreme suspicion of American states-

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<sup>33</sup> Ephraim Douglass Adams, British Interests and Activities in Texas, 1838-1846 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1919), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-117.

men."<sup>36</sup> Adams further stated that Calhoun, Tyler, and Upshur sincerely believed in slavery and that the institution was threatened by British plans to abolish it in the United States. In this, Adams felt, there was just grounds for their hostility toward England.<sup>37</sup>

In 1843 an abolitionist convention was held in England and Aberdeen held conferences with a committee urging him to increase his efforts to secure the abolition of slavery in Texas. This caused Aberdeen to press the issue harder, which actually aided the annexation cause, since it was interpreted in the United States as foreign interference with a national institution. Adams' conclusion was that "British interests in and for Texas could be interpreted to mean British interference and intrigue, and most bitter anti-British sentiments were aroused."<sup>38</sup>

Much light was shed on the status and position of the Whig party in the South by Arthur C. Cole's The Whig Party in the South. The southern faction of the Whig party, Cole found, did not consist of nonslaveholding whites, as one might be prone to conclude in light of the slavery views of the national Whig party, but rather was made up of large plantation owners and slaveholders.<sup>39</sup> The southern Whigs owned from two-thirds to three-fourths of the slave property. Politically, this southern branch of the antislavery Whig party was conservative and wished to preserve and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 148, note 30.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Charles Cole, The Whig Party in the South (Washington: American Historical Association, 1913), p. 72.

safeguard states rights.<sup>40</sup> The southern Whigs backed Henry Clay, the national Whig leader, in 1844 and voted to defeat Tyler's annexation treaty. Some Whig votes were lost to Polk because of his stronger stand on annexation, but on the whole Clay received the endorsement of the southern Whigs. Many southern leaders, Cole argued, felt that to endorse Tyler's annexation treaty would be a breach of national honor and good faith toward Mexico.<sup>41</sup>

Although many southern Whigs looked with favor on the extension of slavery to Texas, others opposed annexation on the ground that it would cause the migration of slaves to the new territory. This would endanger the slave interests in the old states by making slavery unprofitable there. This split in southern Whig opinion, as explained by Cole, did much to shatter the abolitionist concept of a united slaveholders' conspiracy. It was the Union that most of the southern Whigs championed, not slavery extension. During the campaign of 1844, many Whigs cried, "The Union without Texas rather than Texas without the Union."<sup>42</sup>

John C. Calhoun was rescued from abolitionist disdain by his biographer, William Montgomery Meigs. Calhoun, in Meigs' judgment, believed in the equality of the two sections and that the North was honor-bound under the Constitution to help the South at a time when its civilization was threatened both internally and externally by abolitionist agitation.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 111-113.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 113, 115.

<sup>43</sup>William Montgomery Meigs, The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun (New York: The Macle Publishing Company, 1917), Vol. II, p. 299.

Meigs emphasized that Calhoun was against the war because it was unconstitutional; the war could not exist until Congress had declared it. While defending Calhoun, Meigs was harsh on Volk, especially his order sending Taylor to the Rio Grande. He concluded that this order precipitated the war.<sup>44</sup> Calhoun, so often called the champion of the South, increased in stature in Meigs' biography at the expense of Volk. Slavery was abandoned as a cause for the war; the South was vindicated; and Volk now became the villain.

This revision of basic abolitionist history continued after the First World War. A number of journal articles and books were published that weakened further the abolitionist contention that a slaveholders' conspiracy existed in the South with plans to colonize and annex Texas, and then force a war with Mexico. In 1921 Chauncey S. Boucher wrote an analysis of the so-called slavocracy. Why, he asked, was it labelled "a criminal conspiracy" when southerners shared in the American impulse to develop new lands? Was this not part of the American westward movement?<sup>45</sup> Boucher questioned the existence of a slavocracy. Party lines cut more deeply than sectional ones, he stated, and the southern Whigs were much more moderate in their slavery views than the southern Democrats. Party feuds were frequent; distrust of leaders was rampant. "Instead of a united, aggressive slavocracy," he stated, "one finds evidence

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>45</sup>Chauncey S. Boucher, "In SE that Aggressive Slavocracy," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, VIII (June, 1921), p. 21.

at almost every turn that the true picture is quite the reverse. . . .<sup>46</sup>

Further defending the South, Souther wrote that the aggressive reaction of southerners to the delays in the annexation of Texas was due to northern agitators and opponents of slavery. It was a defensive position in face of hostile abolitionist aggression. Furthermore, had the South permitted the annexation of Texas to be defeated on the grounds that it was a slave state, it would have been tantamount to the South's surrendering all its rights.<sup>47</sup> In the antebellum period the South was on the defensive; therefore, it could not have staged a united organized plot. Polk, Souther stated, was a national expansionist, not a leader of a proslavery plot.<sup>48</sup> Three years after Souther's article, Eugene C. Barker in his study, "The Influence of Slavery in the Colonization of Texas," also concluded that the migration of settlers into Texas had no purposeful relation to the extension of slavery but was a phase of the westward movement.<sup>49</sup>

Indicative of the school of history that defended Polk was David Seville Muzzey's general history of the United States and Albert J. Beveridge's biography of Abraham Lincoln, both written in the 1920's. Rejecting the slave conspiracy theory as not in line with facts, Muzzey explained

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-19.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>49</sup>Eugene C. Barker, "The Influence of Slavery in the Colonization of Texas," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XI (June, 1924), p. 9.



that the Mexican War was viewed through the haze of sectional strife.<sup>50</sup> He emphatically defended Folk against charges that he had brought on the war. Criticizing Schouler, Mussey stated that the United States was not the "wolf" and Mexico the "lamb;" rather, "it was Mexico that insisted on war and began the hostilities."<sup>51</sup>

Beveridge, an American nationalist and imperialist who believed in the destiny of America,<sup>52</sup> defended Folk, claiming that the United States had tried to appease Mexico. When Folk did order Taylor forward, it was to repel an invasion. Folk, Beveridge firmly believed, did not want war, and ". . . had only done the plainest of duty in sending troops to protect Texas. . . ."<sup>53</sup>

In an article "The Slavery Question and the Movement to Acquire Mexico, 1846-1848," John D. P. Fuller wrote that the Texas settlers were expansionists led by the same ideals of Manifest Destiny which had inspired the settlers who had opened the western frontier. The slaveholders must be acquitted of plotting a sinister war.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>David Saville Mussey, The United States of America (Boston: Ginn and Company, [c. 1922]), Vol. I, p. 421.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 423.

<sup>52</sup>William T. Hutchinson, (ed.), The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 399.

<sup>53</sup>Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, [c. 1926]), p. 219.

<sup>54</sup>John D. P. Fuller, "The Slavery Question and the Movement to Acquire Mexico, 1846-1848," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXI (June, 1934), p. 32.

Avery Craven, writing at a later period on the coming of the Civil War, explained the combining of expansion with slavery as ". . . the product of political scheming, not of inherent forces."<sup>55</sup> The political ambitions of Calhoun and the zeal of the abolitionists were in part responsible, he declared. The expansionist movement into Texas was part of the normal American drive of Manifest Destiny; in fact, a powerful motive was the liberal Mexican land laws which made it relatively easy to obtain cheap land. This cheap Mexican land plus a panic and depression within the United States in 1824 provided a powerful motive for the quick rush to Texas; slavery was not its author.<sup>56</sup>

These histories represented a revolt against the one-sided, extremely biased abolitionist histories so prevalent during the nineteenth century. In attacking specific facets of the slavery interpretation of the Mexican War, these anti-abolitionist histories revealed a negativism of their own in exposing only the errors of the nineteenth century viewpoint. The more positive side of the school of history that rejected slavery as a motive for the war and was favorable to Polk reached its culmination in the works of Justin H. Smith, Eugene I. McCormac, Robert Selph Henry, and Alfred Hoyt Bill.

One reason for grouping historians together is that they share a common outlook or interpretation on a particular historical event. The four historians--Smith, McCormac, Bill, and Henry--represent the fullest

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<sup>55</sup>Avery Craven, The Coming of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 187.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 182-183.

expression of that body of historians which viewed the war in a perspective favorable to the United States. In a book review of Smith's detailed volumes, The War With Mexico, Eugene C. Barker, in summing up Smith's view, outlined succinctly the strongly nationalistic view of the new school of historians. This view held that the United States honestly tried to maintain neutrality during the Texas Revolution; that America showed much forbearance in regard to the claims issue, whereas Mexico displayed an inexcusable shiftiness; that the United States had every right to annex Texas; that Slidell was sent to Mexico because Polk earnestly desired to avoid war; that the war was justified and necessary; and that Polk did not provoke war to seize California.<sup>57</sup>

Smith's volumes are the nearest approach to a definitive study of the Mexican War. Examining every known document connected in any way with the war, this historian redressed the balance which had tipped unfavorably against Polk and the United States during the nineteenth century. The reason for this imbalance, Smith claimed, lay partly in Polk's unpopularity and cold personality. People disliked him; they falsely imagined that Taylor's march to the Rio Grande caused the war; and they were willing to disgrace the nation merely to disgrace Polk.<sup>58</sup> This act of casting stones at the Mexican War and its backers then became traditional.<sup>59</sup>

Smith's first task was to clear up the misconceptions concerning

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<sup>57</sup>Eugene C. Barker, Review of The War With Mexico, by Justin H. Smith, American Historical Review, XXV (July, 1920), p. 730.

<sup>58</sup>Justin H. Smith, The War With Mexico (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), Vol. II, pp. 269-270, 274.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

America and the Texas Revolution. Smith believed the settlement of Texas was part of the movement to settle the Mississippi Valley. When the Texans revolted, the United States possessed clean hands, he stated.<sup>60</sup> No plot to recognize or annex Texas existed in the United States. Recognition, when given, was in line with the United States government's previous recognition of Mexico when it had become independent--a recognition conferred much sooner than the American recognition of Texas.<sup>61</sup>

Annexation followed recognition after nine long years. By then, the United States government had every moral, legal, and political right to annex Texas. The basis for this right, Smith explained, was threefold: Texas had defied the arms of the mother country for nine years; Texas had been recognized as an independent nation by the leading commercial powers; and no well-informed person believed that Texas would return to its former position within the Mexican empire.<sup>62</sup>

The United States had strong reasons for desiring the annexation of Texas. These were, said Smith, that the national interest seemed to demand it, that all of northern Mexico and California seemed likely to succeed and seek for a strong orderly government, that there was reason to suspect Sam Houston had plans to organize a southwestern empire under European protection, that many southern citizens in fear of antislavery agitation wanted separation from the Union and a union with Texas, and that many believed that England had tried to exert an influence in Texas

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., Vol. I, p. 63.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

to the detriment of American interests.<sup>63</sup> Smith concluded that Mexico, when Texas was being settled, should have used wisdom ". . . to cut off the infected section before it . . . set an example of dissatisfaction, and perhaps cause trouble also with the United States."<sup>64</sup>

Mexico also lacked wisdom in its handling of the claims dispute. The United States had been honorable in its efforts to collect a just debt. Answering critics who charged it was contemptible for a rich nation like the United States to ask for money from a poor country like Mexico, Smith pointed out that richness had no bearing on the rights of American citizens. Besides, he wrote, crime was largely responsible for the empty treasury in Mexico.<sup>65</sup> It was America's duty, Smith felt, to ". . . bring Mexico to her senses by teaching her what membership in the family of nations involved."<sup>66</sup> No room for sympathy remained, he declared, when Mexico defaulted on its payments. Mexico's embarrassed condition was inexcusable; its irritation over the Texas affair was unfounded. There was no excuse for Mexico to make an agreement and then proceed to break it dishonorably.<sup>67</sup>

Smith also had a word on the boundary dispute. He believed that a fixed boundary was impossible to determine except by negotiation because

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

the war between Mexico and Texas had wiped out any boundary that may have existed.<sup>68</sup> When Polk had pledged his acceptance of the Texan claim to the Rio Grande boundary, wrote Smith, it was "a grip of steel."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, he explained, the American government looked to the Louisiana Purchase as the basis for its claim to the Rio Grande boundary. According to Smith, the United States had never renounced that boundary after it had ceded Texas to Spain in the treaty of 1819; rather, the United States had arranged to cede possessions west of the Sabine River for other important concessions. In the years 1819 to 1845, Texas had always been regarded with its historical and geographical boundaries as it was under the Louisiana Purchase. It was only natural, wrote Smith, that upon annexing Texas, the old boundary should be claimed.<sup>70</sup>

It was also fair, wrote Smith, for the United States to consider an attack by Mexico across the Rio Grande as an invasion of American soil. He argued that the United States had peacefully placed troops in the intermediate region, thereby placing itself on equality with Mexico; Taylor was ordered to leave the Mexican posts alone which implied United States recognition of the principle of pacific occupation during negotiation. Fewer soldiers would have been unsafe in light of the Mexican attitude, but considering American pacific intentions, it was quite unnecessary for Mexico to dispatch an army in the region of the border. Mexico threatened the United States and made preparations to strike. When the Mexican general

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., pp. 138-139.

stated that hostilities were about to begin, it was only natural to consider an invasion by Mexican forces across the Rio Grande as the fulfillment of Mexican threats.<sup>71</sup>

Smith also considered it expedient that Taylor advance to the Rio Grande. He declared the United States' claim to the disputed territory would have been weakened had the United States not shared in its occupation. The historian considered it wise for the United States to occupy a strategic position as a defense against the Mexican threat. A strong military attitude was necessary to convince the Mexicans of American resoluteness and thereby facilitate Slidell's negotiations. Smith concluded that the movement of Taylor's troops into the disputed territory rested on the necessity of a military defense. This strategy proved correct when Mexico commenced its attack. Mexico wanted war and had issued orders to begin one, Smith believed; Polk was right in his assertion that the war had been forced on the United States.<sup>72</sup>

While agreeing in spirit with Smith's vindication of Polk's part in precipitating the war, McCormac's approach was different. In his political biography of James Knox Polk, McCormac stated in the preface the new historical attitude toward President Polk. McCormac wrote that Polk was a ". . . constructive statesman--a statesman possessed of vision, sound judgment, and unusual executive ability."<sup>73</sup> He reasoned that Polk's

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., pp. 144-145.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 152, 153, 155.

<sup>73</sup>Eugene I. McCormac, James K. Polk: A Political Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1922), p. v.

object in sending troops to the Rio Grande was to prevent any hostile acts by Mexico and to show Mexico that the United States would protect Texas' claim to the Rio Grande.<sup>74</sup> Concerning the actual ownership of the disputed territory, Smith and McCormac disagreed. McCormac pointed out that the cry "disputed territory" as applied to the land between the Nueces and Rio Grande was first voiced by Americans, not Mexicans. Mexico, McCormac felt, laid no greater claim to this strip of land than to the rest of Texas; any crossing of the Sabine was considered an invasion of Mexico. If the Rio Grande be assumed as the boundary of Texas, asserted McCormac, it was only Polk's duty to defend Texas and to consider any crossing of the Rio Grande by Mexico as an act of invasion and war.<sup>75</sup>

McCormac did not leave the problem there. As the joint resolution admitting Texas to the Union did not specify any territorial boundary, Texas' claim rested on the treaty with Santa Anna, and the subsequent Act passed by the Texan congress claiming the Rio Grande River as the boundary. This claim was passed on to the United States.<sup>76</sup> McCormac, however, doubted the validity of this claim. Santa Anna, he believed, had made the treaties under duress and without authority. Also, it was not certain whether Texas could lawfully enlarge its territory by an ordinary act of the legislature. The United States' claim, based on the Louisiana Purchase boundary, had no validity at all because all rights were ceded to Spain by the Florida treaty of 1819.<sup>77</sup> Besides, Texas,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., pp. 378, 380.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 381.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.



when under Mexican rule, only extended to the Nueces River; beyond was the Mexican department of Tamaulipas. When the joint resolution was signed in the American Congress, the boundary was left open to negotiation. By occupying this territory, Polk, according to the Whigs, gave the Mexicans an excuse for war. But at this time, McCormac pointed out, diplomatic relations were severed and the boundary was not an important issue. Almonte, when asking for his passports after the annexation of Texas, had not waited to see what boundary was claimed. Mexico had always asserted its right to reconquer all of Texas.<sup>78</sup> Any question over the boundary was now nullified.

The boundary dispute was also reinterpreted by the historians Henry and Bill. Henry stated that the disputed area between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers was a desolate frontier. Nothing was thought of Taylor's movement of troops into this area until certain Americans tried to prove that the United States had forced the war as part of a preconceived plan of conquest. Consequently, Taylor's march became a primary argument in their indictment of the United States. The American government was charged with invading Mexican territory in time of peace. Henry rejected this reasoning and defended Taylor's march across the Nueces.<sup>79</sup>

Bill wrote that the United States was honor-bound to protect Texas and to support its territorial claims upon annexation. Considering the

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>79</sup>Robert Selph Henry, The Story of the Mexican War (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950), p. 20.

weager size of the American army and navy, Polk could have had only peaceful intentions.<sup>80</sup>

Two other questions of equal importance were thoroughly discussed by Henry, McCormac, and Smith. Slidell's mission to Mexico and the ultimate conquest of California had been subject to all kinds of criticism. To many historians the conquest of California was the main cause of the war; to others, Slidell's mission was just a Machiavellian move by Polk to provoke a sensitive Mexico to war.<sup>81</sup> The historian Henry disagreed. He believed that Polk wanted only to settle peacefully all disputes which led to the diplomatic break. Polk's offer to receive territory from Mexico in lieu of money was made to help Mexico's financial situation. Further proof of Polk's peaceful intentions can be found in his instructions to Slidell. Slidell was informed not to push for a territorial purchase if it endangered the outcome of the mission. This certainly was not war-provoking, thought Henry.<sup>82</sup>

McCormac, commenting on Slidell's mission, criticized the earlier view held by Jesse Reeves and others that the main objective of Slidell's mission was the acquisition of California and that the war therefore was not the result of annexation.<sup>83</sup> McCormac granted that one of the motives for reopening diplomatic relations with Mexico was the desire to purchase

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<sup>80</sup> Alfred Hoyt Bill, Rehearsal for Conflict: The War With Mexico, 1846-1848 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 58.

<sup>81</sup> Henry, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>83</sup> McCormac, op. cit., p. 391.

California, but he was unable to understand how Slidell's instructions could be used to prove that acquiring California was the main purpose of the administration. Rather than proving that the Mexican War was waged "for the fulfillment of Polk's designs upon California,"<sup>84</sup> Slidell's instructions indicated that the President, at the time Slidell's instructions were drafted, was ready to release Mexico from further obligation if it would cede a part of New Mexico and the land east of the Rio Grande. Had Slidell been successful, Polk would have been left with no means to get California other than open military aggression.<sup>85</sup> McCormac asserted that it was not correct to judge motives by results; the conquest of California following the outbreak of war did not prove that war was waged for that purpose.<sup>86</sup>

In his summary of the Slidell incident, McCormac, to emphasize his point, boldly stated that possibly Polk had wanted war or had even provoked it. But his offer to settle the claims debt for so small a tract of land was sufficient evidence to prove that conquest was not his intention at the time Slidell was sent to Mexico.<sup>87</sup> It was also significant to McCormac that in Polk's war message he stressed the failure of Slidell to settle the claims issue. As Mexico could not pay its debt except by ceding land, McCormac concluded that Polk was then ready to wage a war to secure terri-

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<sup>84</sup> McCormac, loc. cit., citing Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1907), p. 286.

<sup>85</sup> McCormac, loc. cit.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

torial compensation for the claims against Mexico.<sup>88</sup>

The most detailed study of the diplomatic intrigue surrounding Mexico's refusal to receive Ellidell was made by Smith. He attempted to analyze not only the events, but also the translation of the notes sent to the United States from Mexico. Smith began his analysis with the American cabinet's decision to reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico. Because of Mexico's war-like preparations, the cabinet had decided to wait until John Black, the American consul in Mexico, had ascertained whether a minister would be officially received. The British Minister Barkhead had also had an interview with the Mexican Foreign Minister, Peña y Peña, and President Herrera.<sup>89</sup> Smith said that they had agreed that Mexico should discuss all the subjects that the American envoy might bring up and should attempt to settle them peacefully. Peña y Peña then wrote a letter to Barkhead in which he thanked him for persuading Richard Pakenham, the British minister in Washington, to use his influence "for the purpose of amicably arranging the differences las diferencias" that existed between the United States and Mexico.<sup>90</sup>

Smith further stated that Barkhead reported that not only the annexation question, but all other points of difference between Mexico and the United States, would be discussed; also that from any sum the United States agreed to pay for the disputed territory, the claims debt would be

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>89</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

subtracted. Was this not Volk's view also, Smith asked? It would have been ridiculous to separate the boundary dispute from the claims problem. Surely the United States would not hand over a large sum of money to Mexico without first deducting the claims debt owed American citizens. Besides, was not the claims debt one of the many differences the United States and Mexico were to resolve?<sup>91</sup>

The historian next attacked the Mexican government's contention that it could not receive Slidell because it had agreed to receive a commissioner, not a minister. The note sent to Washington stated the Mexican government was

. . . disposed to receive the representative [comisionado] of the United States who may come to this capital with full power from his government to settle the present dispute [contienda] in a peaceful, reasonable, and honorable manner.<sup>92</sup>

The seeming contradiction between this reference to "the present dispute" and the previous declaration of the Mexican government's desire to settle all differences was immaterial, Smith contended. Using the geometric axiom that the whole included all of its parts, Smith argued that the phrase "the present dispute" was meant to include all the differences between Mexico and the United States. The difference in phraseology did not indicate a Mexican rejection of the United States' proposal to settle all disputes.<sup>93</sup> Besides, Black's note to Washington had followed

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 93, citing House Executive Document 60, 30 Congress, 1st Session, pp. 12, 13, 14, 17.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

a confidential interview with Peña y Peña in which ideas had been freely exchanged. Smith conjectured that the Mexican minister must have understood the United States would not recognize Mexico's claim to Texas; therefore, no United States envoy would be appointed to treat only the dispute over America's annexation of Texas. If Mexico had decided to discuss only the boundary dispute, more than likely Black would have reported to Polk that his offer to discuss all the differences had been declined. The American position had been understood.<sup>94</sup>

Smith next demolished the Mexican contention it had agreed to receive only a commissioner and not a minister. The word "comisionado" as used by Peña y Peña, he explained, was the past participle of the verb "to commission" used as a noun. This verb had been translated by American historians to mean commissioner and was then used to prove Peña y Peña had not agreed to receive a minister. Smith disagreed. The Mexican Secretary of Relations Bocanegra had defined a "comisionado" as "a person charged by any community, or private citizen to conduct any business."<sup>95</sup> By definition, the historian concluded, this must include a minister. In comparing documents, Smith reported that he had found the words minister, envoy, plenipotentiary, and comisionado used as equivalents. Furthermore, Peña y Peña had used the word "comisionado" in referring to Slidell, after he had learned that Slidell had come as a resident minister.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

Surprised at Slidell's sudden appearance at the capital on December 3, 1845, Peña y Peña asked Black the reason for Slidell's arrival. When Black reminded him that Mexico had agreed to receive an envoy, Peña y Peña exclaimed that Slidell should not have come until January; the government, fearing opposition cries of treason, was not ready to receive him. This conversation, Smith pointed out, had taken place before anything was known of Slidell's title or credentials. It was, then, because of domestic problems that the Mexican government decided to break its agreement.<sup>97</sup> The excuse of the government that it had agreed only to a commissioner was proven incorrect by the events leading to Slidell's appointment.<sup>98</sup>

Smith, in further championing the American cause, was also sure of Polk's pacific intentions regarding California. He characterized Polk as being not "mendacious," but "mediocre," a man too uninspiring to be the chief villain in a great international tragedy.<sup>99</sup> Polk, Smith explained, had a genuine fear that England was trying to gain a foothold in California. Polk's foreign policy was based on this fear of foreign influence. Mexico's tenuous hold on California impressed upon Polk that time alone was needed to secure California for the Union. No foreign foothold could be allowed.<sup>100</sup>

To counteract any foreign influence, Polk dispatched Larkin as his

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., pp. 322-326.

confidential agent to California. To further strengthen his position, Smith believed, Polk sent Lieutenant Gillespie to act as co-agent with Larkin and ordered Commodore Sloat with a squadron to the Pacific coast. Surely this was not intrigue on Polk's part, opined Smith. Rather, it was to " . . . receive with a gentle hand the neglected, abused and lost. . ." and to ward off foreign interference which would lead to war. Polk must be vindicated from the charge that he provoked war to effect conquest of California.<sup>101</sup>

Smith's conclusions were shared by both McCormac and Henry. Henry believed Polk wanted California, but not badly enough to initiate a war. Both Henry and McCormac also interpreted Polk's policy as one based on fear of foreign interference;<sup>102</sup> only this explained Polk's later instructions to Larkin and Sloat. Furthermore, Polk's policy was consistent with his general attitude toward the nonextension of European sovereignty in any part of North America.<sup>103</sup>

Concerning the controversial Frémont and Bear Flag revolt, Smith emphatically exonerated the United States government from any guilt. Instructions to foment revolution would have been inconsistent with Polk's instructions to Larkin and Sloat to conciliate the native Californians. Besides, Frémont was aware of Polk's desire to counter any foreign influence. It was fear of a deal between England and Mexico wherein England

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>McCormac, op. cit., p. 386; Henry, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>103</sup>Henry, loc. cit.



would get California, Smith explained, that prompted Frémont to raise the Bear Flag, knowing that it could be replaced by the stars and stripes.<sup>104</sup>

The secret instructions Gillespie supposedly brought to Frémont, Smith wrote, probably stated that Polk wanted a settlement with Mexico; but if war did begin, Frémont was to stand by and be ready for action at the proper time to conquer California. Seeing a chance for personal glory and remembering his humiliation at having run from General Castro, Frémont decided to vindicate himself by overthrowing the Mexican authorities. His action, Smith declared, upset the American plans.<sup>105</sup>

In their conclusions as to precisely what caused the war, Bill, McCormac, Henry, and Smith each emphasized certain aspects. McCormac hesitated to condemn Mexico only. He pointed out that Mexico had not attacked until Taylor had crossed the Nueces River; therefore,

Polk may or may not have acted within his rights in assuming the boundary claimed by Texas, but at least there was some justification in the contention of the Whigs that he precipitated the war by ordering Taylor to the Rio Grande.<sup>106</sup>

Neither Smith nor Henry doubted Mexico's guilt.<sup>107</sup> The annexation of Texas, they believed, was the prime cause of the war.

Smith stated that America's desire for California could not have caused hostilities to begin. Nor was the boundary dispute an important enough conflict to cause Mexico and the United States to fight. He denied

<sup>104</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 332.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., pp. 332, 333.

<sup>106</sup>McCormac, op. cit., p. 414.

<sup>107</sup>Henry, op. cit., p. 32; Smith, op. cit., p. 189.

that the war was fought to extend Negro slavery as the southerners considered possession of Texas enough protection for the slave institution. Polk's diary, furthermore, was bare of any references connecting slavery with the Mexican problem. Annexation, Smith declared, was the essential cause of the war; but, he cautioned, annexation could not be regarded as the sole cause.<sup>108</sup> Mexican barbarities during the Texas Revolution and outrages committed against American property in Mexico caused deep resentment in Americans. Conflict over the annexation of Texas was the chief episode in a series of unpleasant events.<sup>109</sup>

Greedy, self-seeking politicians in Mexico, Smith explained, used these events to create a hostile attitude among the Mexican people. This attitude reached fruition in Paredes' coup; Paredes ordered the Mexican attack on the American forces, which was the "precise cause of the war."<sup>110</sup> Taylor's advance to the Rio Grande no more produced the war than Fitch's march to Lexington produced the American Revolution. "It was an effect and an occasion, but not the cause."<sup>111</sup>

Henry, though writing thirty years after Smith, also placed great importance on the annexation of Texas as a major cause leading to war. That incident, he declared, rather than the claims question or boundary dispute, prompted Mexico to break diplomatic relations with the United

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<sup>108</sup>Smith, loc. cit.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

States. The United States, however, was fully justified in annexing Texas; it had waited nine years.<sup>112</sup> In contrast to Smith, Henry was cognizant of larger forces that conspired to bring on the conflict. Both countries, he stated, drifted to war through a fog of misunderstanding. "It was, in short, an inescapable and a not inglorious step in the historical process by which the United States of America was brought to its present place in the world."<sup>113</sup>

This concept of the inevitability of the war was an afterthought in Henry's history. He did not make it a major theme in his interpretation. The school of Mexican War interpretation which places primary emphasis on its inevitable aspects will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>112</sup>Henry, loc. cit.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

## V. EXPANSIONISM

### THE INEVITABLE WAR

The primary concern of those historians who rejected the abolitionist interpretation of the Mexican War and vindicated the United States was to disassociate slavery extension from national expansion. They were also much concerned with President Polk's diplomacy and the actions of the American government as honorable and justifiable in light of Mexico's aggressive policy. This revolt reached its peak in the work of Justin Smith.

Many historians, however, chose to place little emphasis on slavery as a crucial element in Mexican War causation--that battle had been won--and instead focused their analyses on America's expansionist spree during the 1840's. But this raised an important question. Did inherent forces loose in the American earth conspire to bring on war, or were men with clearly defined expansionist goals necessary to lead and even at times accelerate these forces to bring on war?

Graphically, the problem can be viewed as follows: the forces of expansion can be regarded as a rapidly moving wagon pulled by a team of strong horses. In the driver's seat is the President of the United States, James K. Polk. The rapid movement of the vehicle makes it difficult to see whether the mighty horses of expansion are following their own lead with little direction from Polk, or whether the President is able to control these horses and lead them in the direction and at the speed he wishes.

Many historians are on both sides of the argument. To those who saw Polk carried along by forces stronger than he, the war became an inevitable conflict.

Representative of these historians was George Lockhart Rives, who did a much-needed two volume study in 1914 on United States-Mexican relations. Extremely cautious in his judgments, Rives neither completely condemned nor vindicated either side. His nationalistic outlook in regard to the expansionist movement of the 1840's placed his history above sectional bias and partisanship.<sup>1</sup> While avoiding a deterministic approach, Rives' history does provide a transition to those histories that are deterministic in their analyses of the causes of the war. Not until the very end of the second volume of his work does Rives somewhat apologetically write of irresistible forces as the major force pulling toward war.<sup>2</sup>

In the preface of his history, Rives emphatically stated that the war was not an episode in the slavery struggle.<sup>3</sup> Prior to 1836 most Americans cared little about Texas; after 1836 only the objections to the extension of slavery delayed immediate annexation. But Polk's election was a victory for the western expansionist spirit: this made the difference in Mexican-United States relations. These relations would have been

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<sup>1</sup>Jesse S. Reeves, Review of The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848, by George Lockhart Rives, American Historical Review, XIX (April, 1914), pp. 659-661.

<sup>2</sup>George Lockhart Rives, The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), Vol. II, p. 659.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Vol. I, p. vi.

stabilized after the annexation of Texas had there not been other problems such as the claims debt and a disputed boundary. Also important was Polk's eye to California.<sup>4</sup>

Polk's motives, however, were peaceful, according to Rives. He desired to acquire California in a peaceful manner by negotiation; only his lack of understanding of Mexican character and of foreign affairs caused his diplomacy to seem aggressive.<sup>5</sup> Surely his cabinet did not want war; its reason for agreeing to Taylor's advance to the Rio Grande was to present a show of force to help pave the way for Slidell's acceptance by the Mexican government. "That this display of force provoked the Mexicans, and induced them to fight rather than to bargain, proves nothing as to the intentions of the American cabinet."<sup>6</sup> If anything, Rives declared, it showed the cabinet's ignorance of the Mexican nature.<sup>7</sup>

Rives did not spare the rod when discussing Taylor's march to the Rio Grande. He felt there were serious flaws in the argument that the United States was justified in possessing the disputed territory. America's claim that Texan jurisdiction extended beyond the Nueces River, Rives asserted, was nothing more than an assertion of actual possession. Full responsibility for Taylor's move into territory not actually in Texas jurisdiction lay with the administration. Rives' sharpest criticism was

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 363, 647, 650, 719.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Vol. II, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

directed at Taylor's blockade of the Rio Grande. Only war could justify such an act, he declared, and in this act Mexico saw justification for attacking the United States.<sup>8</sup>

If Rives' history had ended at this point, there would be no justification for classifying his work with the irrepressible conflict school of interpretation. But it did not. Rives wrote that a large majority of the American people favored the war because of the long continued hostilities on the part of Mexico, Mexico's failure to pay the claims debt, and its unwillingness to negotiate. Polk did not want war. He hoped that California could be secured either by purchase or by cooperation from inhabitants declaring their independence.<sup>9</sup> In the event of war, Rives wrote, the ports of California were to be seized, an act not considered conquest by the President. Americans justified their action, Rives wrote, by rationalizing that should war begin they were ". . . to come as liberators, as defenders against Mexican oppression, and in no way as conquerors."<sup>10</sup>

While Rives did not accept this thesis, he was somewhat ambivalent in his attitude toward the end of his history. In a sense he believed the war might be regarded as one of conquest, but the use of "might" was not very emphatic. Rives criticized Polk for his assertion that the war was prosecuted solely to get payment for debts, but:

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 135-141.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 161, 168.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

. . . the fact remains that it had always been the intention of the administration to obtain such payment by a cession of territory belonging to the Mexican republic. But that territory was not Texas. It was New Mexico and California--especially California.<sup>11</sup>

Thus far in Rives' analysis, Polk and the administration, though clothed with good intentions, appeared to be the chief villains in a war of conquest. But Rives then found justification for the United States' actions in forces beyond the control of men. He mentioned the mid-nineteenth century practice of acquiring territory by conquest. Civilized nations, Rives contended, were not opposed to this method. Besides, many circumstances justified the conquest of California; the conduct of the United States was supported by the existing precedent of American acquisition of Florida from Spain. Spain had given in, Rives declared, but Mexico had refused to yield to irresistible forces. Mexico had tried to hold on to territory it could neither develop nor protect.<sup>12</sup> These irresistible forces could not be localized in any one person; they must be found in the almost mystical expansionist spirit of the 1840's.

Twelve years after Rives' detailed two volumes were published, a biography of a historically underworked figure was written by Louis Martin Sears. His John Slidell contributed much toward a better understanding of the motives behind Slidell's ill-fated mission; Sears related this diplomatic mission to the larger scope of Mexican War causation. He studied Slidell's mission within the framework of Manifest Destiny and natural

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.658.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 658, 659.



evolution.

Slidell, by his mission, became an empire builder associated with the expansionist movement. Folk, Sears wrote, chose to use the claims debt owed by Mexico as a lever to acquire California and to settle the Texas question. This method, Sears exclaimed, seemed almost providentially arranged. To further facilitate this acceptance of land for debt payment, Folk would grant a large bonus.<sup>13</sup> His policy, Sears wrote, can be described as the pursuit of "much gain, no war, and an opposition silenced."<sup>14</sup> One snag existed and this was the Mexican politicians. They were too weak, declared Sears, to face realities.<sup>15</sup>

Slidell's failure to be received by the Herrera government ended the optimistic first phase of the mission. Sears believed that the continued approaches to the Paredes administration were not honest. It was not likely that the United States would continue to negotiate on the original terms. Not only were these continued approaches dishonest, Sears felt, they were only a facade to prove the willingness of the United States to negotiate.<sup>16</sup> But, cautioned Slidell's biographer, this second phase must not be confused with the original plans. Sears explained the later action in terms of irresistible forces. Manifest Destiny, he wrote, demanded a two-ocean nation; America's reach for additional territory was

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<sup>13</sup>Louis Martin Sears, John Slidell (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1925), pp. 48, 49, 52.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 65-66.

a case of natural evolution. This desire, when blocked, became determination, which in turn led to action. The end result, Sears declared, was not the original motive for Slidell's mission.<sup>17</sup>

If one must find fault with Polk, Sears conceded, it would be in his failure to understand the temper of the common people in Mexico. The common people, not the leaders of the government, caused Slidell's mission to fail. The disrupting force so prevalent among the mass, Sears declared, was a ". . . case of mob-rule-democracy gone to seed--in a land which could not comprehend the rudiments of self-government."<sup>18</sup> It was "the unrestrained democracy of nineteenth century Mexico" that caused the Mexican War. Polk stood by helplessly.<sup>19</sup>

Two books appeared in 1935 that also described Polk as a helpless victim in the surge of uncontrollable forces. Albert K. Weinberg, in analyzing the concept of Manifest Destiny, traced the evolution of this concept in light of the changing political philosophy in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Discussing the Mexican War and the American desire for territory, Weinberg described the contemporary appeal to a law higher than that written in treaties and diplomatic rules: "the law of beneficent territorial utilization."<sup>21</sup> Geographical predestination, it was felt, made inevitable the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 57, 67.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>20</sup>Isaac J. Cox, Review of Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History by Albert K. Weinberg, Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXIII (December, 1936), p. 421.

<sup>21</sup>Albert K. Weinberg, Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1935), p. 153.

United States' acquisition of contiguous territory.<sup>22</sup> Polk, Weinberg felt, would not have used force if the Mexican attitude from the time of the annexation of Texas had not made war seem legally valid and justifiable. The tension created by the annexation of Texas was made more critical and intense by the subsequent follies of both nations. Harbin lay the fundamental cause of the war.<sup>23</sup>

In analyzing the primary cause of the war, Herbert Ingram Priestley, who wrote a volume on the Mexican nation, placed greatest emphasis on what he described as the natural social antipathies between the Mexicans and the Americans. Nationalistic and religious rivalries along with the aggressiveness of the Anglo-Saxon people in contrast to the obstructionist policy of the Mexicans made friction inevitable.<sup>24</sup>

As a more immediate cause of the war, Priestley blamed American colonization and annexation of Texas. Mexico, he stated, believed the American government had a part in the Texas Revolution. Mexico could not be blamed for failing to distinguish between the attitude and actions of various groups in the United States, who did materially help the Texans, and the United States government.<sup>25</sup> Hostile feelings swelled in each nation; the leaders of both countries desired peace, but the popular clamor demanded otherwise. Mexico was drawn into the war by the ambitions of

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<sup>22</sup>Cox, loc. cit.

<sup>23</sup>Weinberg, op. cit., pp. 166, 167.

<sup>24</sup>Herbert Ingram Priestley, The Mexican Nation, A History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), p. 299.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

Peredes and the clerical party; the United States was drawn into the war by land hunger and the ideals of Manifest Destiny.<sup>26</sup>

In Priestley's opinion, both countries were equally involved; therefore, the war could be called neither just nor unjust. "The whole process," he wrote, "is to be observed as a biological phenomenon, in which the historical facts are largely accidentals of that process."<sup>27</sup> When two races met and clashed on a mutually coveted frontier, Priestley concluded, war was inevitable. The victory went to the stronger.<sup>28</sup>

The most recent work on the Mexican War is Otis A. Singletary's volume in The Chicago History of American Civilization series. This brief account takes a rather eclectic but deterministic view. To state that the annexation of Texas caused the war, declared Singletary, would be a gross oversimplification. The causes of the war were more fundamental: Mexican resentment of American expansion, hatred by Americans of Mexican atrocities committed in border warfare, the political instability of the Mexican government, and the utter failure of diplomacy.<sup>29</sup>

This complex of misunderstandings was made more acute, wrote Singletary, because of the American disease, Manifest Destiny. The Americans wanted contiguous land; therefore, Mexico geographically became a target of the Americans. In a deterministic vein, Singletary maintained,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Otis A. Singletary, The Mexican War (in The Chicago History of American Civilization series, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 14.

" . . . geography and history conspire [d] to bring on disaster."<sup>30</sup>

Singletary failed to castigate either nation. The war was beyond the control of any one person. He summed up the causes of the war thus:

Annexation, then, was one, but by no means the sole, cause of the war. The bad feelings that had slowly but surely grown out of the encroachments of one power and the brutalities of the other set the stage for war; political instability increased its probability; the failure of diplomacy made it inevitable.<sup>31</sup>

Singletary and the other historians of this group have vindicated individuals as the primary suspects in causing the unpopular Mexican War and, by stressing environmental and psychological factors, have made the war a deterministically irrepressible conflict. For interpretations stressing practical economic considerations, including a desire for good ports, increased trade, and land grants, one must turn to the historians Edward Channing, Charles A. Beard, and Norman A. Graebner.

One of the last historians to write a multivolume history of the United States was the New Englander, Edward Channing. Writing after the turn of the century, he emphasized nationalistic tendencies rather than sectional conflicts in America's history.<sup>32</sup> Though not an economic determinist in his interpretation of the Mexican War, Channing did stress the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Kraus, The Writing of American History (Norman: Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 293; William T. Hutchinson (ed.), The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 300.

general operation of economic forces that conspired to bring on the war.<sup>33</sup> Channing, who looked with disdain upon extremists,<sup>34</sup> refused to follow in the footsteps of his sectional predecessors, the New England abolitionists, who ascribed to slavery the primary force behind the war.

"It was the destiny of the United States to extend to the Pacific and as far south as the arid portions of Mexico," proclaimed the New Englander.<sup>35</sup> These lands, Texas, New Mexico, and California, belonged legally to Mexico, Channing wrote; but more important, the lands belonged economically to the United States.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Weinberg, Channing did not formulate any abstract law of land use to justify America's coveting the land. In a more mundane vein, Channing stated that the United States possessed no moral right to take the land; but with Mexico unable to utilize the land to the benefit of humanity, the United States, which could make use of the land, had a form of justification for taking it. Furthermore, he added, the United States did offer to pay an adequate sum of money for the land.<sup>37</sup>

Channing was dogmatic concerning America's right to annex Texas. It was "beyond the line of argument," he wrote, in light of Texas' nine

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<sup>33</sup>Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 240; Thomas J. Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 180.

<sup>34</sup>Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>35</sup>Edward Channing, A History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), Vol. V, p. 550.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 525.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 550.

years of independence. Upon this assumption, it was easy for Channing to write that it was right and proper for the United States to strengthen its army along the Texan frontier when Mexico refused to recognize America's right to annex Texas and threatened to attack.<sup>38</sup> That attack did not come until Slidell had been rejected and Polk had decided to reinforce diplomacy by arms. When Taylor moved to the Rio Grande, the Mexicans did not believe that the Americans would fight and therefore attacked Taylor's troops, wrote Channing. Consequently, as Mexico waged war over Texas, the conquest of its provinces could be considered a proper indemnity for the expenditure forced upon the United States by Mexico.<sup>39</sup>

Nowhere in his history did Channing criticize Polk for forcing a war to gain possessions; rather, his emphasis on the geographical and economic propinquity of Mexico's land and on Mexico's failure to recognize the inevitable restrained him from harshly criticizing either nation. He wrote:

Manifest Destiny urged them [the American people] on to the acquisition of Florida, to the regaining of Texas on the South, and to the possession of the lands westward from the coast of the Rockies to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>40</sup>

The apostle of twentieth century economic interpretations of history was Charles Beard. In his famous economic interpretation of the Constitution, he pointed out the economic factors that shaped the thinking of the founding fathers. This economic interpretation was a boon to the progres-

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 552.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 552-555.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 614.

sive reform movements of the early twentieth century. If real men with real economic motives had written the Constitution, it was conceivable that other men, living under radically different conditions, should have a right to change it.<sup>41</sup> Beard was closely associated with the reform movement and wrote in that climate of opinion. Crusading for reform, he felt history should be used for social change. Probably the most deciding factor in shaping his opinions was a visit he had made to the Chicago slums in 1896 while still a college student.<sup>42</sup>

In his The Rise of American Civilization, Beard explained history as consisting of great contests or struggles for power, rather than conflicts of principle or arguments over moral and legal issues. These moral and legal issues, he believed, were mere rationalizations.<sup>43</sup> The basic cause of struggle was economic rivalry. Writing of the 1840's, Beard declared that a movement was in swing to carry the American flag to Mexico and the Pacific. "Nothing," he stated, "could check its momentum; neither the protests of New England abolitionists nor the resistance of the Mexicans. . . ."<sup>44</sup> This movement reached its climax in the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War. Beard described the components of this great

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<sup>41</sup> Krause, op. cit., pp. 367, 368.

<sup>42</sup> Fressly, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>43</sup> William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr. (eds.), Interpreting and Teaching American History, Thirty-first Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies (Philadelphia: McKinley Publishing Company, 1961), p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> Charles A. Beard and Mary H. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 581.



moving force as primarily economic: the passion of farmers for land, the lure of continental trade, the profits of New England traffic in the Pacific Ocean, the American citizens who owned Texan debt and land script, and the desire of Texas for security in the Union.<sup>45</sup>

But Beard did not try to explain the whole westward movement in economic terms alone. Manifest Destiny, he contended, ". . . tinged with mystery by the imagination of the esoteric . . .," must be considered.<sup>46</sup> Beard described impartially both the Mexican and American feelings toward Manifest Destiny. The Americans felt their rights had been scorned and their flag insulted by incompetent and dishonest Mexican officials to the point where peace was folly and annexation a virtue. On the other hand, Beard explained, the Mexicans felt the Americans were a ruthless, overbearing race, greedy for trade, intent on despoiling their neighbor, and willing to make war to do so.<sup>47</sup>

The Mexican empire, Beard pointed out, was an empty realm with few people to populate it. But, "peering over the borders of this almost empty realm was a restless, hardy, conquering people that had carried the American empire westward with a rush. . . ."<sup>48</sup> This rush was directed not at Texas alone, but also at California. American farmers and planters were rushing into Texas; New England sea captains were interested in the trade

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 581, 582.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 582.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 586.

of California; and the pioneers were breaking new land routes to the Pacific.<sup>49</sup> Closely behind this economic penetration, Beard declared, came political dominion. Webster, he pointed out, had been as anxious to get California for the shippers as Calhoun had been to get Texas for the planters.<sup>50</sup> Mexico would not sell. Here Polk was on hand to give the push necessary to precipitate a crisis that would in all probability result in acquiring the territory in spite of the failure of diplomacy. This push was the annexation of Texas, "a spark . . . applied to tinder." The agricultural interests in America, Beard concluded, assured their predominance.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to Beard's thesis that agricultural interests were behind America's expansion westward and the consequent war with Mexico, was the view advanced by Norman A. Graebner, who insisted that expansion was limited to maritime objectives. Writing in the Pacific Historical Review, and a monograph, Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion, he emphasized the maritime commercial interests in the pursuit of California, challenging the traditional view of agrarian expansion.<sup>52</sup>

Polk, Graebner wrote, feared British expansion in California and upon this fear formulated his policy to acquire California. Polk's fears

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 589.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 603.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 605.

<sup>52</sup>Norman A. Graebner, Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion (New York: The Ronald Press Company, [c. 1955]), p. vi; Cartwright, op. cit., p. 112.

were needless, explained Graebner, for the American pioneer had guaranteed that California would never belong to Britain. But the greatest dream of the expansionist was not for land; rather, it was a craving for the Pacific commerce and trade with the Orient.<sup>53</sup>

In the American scene of the 1840's, wrote Graebner, the Texas situation was no problem. Only because of political scheming and ambition did it become an issue in 1844. Graebner accused the Democratic party of playing politics with Texas in order to win an election.<sup>54</sup> He analyzed the conflict over Texas as essentially a power struggle between the southern and western agrarians and the eastern industrialists for domination of national policy.<sup>55</sup> The Whig Party, representing the eastern commercial interests, opposed the annexation of Texas as they feared the expansion of slavery and the expansion of agrarian Democratic power. They lost in the election of 1844 when a Democratic victory assured the annexation of Texas. They gained when the expansionist sentiment moved to the Pacific. In the Pacific, Graebner declared, Boston and New Orleans joined hands. While the Democratic agrarians perpetuated a national outlook, the objective of the northern Whigs was particularistically centered on the Far West.<sup>56</sup>

Specifically, Graebner explained, New England had its eye on the

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<sup>53</sup>Norman A. Graebner, "American Interest in California, 1845," Pacific Historical Review, XIII (February, 1953), pp. 13-21.

<sup>54</sup>Graebner, Empire on the Pacific, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 17, 18.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 18-21.

part of San Francisco to extend trade with the Orient.<sup>57</sup> This desire was caught in the international rivalry between Britain and France, who both believed it inevitable that California would separate from Mexico.<sup>58</sup> As happened in Texas, wrote Graebner, "fear of England more than any other factor carried Manifest Destiny to the Pacific in 1845."<sup>59</sup> So widespread was the desire for California among the American people that Polk necessarily had to follow their lead. He was helpless to avoid it, stated Graebner.<sup>60</sup>

To remove permanently the British threat, Polk decided on outright purchase of California from Mexico, a natural solution considering Mexico's unstable internal conditions. It was only as moral coercion that Polk pressured Mexico for settlement of the claims debt, Graebner maintained.<sup>61</sup> He emphatically added that those claims did not constitute adequate grounds for war. They were nothing more than a sore spot in Mexican-United States relations. A side effect of this claims dispute was a less peaceful attitude toward Mexico on the part of the American expansionists. Actually, Graebner wrote, the claims became "a pawn in an expansionist game."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 112, 114.

Yet, in spite of the pressure for war, Polk continued to seek a peaceful solution. Only when threatened by Mexico did the President take defensive measures. From this point on, Graebner explained, tensions mounted which drove both nations toward war. When Polk, who was adamant in his insistence that the Rio Grande was the boundary, moved Taylor to that river, his position changed from one of defense based on Mexican procreatinism to one that had the appearance of aggression.<sup>63</sup> Polk's excuse that this move was intended to induce Mexico to negotiate, Graebner wrote, ". . . may have been diplomatically sound, but it led the nation to war. And it was a political blunder for it exposed the Polk administration to unlimited partisan attack."<sup>64</sup>

This blunder was only the most serious in a long string of diplomatic crises. The cause of the war, Graebner concluded, lay deep in a hub of diplomatic and commercial relations; it came ". . . because neither nation made a sincere effort to avoid it."<sup>65</sup>

While Channing, Beard, and Graebner stressed primarily economic motives behind expansion, the historians Bernard De Voto and Ray A. Billington focused their attention on the spirit of Manifest Destiny. With vigorous prose,<sup>66</sup> De Voto portrayed the courage displayed in face of ad-

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 111, 118, 152.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Arens, op. cit., p. 292.

versity and the honor achieved by Americans when conquering the western frontier.<sup>67</sup> DeVoto ignored economic motives in the expansionism of the 1840's and instead emphasized those unanalyzable elements he claimed historians so often neglected such as romance, utopianism, and the dream that all men might be free. Also an important element in expansion, he felt, was the logic of geography and the incompleteness of the United States' territory. Here he is kin to both Channing and Weinberg. But DeVoto wrote further that expansionism had acquired an emotion that was both new and different. This emotion took form in the idea that it was America's destiny to spread its free and admirable institution by action as well as by example. Manifest Destiny became the label for this emotion.<sup>68</sup>

DeVoto was harsh in his criticism of Mexico. He refused to recognize Mexico as a republic, explaining that Mexico was in the last stage of the breakdown of the Spanish empire. America's annexation of Texas was just the last episode in the erosion of that empire.<sup>69</sup> President Polk, wrote DeVoto, helped dismember this decayed empire by making use of the claims dispute. His chief motive, DeVoto conceded, was to get California. But Polk did not want nor expect war. It was only after war had erupted that Polk decided on the conquest of California.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Bernard DeVoto, The Year of Decision, 1846 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1943), pp. iii, ix.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

To explain the ultimate causes of the war, DeVoto subordinated personalities to insinuate forces and conflicts within the nation. Many, he wrote, felt something unworthy had come over the American people.

This was so because:

there was no one to describe the tides of the sun's pull--no one to say that the nation was bent out of shape not only by unsolved conflicts within itself but also by the explosion of forces new to the earth.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, added DeVoto, as no one was able to dissect out causes for Polk's war, many attributed the bad effects of the war to "personal devils." One of these, popularized by James Russell Lowell, was the slave conspiracy: the notion that the Mexican War was precipitated for the extension of slave territory. These blinded people, wrote DeVoto, did not see nor understand that the slavery crisis was one of the effects--an effect produced by tidal forces.<sup>72</sup>

A more recent work than DeVoto's discussing the Mexican War as the result of inevitable expansionist forces was Ray A. Billington's The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860, a volume in The New American Nation Series. In his earlier but more comprehensive work, Westward Expansion, Billington also discussed and analyzed the forces that caused the Mexican War. Eighteen forty-six, he wrote, was America's year of decision; it was the year that Americans became aware of their role as a chosen people in a Divine plan to extend the area of freedom to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ray Allen Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steel Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, [c. 1956]), p. 143.

The American people thought and acted in a climate of opinion that caused them to believe their institutions were ". . . of such magnificent perfection that no boundaries could contain them."<sup>74</sup> To the mind of an American in that fateful year, Billington wrote, expansion was "not imperialism, but enforced salvation." The spirit of Manifest Destiny was in the air, and there was no stopping the Americans.<sup>75</sup>

This idea of a spirit or force behind America's westward march parallels DeVoto's concept of forces inherent in the American earth. Both Billington and DeVoto saw this motivating force as something mystical or spiritual in nature, and as a more important component of expansion than mere materialistic economic goals so prevalent in Beard's and Graebner's interpretations.

Billington diagnosed expansion as having three major components: the persistence of the westward movement, American fear of other nations, and the emergence of Manifest Destiny. Actually, wrote Billington, the movement of the pioneers made expansion inevitable. These hardy adventurers demanded that their government follow them and give them protection. Never did they think of renouncing their American heritage. Even the statesmen of the day believed that ". . . where the frontiersmen went the flag must follow."<sup>76</sup>

So convinced was Billington of the inevitability of the Mexican

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<sup>74</sup>Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion, A History of the American Frontier (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 572.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Billington, Far Western Frontier, p. 144.



War that he wrote, "War with Mexico followed America's expansionist spree as inevitable as night follows day."<sup>77</sup> The annexation of Texas, coupled with Polk's incessant demands for California, ignited a fire of hatred between the United States and Mexico that only the strongest will could have resolved. And that will was lacking, wrote Sillington. Only by ceaseless negotiation could war have been avoided, but when Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States, all ". . . hope of orderly settlement was gone; mounting tensions were certain to bring on conflict."<sup>78</sup>

The inevitability of the Mexican War, according to both DeVoto and Sillington, lay primarily, though not exclusively, in the Manifest Destiny of the American people to expand. Both historians emphasized the more spiritual side of Manifest Destiny and the mission of America as the major components of expansion. Here they differ from Beard and Graebner who placed emphasis on the more economic or pecuniary aspects of expansion. The most important link between these two groups of historians and those who saw the war in terms of unresolved tensions and emotions was their belief that the war was inevitable. The potent forces of expansion were too strongly embedded in the spirit of the American people to be halted by any one person, even the President of the United States.

Another school of historians, also concerned with American expansion, chose to place greater emphasis on Polk and his diplomacy than on expansion as the major contributing factor in initiating the conflict.

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

The President's diplomatic moves, like pawns in a chess game, were analyzed and studied in a context of expansionist sentiment. To the writings of representative historians of this school we turn our attention in the following chapter.

## VI. EXPANSIONISM

### POLK AND POWER DIPLOMACY

American expansionism, a dominant theme in twentieth-century accounts of the Mexican War, is a complex phenomenon in the history of the United States. How vital a role did expansionist sentiment play in shaping national policy? Were the component forces of expansionism--Manifest Destiny, slavery extension, commercial profits, and the westward movement--powerful enough to embroil the American people in a war with their southern neighbor?

Many historians have not thought so. While agreeing that a climate of opinion favorable to conquest existed in the 1840's, these historians have spoken less of expansionism in general terms and more of Polk's power diplomacy. Polk was a victim of his expansionist environment, but he was also a "doer," as the historian George P. Garrison described him.<sup>1</sup> Although the "horse and wagon of expansion" were moving, Polk held the reins and was able to direct them in accord with his own expansionist aims.

Garrison was one of the first western historians to emphasize Polk's diplomacy when discussing the hostile Mexican-United States relations. His volume, Westward Extension, 1841-1850, in the American

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<sup>1</sup>George Pierce Garrison, Westward Extension, 1841-1850 (Vol. XVII of The American Nation: A History, ed. A. B. Hart. 27 vols.; New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1906), p. 207.

Nation Series, described the region west of the Mississippi River, of which Texas was a part, and discussed the causes for its settlement.<sup>2</sup> When Texas was annexed by the United States, Mexico's resentment and declaration that a state of war existed caused a rupture in the already strained relations between the two nations.<sup>3</sup> "No theory of a conspiracy is needed to explain the war with Mexico," Garrison wrote. Impatience on both sides had reached the breaking point and pointed to a clash of arms.<sup>4</sup>

Because of Mexico's previous threats, Polk had sent Taylor to Corpus Christi to protect Texas when annexation was still pending. Only when it became known that Slidell had not been received, wrote Garrison, did Taylor move to the Rio Grande. It is significant, he stated, that until the time of Taylor's move, Mexico had made no distinction between its claim to territory east of the Rio Grande and its claim to all of Texas. Therefore, in Mexican opinion, the moment Taylor went into Texas he had invaded their territory; the distinction was made only when Taylor moved to the Rio Grande.<sup>5</sup>

Garrison characterized Polk as a "doer," a person not afraid of danger, who failed to see the whole truth, and whose mind, once made up, was unchangeable. There can be no doubt, Garrison stated, of Polk's ". . .

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Kraus, The Writing of American History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 232.

<sup>3</sup>Garrison, op. cit., pp. 188-201.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 202-204.

sincere faith in the righteousness of his own purposes and of the means he used to attain them."<sup>6</sup> Garrison justified Polk's means by his ends. There were very few, he contended, who, though condemning Polk's methods, would want to see his work undone.<sup>7</sup> Jesse S. Reeves, who reviewed Garrison's book in the American Historical Review, criticized Garrison's reasoning that the end justified the means. He wrote that Polk's administration could not be judged by its results when the motives and methods were improper.<sup>8</sup> But did Garrison believe Polk's motives were wrong? Not entirely.

Garrison first assured the reader that Polk was sincere in his belief that Great Britain would take possession of California, although little evidence was found for such a conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Slidell was then sent to Mexico to effect a peaceful settlement and would have been received, according to Garrison, had it not been for the shakiness of the Mexican government. Polk, who had no intention of using aggressive measures to carry out his plan to acquire California, was not adverse to forcing Mexico's hand when he learned Slidell had been refused. Consequently, Taylor was sent to the Rio Grande.<sup>10</sup> Only when negotiation had failed, concluded Garrison, did Polk force a conflict; "the most valid criticism

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse S. Reeves, Review of Westward Extension, 1841-1850, by George F. Garrison, American Historical Review, XII (April, 1907), p. 674.

<sup>9</sup> Garrison, op. cit., pp. 209-210.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 220, 225.

of Polk's aggressiveness . . . rests on the weakness and disorganization of Mexico."<sup>11</sup> Patience, which Garrison believed would have gotten nowhere, had no place in Polk's administration; delay was neither in accord with the spirit nor practice of Polk's administration.<sup>12</sup>

Published one year after Garrison's book was Reeves' history of the diplomacy during the administrations of Tyler and Polk. Reeves, taking a new approach, stated that the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas were two distinct episodes in the expansion to the southwest. The annexation of Texas, he wrote, was definitely not the cause of the Mexican War. However, some similarities between the two events did exist: both were at the expense of Mexico and both reflected the expansionist desires of the American people.<sup>13</sup> The slavery question, Reeves stated, rather than aiding this expansion, had slowed it down and almost defeated it.<sup>14</sup>

The false view that slavery was behind this expansion had its origin, according to Reeves, in a speech by John Quincy Adams in 1838 in the House of Representatives. Jay had expounded this view in his books, which later became the basis for von Holst's interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Calhoun had made matters worse when he wrote his letters to the British Foreign Minister,

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>13</sup>Jesse E. Reeves, American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1907), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

Pakenham, defending the annexation of Texas as a needed protection for the South against British attempts to abolish slavery in Texas. The result of these letters, Reeves wrote, robbed annexation of a national character and gave it a sectional bias. The slave issue had again halted annexation.<sup>16</sup>

When annexation finally succeeded, Almonte left Washington. This act, Reeves believed, ended the story of the annexation of Texas; it had no further connection with the Mexican War. "If Polk had no ulterior designs upon Mexico the Mexican War would not have taken place," he wrote.<sup>17</sup> Herein lay the crux of Reeves' thesis concerning the causes of the war: Polk wanted California and the boundary question gave him his chance to get it.<sup>18</sup>

Reeves then analyzed the instructions sent to Slidell. These instructions plus the nature of Parrot's mission to Mexico, whom Polk had sent to pave the way for Slidell, proved conclusively to Reeves that the Mexican War was not the result of Texas annexation; the attempt at reopening diplomatic relations with Mexico had been for the purpose of securing California by purchase. In these instructions was the keynote to Polk's aggressive policy of expansion. Simply, it was to get territory for the assumption of debts that Mexico could not pay.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

Folk, Reeves continued, then combined military moves with his diplomacy. Taylor was sent to the Rio Grande, Fremont to California, and Gillespie on his secret mission. All were part of the same policy.<sup>20</sup> Reeves believed that it would have been no sacrifice of national self-respect had Folk sent a commissioner rather than a minister, whom Mexico could not very well accept.<sup>21</sup> As soon as the mission had failed, aggressive moves were planned. The clash of Taylor's troops was a lucky incident for Folk, who had already determined to declare war on Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

Concluding, Reeves wrote that the Mexican War was not the result of the annexation of Texas, but rather the result of conquest, the fulfillment of Folk's designs on California. War, Reeves believed, would have been declared even if there had been no conflict on the Rio Grande.<sup>23</sup>

The interpretation expounded by Garrison and Reeves was reinforced by historians writing in the 1920's and 1930's. In 1921, Nathaniel W. Stephenson wrote a volume, Texas and the Mexican War, in The Chronicles of America Series. In this brief but lucid account the author portrayed Folk as a man torn between two desires. On one hand Folk was an expansionist and wanted California from the hostile Mexicans, but on the other hand he wanted to avoid war. Torn between these two pulls, the President, Stephenson wrote, had to maneuver to bring about a schism of his own. His

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 285, 287.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 288.



first move was to try and reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico.<sup>24</sup>

Stephenson was not as harsh toward Polk as was Reeves. Stephenson explained that Polk was ignorant of the Mexican character and falsely concluded that the Texas affair was a closed issue. It was not. Little did Polk realize that Mexican public opinion was "ignorant, visionary, sensitive, and enraged against the United States."<sup>25</sup> On no account, stated Stephenson, could any Mexican government receive an American minister.<sup>26</sup>

Stephenson parted ways with Reeves, too, in his appraisal of Slidell's instructions and Polk's motives for sending him to Mexico. Whereas Reeves believed Polk wanted California and hoped to get it through Slidell's mission, Stephenson felt that Polk's real purpose in Slidell's mission was to get Mexico to accept the Rio Grande as the boundary upon America's assumption of Mexico's claims debt.<sup>27</sup> But Stephenson acknowledged that Polk had a further and dearer aim. He saw the germ of another Texas in California.<sup>28</sup> His policy for California, wrote Stephenson, was based on two factors: the movement of American settlers into the Sacramento Valley and the fear of British designs to get California.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Nathaniel W. Stephenson, Texas and the Mexican War; A Chronicle of the Winning of the Southwest (Vol. XXIV of The Chronicles of America Series, ed. Allen Johnson. 50 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 178.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

To prevent the latter, Polk, through Slidell, offered Mexico money. However, "into this shifting scene of Mexican politics stepped John Slidell, the king's pawn in Polk's vision of peaceful imperialism, only to find that Herrera's Government was in a panic."<sup>30</sup> Polk, wrote Stephenson, faced a dilemma. He now realized that California would elude his grasp unless America went to war. But would Congress approve of war? Polk's one recourse lay in a defensive war, a war to protect Texas from Mexican attack. Regardless of a questionable boundary, Polk was sure he could count on a majority of Congress.<sup>31</sup>

Not to be caught napping, the determined President, even while hoping for a peaceful settlement through negotiation, ". . . had kept a hand behind his back, and in it he held his weapons."<sup>32</sup> The army and navy had been ordered to a position of readiness and orders had been sent to the Pacific and Gulf squadrons; General Taylor had been ordered to move his forces into Texas.<sup>33</sup> When the news of Slidell's rejection was received, Taylor was ordered to the Rio Grande. Even before this, wrote Stephenson, Polk had urged upon his cabinet a war policy. Then, "as if by magic Polk's horizon cleared. Fate had thus suddenly and unexpectedly filled his hand with trumps:"<sup>34</sup> news of fighting had reached the White

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 185-186.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 186-187.

House.<sup>35</sup> Polk's dreams become real possibilities.

Several other historians of the West, such as Cardinal Goodwin, Frederic Paxson, and Frederick Jackson Turner, also wrote on the Mexican War. Goodwin, in the early twenties, wrote The Trans-Mississippi West, in which he based his conclusions on Reeves' interpretation accusing Polk of preparing to use force to carry out his plans for expansion. When peaceful methods failed, Polk, not content with Texas alone, hoped for war.<sup>36</sup> Paxson, another close student of the western frontier,<sup>37</sup> contended that Polk falsely interpreted his election as a mandate for expansion. This was not the case, Paxson explained; rather, it was Clay's ". . . trimming between the forces for slavery and against it [that] alienated northern Whig votes."<sup>38</sup> The abolitionist vote for James A. Birney cost Clay New York and hence the election.<sup>39</sup>

The annexation of Texas, Paxson stated, was part of the frontier movement, the "most American thing in all America," and it was unfortunate, he wrote, that annexation had become embroiled with the slavery question.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Paxson believed that Polk realized annexation

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>36</sup> Cardinal Goodwin, The Trans-Mississippi West, 1803-1853; A History of Its Acquisition and Settlement (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1922), pp. 478-493.

<sup>37</sup> Kraus, op. cit., p. 292.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Paxson, History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, [c. 1924/]), p. 353.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

probably would mean war; but rather than fearing it, Polk welcomed war. When war seemed slow in coming, Paxson wrote, Polk hastened it; he had a war message planned based on American grievances before news was heard concerning Taylor's fighting. All Polk did was to shift his reason for war.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of who the aggressor was, concluded Paxson, war was irrepressible without Polk's going for it.<sup>42</sup>

Paxson sharply disagreed with Reeves' opinion that the conquest of California was a major cause for the war. Instead, Paxson believed that the war hastened the conquest, but did not cause the conquest of California. That, wrote the frontier historian, had been going on for a long time by the peaceful penetration of the moving frontier. This movement would have produced the same results in California as it had in Texas and Oregon.<sup>43</sup>

The New England historian, Samuel E. Morison, gave special attention to refuting those historians, Garrison among them, who believed war inevitable because of Mexican insistence that all of Texas belonged to it. Therefore, the argument ran, as soon as Polk had ordered Taylor to cross the Sabine, he had actually invaded Mexico.<sup>44</sup> Morison contended that this argument was false because it did not take into account the Latin unwillingness to acknowledge a fait accompli. Had Polk been con-

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 354-356.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 356-357.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>44</sup>Samuel E. Morison, The Oxford History of the United States, 1783-1917 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 75.

tent with Texas only, and had he not reached out for more, Mexico would never have initiated a war.<sup>45</sup> The main objective of the war, Horison believed, was the conquest of California.<sup>46</sup>

Published posthumously in the 1930's was an incomplete manuscript by the most celebrated historian of the West, Frederick Jackson Turner. In his history, The United States, 1830-1850, Turner studied the influences of the various sections on the development of the United States.<sup>47</sup> This sectional approach was aptly illustrated in his discussion of the split between Calhoun and Polk and their difference in approach to expansion. Turner explained Calhoun as the representative of the South Carolina and South Atlantic sections who was primarily interested in the power of the slaveholding South; he described Polk as a Tennessean who was chiefly interested in carrying forward the traditional westward movement of the pioneer. This sectional interpretation cleared Polk from the abolitionists' charge that he was a tool of a slaveholding conspiracy.<sup>48</sup> Turner wrote that in spite of the bitter controversy between North and South, which only hindered the annexation of Texas, it was the Mississippi Valley and the north and south central regions that were eager for annexation and expansion to the Far West.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>47</sup>Donald H. Mugridge, Blanche P. McGrum, and Roy P. Basler, A Guide to the Study of the United States of America, The Library of Congress (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 369, note no. 3357.

<sup>48</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and Its Sections (New York: Henry Holt and Company, [c. 1935]), pp. 573, 560.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 537.

Turner did not blame the expansionist fever for causing the Mexican War. Instead, he stated that Polk determined to use the boundary question and the claims question to bring on a military situation that would force Mexico to accede to his proposals.<sup>50</sup> These proposals were aimed not only at getting Texas, but also New Mexico and California; this desire to get California, Turner wrote, no doubt influenced Polk's directive ordering Taylor to the Rio Grande.<sup>51</sup>

Richard R. Stenberg, probably Polk's severest critic in the twentieth century, also believed Polk initiated the war for conquest.<sup>52</sup> In two articles in 1934 and 1935 Stenberg took to task the body of opinion exemplified by Justin Smith. Stenberg accused Polk of double-crossing Senator Benton by rejecting Benton's plan for annexation. Benton's alternative to outright annexation by joint resolution was to disregard joint resolution and seek a treaty with Texas that would need Senate approval. This alternative was provided by Congress during the closing days of Tyler's administration. Stenberg contended that Polk had explicitly promised Benton and his colleagues, Senators Tappan and Blair, that he would go along with the Benton or Senate method for annexation and reject the House or joint resolution method. He did not; Texas was annexed by the House plan.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 543.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 563.

<sup>52</sup> Richard R. Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigues of 1845," Pacific Historical Review, IV, (1935), p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Richard R. Stenberg, "President Polk and the Annexation of Texas," Southwestern Social Science Quarterly, XIV, (March, 1934), p. 334.

Stenberg's evidence for this supposed double-cross was the published testimonies of Senators Tappan and Blair. They testified that had Polk not made such a commitment, they would never have voted for the House plan.<sup>54</sup> Evidence to the contrary, stated Stenberg, was based solely on Polk's diary.<sup>55</sup> The alternative for the historian was to accept either the word of the gentlemen or to believe that they had tried to "frame" Polk. Both sides cannot be right. That Blair and Tappan would try to frame Polk appeared absurd to Stenberg, considering the high character of both men. Also, wrote Stenberg, though Polk denied the charge, he persuaded his friends to testify on his behalf in 1848 and would not face his accusers. In view of this, Stenberg preferred not to believe Polk but to accept the opinion that Polk had flinched on a promise and double-crossed Benton and his followers.<sup>56</sup>

Stenberg attacked both Smith and Hives for their conclusion, based on Slidell's mission and instructions, that Polk had peaceful intentions. It is necessary, Stenberg argued, to examine Polk's diplomacy before the Slidell mission.<sup>57</sup> Stenberg accepted the testimony of President Jones of Texas stating that before annexation Polk had tried to incite Texas to conquer additional disputed territory and thereby precipitate war with Mexico. Jones claimed he had refused, preferring to leave to Polk the

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 339-349.

<sup>57</sup>Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigues," p. 39.

responsibility of starting a war.<sup>58</sup>

Stenberg then interjected that there was no reason to doubt Jones' word. When Polk pledged the Rio Grande to Texas, he succeeded in provoking a war with Mexico.<sup>59</sup> As further proof of Jones' veracity, Stenberg cited testimony of the British minister in Texas, Elliot, which corroborated Jones' statements. The only reason critics doubted Jones' story, Stenberg charged, was that it was not consistent with the Slidell peace mission. Actually, Stenberg wrote, Slidell's mission was just a new plan by Polk to coerce Mexico. The whole thing was probably a hoax. Polk wanted a war; he strongly desired the northern Mexican territory.<sup>60</sup>

Not quite so harsh on Polk were the four diplomatic historians, James Norton Callahan, Samuel Flagg Bemis, Thomas A. Bailey, and Julius W. Pratt. A complete volume on Mexican-United States relations was written in the early thirties by Callahan. He believed that the acquisition of California was the chief objective of Polk's foreign policy. It was for this reason that Polk tried to reopen diplomatic relations by sending Slidell to Mexico City.<sup>61</sup> Mexican threats of war, which made the Texas border a critical area, prompted Polk to dispatch Taylor and his army. Also, Callahan wrote, this show of force was in preparation for a possible show of force against Mexico.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 64, 65, 67.

<sup>61</sup>James Norton Callahan, American Foreign Policy in Mexican Relations (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), pp. 146-148.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 149.



Polk then developed a new policy, according to Callahan. Upon hearing from Larkin that many Californians were disloyal to Mexico, Polk hoped to get California with the help of a spontaneous uprising of the people.<sup>63</sup> Then news reached the President that Slidell had been rejected. This, opined Callahan, happened because of Mexico's stubborn and unreasonable attitude.<sup>64</sup> A direct result of Slidell's failure was Polk's ordering Taylor to the Rio Grande. Then another variable entered the complex situation. Polk was visited by Atacha who had glowing ideas of Santa Anna's planned return to Mexico with United States' help and of his willingness to sell California to the Americans. It was "on this confidential communication . . . [that] Polk based a large part of his later plans."<sup>65</sup> He decided to combine diplomacy with military force. Polk's decision for warlike action met with approval on the grounds that war was justified by ". . . the delinquencies and hostilities and obstinacy of Mexico. . . ."<sup>66</sup>

Bailey, Pratt, and Bemis have written textbooks used in college courses in American diplomatic history. Quite naturally their interpretations of the Mexican War have had a vast influence. The oldest of the three is Bemis' A Diplomatic History of the United States. Bemis both criticized and defended Polk. Mexico's diplomatic break with the United

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-155.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., pp. 156-157.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., pp. 159, 161.

States and continual threats could probably have been regarded as a declaration of war, wrote Bemis. Thus, Polk sent Taylor into Texas only for protection.<sup>67</sup>

That Polk had been reasonable with Mexico was amply shown in his instructions to Slidell, wrote Bemis. Polk

. . . would have welcomed a war and the conquest of coveted territory, and he was determined to have California, but he certainly gave Mexico every chance for a peaceful settlement, and on terms which stopped short of taking a single square mile of indisputable Mexican territory.<sup>68</sup>

By refusing to negotiate with Slidell, Mexico played right into Polk's hands. In a challenging way, American troops were sent to the Rio Grande. Still, conjectured Bemis, Polk might have avoided a clash if he had kept Taylor out of the disputed area, ". . . but it is difficult to condemn his move under the circumstances. . . ." <sup>69</sup> Polk had allowed Mexico to begin the war, but without any dishonorable action on his part to precipitate it.<sup>70</sup>

Both Bailey and Pratt take a more eclectic view. Both stressed that it was not slavery that motivated the settlement and annexation of Texas. Pratt found the answer in geography rather than in slavery,<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Samuel Flagg Bemis, A Diplomatic History of the United States (New York: Henry Holt and Company, [c. 1936/], p. 232.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., pp. 235-236.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., pp. 237, 239.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>71</sup>Julius W. Pratt, A History of United States Foreign Policy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 228.

while Bailey explained it as part of the westward movement.<sup>72</sup> Pratt listed four major causes of the war: Mexican resentment over the annexation of Texas, the dispute over the southwestern boundary of Texas, the failure of Mexico to pay its claims debt, and Polk's anxiety to get California for the United States.<sup>73</sup> To get California, Polk did some sabre rattling to help the negotiations, wrote Pratt. When Slidell was refused, Polk then chose a war to punish the weak Mexico. "Polk's attitude toward Mexico from first to last combined simultaneous gestures with the sword and the olive branch," Pratt concluded.<sup>74</sup>

Bailey also maintained that Polk was determined to force the war after Slidell had been rejected. Bailey believed there would have been no war at the particular time and place it occurred had Taylor not been sent to the Rio Grande. Polk did not want war, provided he could get California peacefully, but Polk had not leaned over backwards to avoid hostilities. He probably welcomed war, thought Bailey. "He would have been a little less than human if, in the circumstances, he had not."<sup>75</sup>

Polk's reputation was enhanced as historians realized he was a man of fortitude and not one who would be the "dupe" of any slave conspiracy. In the early nineteen forties Robert Glass Cleland wrote a history of California. Polk, he concluded, was ". . . an expansionist as resolute

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas A. Bailey, A Diplomatic History of the American People (sixth edition; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., [c. 1958/]), p. 238.

<sup>73</sup> Pratt, op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 246, 248.

<sup>75</sup> Bailey, op. cit., p. 258.

and zealous as Andrew Jackson himself."<sup>76</sup> Polk, however, was ". . . an expansionist not because he came from the South, but because he belonged to the West."<sup>77</sup> Cleland aptly described Polk's intense belief in America's destiny to expand to the Pacific; it ". . . was as deep-rooted in his convictions," he wrote, "as the rigid Calvinistic theology to which he subscribed."<sup>78</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his The Age of Jackson, also pointed to Polk's kinship with the Jacksonian spirit, one which ". . . assumed the social existence and political nonexistence of slavery. . . ."<sup>79</sup> Both Cleland and Schlesinger, along with Calhoun's biographer Charles M. Wiltse, emphasized Polk's reliance on power diplomacy. In regard to California, Cleland stated that Polk was interested in national growth and commercial supremacy; he saw Mexico's weak hold and realized it would be either America or England who gained the possession. Upon this knowledge, concluded Cleland, Polk formulated a policy of peaceful annexation.<sup>80</sup> Schlesinger, emphasizing the less peaceful aspects of Polk's policy, wrote that news of war on the Rio Grande arrived just in time to destroy all opposition to Polk's plans for gaining by force what he could not get by

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<sup>76</sup>Robert Glass Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, A History of California, 1542-1900 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), p. 197.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), p. 452.

<sup>80</sup>Cleland, op. cit., pp. 197, 217.

negotiation.<sup>81</sup> Wiltse believed that Taylor's move to the Rio Grande was part of a policy of power diplomacy.<sup>82</sup>

Two of the most recent works dealing with Polk and the Mexican War, at least in part, are Glyndon G. Van Deusen's The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848, and Charles A. McCoy's Polk and the Presidency. Van Deusen devoted several chapters to the war with Mexico. Primarily, his analysis centered on the annexation of Texas and the boundary dispute between Mexico and the United States. Van Deusen stated that the Mexican attitude was warlike; Herrera had declared that war was imminent as soon as annexation had been completed. As a result, Taylor was moved by Polk to Corpus Christi. This posed a problem. Van Deusen believed that Taylor's move was a subject for negotiation and not occupation.<sup>83</sup> Polk's action, he further explained, was a game of bluff; the President had hoped to scare Mexico into a peaceful settlement of all the disputes and he honestly believed his actions would prevent war, not start one. But Polk lost the game.<sup>84</sup>

The origins of the war, Van Deusen maintained, lay partly in the unsatisfied claims, but chiefly in the expansionism of the 1840's. Polk must share the blame; his desire for the Rio Grande boundary and for additional territory so embittered the Mexicans and inflamed American public

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<sup>81</sup>Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 452.

<sup>82</sup>Charles M. Wiltse, John C. Calhoun, Sectionalist, 1840-1850 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., [c. 1951/]), p. 280.

<sup>83</sup>Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848 (in The New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steel Commager and Richard B. Morris. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, [c. 1959/]), pp. 214, 215.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

opinion that it led both nations to the point of war. When Slidell failed, Polk was determined on war and the Mexican attack made it inevitable.<sup>85</sup>

The most recent study of Polk in his capacity as chief executive, written by Charles A. McCoy, added little to Mexican War historiography. His work was based primarily on Reeves' interpretation of Polk's handling of the war. McCoy broke the period into two periods: the first was when Polk tried to mix diplomacy and force to get New Mexico and California, the second was the existence of war.<sup>86</sup>

The resolution leaving the boundary open to future settlement, McCoy explained, gave Polk his chance to get California. Polk had hoped to use the boundary question as a wedge, but his actions were blocked when diplomatic relations were severed.<sup>87</sup> In an effort to reopen negotiations, Polk sent Slidell to Mexico, but when Slidell was refused, Polk used this as an excuse to send military forces to occupy the disputed territory. Polk was ". . . determined to gain by force what he had failed to win by negotiation."<sup>88</sup> This was made easier, as Polk was able to utilize his authority as commander-in-chief to direct military forces of the United States. By doing so, he succeeded in presenting to Congress an accomplished war which they had no choice but to accept.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 22b

<sup>86</sup>Charles A. McCoy, Polk and the Presidency (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960), p. 94.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

The one unifying theme of these interpretations, with expansionism taken for granted, was that Polk used force to gain what he could not get by peaceful means. Historians are divided as to whether Polk forced Mexico's hand so as to conquer California or merely to settle the Texan boundary. Unlike the writers in the previous chapter, these historians saw nothing inevitable about the war. Expansionism provided a climate of opinion, but not an initiating force for war. In condemning Polk as an aggressor, this body of historians has returned to the ideas of Polk's Whig adversaries. Whigs such as Gorwin, Delano, and Ashmun, had also believed Polk forced the war; so did the abolitionists. Except for the slave conspiracy interpretation of the abolitionists, both the contemporary Whigs and abolitionists could claim progeny among these modern Mexican War historians.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A study of the literature of the Mexican War reveals that until the early twentieth century, at least, interpretations wavered little from those avenues of causation laid down by contemporaries of the event. It was Polk's war, a war for conquest, an infamous war to extend slavery, or a righteous war to repel Mexican aggression.

The antislavery Whig and abolitionist voices were dominant in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Unalterably opposed to the war, abolitionist writers decried the war as an unjust act of a vicious slaveholding conspiracy to increase slave territory. Their arguments were given added vitality by the sectional controversy over slavery. Typical of this abolitionist criticism was Columbus Delano's charge that the war was "unholy, unrighteous, and damnable." The Philadelphia North American characterized Mexico as the "Poland of America."

The most important contemporary history was William Jay's A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War. Jay's "slave conspiracy" interpretation of the war paved the way for subsequent abolitionist historians in the nineteenth century. His views can be traced through Livermore, Henry, Schouler, Ladd, and Von Holst. Opposition to this abolitionist viewpoint in the nineteenth century was virtually non-existent. This monopoly of biased history left a legacy most detrimental to the reputation of the United States and of President Polk. The American government was a "war loving government" and Polk was characterized as a tyrant and slavemonger. America was a wolf that had devoured the innocent



lamb Mexico to satisfy a hunger for California and more slave pens.

These historians, possessed with a moral fervor, wrote with a righteous superiority. Sure of their own interpretations, these well-meaning, but narrow-minded historians were so busy noticing the mote in their opponents' eyes that they failed to see the beam in their own. In light of more recent scholarship, much of their interpretation has been invalidated. "Mr. Polk's war" was not necessarily a slaveholders' war.

With opinions as strong as the abolitionists, but with voices more faint, Mexican War veterans such as Mansfield and Ripley contributed to the literature of the Mexican War. Reflecting the intense nationalism of the day and their pride in America's military achievements, these writers and others, such as Hughes, Jenkins, Claiborne, and Furber, believed it was America's duty to defend its honor against a perfidious and aggressive Mexico.

It was beyond their vision to see both sides of the dispute. Complex issues were made simple by the fact that Mexico had attacked American troops. America was forced to retaliate. In the spirit of Polk's war message, these men believed that Mexico had shed American blood on American soil. Was it not, wrote Mansfield, Divine predestination that America conquer a wilderness? After the Civil War this school of opinion all but died. The abolitionist viewpoint was dominant; anything to the contrary was anathema.

Before the close of the nineteenth century, however, rumblings of discontent and reaction were evident. A violent storm of anti-abolitionist sentiment swept Mexican War historiography. In 1899, Bourne published his

article in the American Historical Review disassociating slavery extension from national expansion. Polk, he wrote, was an expansionist on behalf of the national domain, not slavery. Owen felt it his duty to refute and counter every viewpoint of the abolitionist historians. Within a decade a full-fledged revision of abolitionist conceptions had taken place. Historian after historian dissected the older view: Adams investigated British interest in Texas; Boucher studied the slavocracy myth; and Barker, Binkley, and Fuller analyzed American expansion into Texas. It was their unequivocal conclusion that American colonization and expansion into Texas were motivated by the same ideals of Manifest Destiny as was northern expansion westward.

But these historians were only the John the Baptists of the new historiography. The slave conspiracy interpretation of the war was fading fast. Two publications killed it completely: in 1910 Polk's diary was published, enhancing his prestige and vindicating his motives from the abolitionist charge that he was a tool of the slavocracy, and a dozen years later, in the pages of McCormac's biography, Polk emerged from the abyss of ignominy into which the abolitionists had cast him. McCormac believed Polk ". . . a constructive statesman--a statesman possessed of vision, sound judgment and universal executive ability."

Justin Smith's two-volume study of the Mexican War was the first major study that interpreted the war as necessary, righteous, and just. Smith exonerated the United States from any guilt in annexing Texas; he wrote also that Polk had not provoked war to conquer California. The annexation of Texas, he felt, was the essential cause of the war, but the Mexican attack was the primary cause for its start. Smith's work

was followed by the histories of Henry and Bill, which adhered closely to Smith's interpretations.

Although these revisionist historians cast a critical judgment on Mexico for initiating the war, their interpretations and analyses were more temperate than their nineteenth-century predecessors. These writers made clear that although one cause was ultimately more important than the others, the war could only be understood as the culmination of a series of complex issues and disputes.

The most important factor in Mexican War causation introduced in the twentieth century was the expansionist theme. This new element, however, produced new problems. Was expansion merely American conquest and imperialism or was it something righteous and divinely predestined? Was American expansion, as Professor Billington aptly phrased it, "enforced salvation," a salvation bestowed upon underprivileged people by the liberty-loving Americans?

The twentieth-century historian, unlike his nineteenth-century predecessor, dared not attribute to a single incident or event the cause of the war. What role did the Texas Revolution play in bringing on the war? What relevance did America's desire for California have to the war? Did the boundary dispute really cause the war? Was Polk really a tyrant bent on conquest regardless of consequence? These distinct but interrelated events all contributed to an understanding of the causes of the Mexican War. While no unanimity as to the relative importance of these causative factors is apparent among twentieth-century historians, there is distinguishable two schools of expansionist interpretation.

Such historians as Rives, Weinberg, Singletary, Beard, Graebner, Billington, and DeVoto believed the war to be inevitable. Great forces of expansion beyond the control of men drove both Mexico and the United States to war. As to the precise nature of these forces, these historians differed. Rives, Weinberg, and Singletary understood expansion as an irrepressible force: a mystical expansionist spirit following a law of beneficent territorial utilization. The historians Beard and Graebner understood expansion on narrower economic grounds. Beard saw expansion primarily as an agrarian movement, while Graebner saw expansion as a maritime movement for new ports in the Pacific. DeVoto and Billington talked more of Manifest Destiny, that indefinable element that gave impetus to the great westward push. This expansion, regardless of its motivation, made war inevitable. It was a force beyond the control of either nation.

Many historians of the twentieth century did not believe these expansionist forces were solely responsible for the war. Rather, they attributed to Polk the responsibility for using this expansionist sentiment to force Mexico's hand. Polk, through the use of power diplomacy, had made all the moves. He controlled the forces of expansion. Whether Polk had favored war to get California, or to settle unpaid debts, or to get additional territory for Texas was still debatable, however.

Garrison stated that patience had no place in Polk's administration; Polk was a doer. Reeves, critical of Polk, believed Polk had forced war to conquer California. Stephens, Goodwin, Faxon, and Turner, other historians of the West, explained that after Slidell had been rejected and

all peaceful solutions seemed doomed, Polk had favored and forced a war. Faxon denied that Polk had wanted war in order to conquer California. On the other hand, Polk's most bitter critic, Stenberg, believed war erupted solely because Polk was bent on the conquest of California. Schlesinger was also harsh on Polk; he wrote that Polk had to gain by force what he could not gain peacefully.

Bailey, representative of several diplomatic historians, probably best described Polk's role in the events leading to the war. He declared that Polk had not leaned over backwards to avoid war; in fact, he probably had welcomed it. But, added Bailey with a touch of sympathy for Polk's dilemma, Polk would have been a little less than human had he not welcomed it under the circumstances. One of the most recent works dealing in part with the Mexican War was Van Dusen's The Jacksonian Era, which provided a bridge between the expansionist schools of interpretation. Van Dusen wrote that the causes of the war lay chiefly in the expansion of the 1840's, but that Polk must share the blame; Polk had determined on war after Slidell was rejected.

From a survey of twentieth century historiography, it becomes evident that opinion as to the causes of the war remains varied. Except for the element of expansion, interpretations of causation have changed little since Polk's contemporaries first voiced their opinions. Even the idea of expansion can be inferred from contemporary writings and speeches accusing Polk of beginning the war to get California. Certainly the abolitionists understood it as expansion--at least slavery expansion. While

slavery extension is no longer held as a cause of the war, the fact that many historians today credit Polk with initiating the war gives credence, at least in part, to the abolitionist contention that Polk was responsible for the war. The truth probably lies neither here nor with those who believed the war inevitable, but somewhere in between.

Unanimity of opinion is impossible; probably some of the problems are too complex ever to completely resolve. But it is apparent that further syntheses are needed and a fundamental re-examination of both the Mexican and American documents is essential. Research and writing on a scale approaching the literature of the Civil War and other important events in American History would be a welcome relief from the inadequate and incomplete narratives now extant. To do justice to the Mexican War and President Polk, this important event must be studied for its own sake; a few chapters in histories of a more comprehensive nature will not suffice. Only when definitive studies, approaching that of Justin Smith's work, are published, will the student of today be given a more relevant and meaningful understanding of the Mexican War.

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