

# Mexico Libel



The claim that the United States went to war to take Texas from Mexico, though widely believed, is untrue.

by Steve Byas

I settled into the chair for my haircut, and the young Hispanic woman struck up a conversation, as hair cutters usually do. She asked what I did for a living, and I told her that I was a college history professor. After a moment of other such questions, she asked when was it that the United States took Texas from Mexico.

I considered my response for a moment. “Well, actually, the United States did not take Texas from Mexico. Texas won its independence from Mexico in the Texas Revolution, and it was almost a decade later that Texas was admitted to the United States as a state.”

She was clearly perplexed, and I added, “Perhaps you are thinking of California, which Mexico lost in the war.”

The young woman had learned her history in Mexico before her family moved to

the United States. One has to wonder what is taught in the schools of Mexico about the circumstances in which Texas was lost, and later became part of the United States. Actually, I doubt if it is a whole lot different than is what taught in schools north of the Rio Grande. The belief that the United States went to war to take Texas away from Mexico is widely believed on both sides of the border, and it is yet another example of an historical libel, with President James Knox Polk cast as the arch-villain of the whole affair.

But it is not true.

The genesis for the Mexican War can be traced to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when President Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory from France for \$15 million in gold. When the American negotiators asked for more specific boundaries for Louisiana, the wily French foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, craftily replied, “I am sure that you Americans will make the most of it.”

This boundary question resulted in some friction with Spain, whose colonial empire

**Free from Mexico's dictator:** Sam Houston's spectacular victory over the Mexican Army near the modern-day city of Houston made Texas an independent republic.

included both Florida and Texas. While the United States did not question Spain's rightful ownership of Florida, Texas was another matter. For several years, due to the uncertainty of the boundary of Louisiana, Texas remained a point of contention between the United States and Spain. The United States, however, had more immediate concern about Spanish Florida than Texas. Florida was a base for Indian raids into Georgia, and a convenient hiding place for outlaws and runaway slaves. Of most importance was that the United States feared the presence of a European power to its immediate south.

President James Monroe directed his secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, to work out, if possible, an American purchase of Florida. Spain proved open to selling Florida, but wanted something more than just money for it. Spain wanted the Americans to cede any claim to Texas. American desire for Florida was so great that the agreement was struck, and this appeared to settle the question of Texas, in 1819.

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Two years later, Mexico, inspired by the success of the American secession from the British Empire, likewise won its independence from the Spanish Empire. Texas was now recognized as part of the new Mexican nation.

At the time, Texas was very lightly populated with Mexican citizens, outnumbered by various Indian tribes, most notably the warlike Comanches. Largely for the purpose of presenting a counter to the Comanches, the Mexican government decided to make a deal with Moses Austin, a Missouri banker, to use a tract of land in South Texas to attract immigrants from the United States. These land-hungry immigrants would, however, have to swear loyalty to the government of Mexico.

Moses Austin's death led his son, Stephen F. Austin, to accomplish most of the actual organizational work of the colony in 1823. In a short period of time, the Americans (often called *Texians*) outnumbered the ethnic Mexicans by about 10-1. The political situation in Mexico appeared hopeful to the American immigrants. In 1823, the leader of the new Mexican nation, Emperor Agustín de Iturbide, was deposed. Iturbide was the leader of the *Centralists*, who wanted to give very little power to the provinces within the Mexican republic, and it was the *Federalists* who had won out. The Federalists drafted a constitution in 1824, deliberately modeled after that of the United States, with a federal system of government, and robust protection of civil liberties and private property.

The next few years saw little political discontent in Texas, among either the Texas immigrants or the ethnic Mexican community. Unfortunately, the results of the 1828 election were cast aside in a Centralist coup d'état led by Anastasio Bustamante. This eventually touched off a rebellion

by Federalist forces, who ousted Bustamante in 1832, then won the election in January 1833. The Mexican Congress remained Centralist, however, so Antonio López de Santa Anna rallied Federalist forces, even gaining the support of many of the influential American immigrants in Texas, such as Jim Bowie. Santa Anna's supposed devotion to federalism and constitutional government was just a ruse to gain power, however, and the Americans

in Texas began to strongly consider their own secession effort.

### **Santa Anna's Suppression**

Most Americans who settled in Texas were Protestant Christians, and resented the Mexican government's requirement of allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. When Santa Anna established a military dictatorship in 1835, he further centralized power in Mexico City, abolished the Mexican Congress, rejected the Mexican Constitution, and increased the number of soldiers in Texas. Like most tyrants, he confiscated many privately owned guns, and suppressed efforts of the Texans to form militias. In a letter to the U.S. minister to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, Santa Anna justified his actions, saying the Mexican people were not “fit for liberty,” and that a “despotism is the proper form of government for them.”

Austin traveled to Mexico City, hoping to avert war. Santa Anna was in no mood to negotiate anything, and threw Austin in jail for several months. When Austin finally returned to Texas, his previous counsel of peace had transformed into a call for a declaration of independence.

Texas declared its independence in early 1836, with strong support from the ethnic Mexican community in Texas, which largely detested Santa Anna. David G. Burnet was chosen as the interim president of the new Republic of Texas, and the first vice president was Lorenzo de Zavala.

Santa Anna traveled north, determined to crush the rebellion. Styling himself the “Napoleon of the West,” he succeeded in re-taking the Alamo (which Texian forces under Jim Bowie had wrested earlier from a small Mexican garrison), and killing all of its defenders, including the famed trio of William Barrett Travis, David Crockett, and Jim Bowie. It took



**Calling himself the “Napoleon of the West,”** Antonio López de Santa Anna was a brutal dictator who believed the people of Mexico needed despotism. His implementation of a military dictatorship caused an independence movement in Texas among both the American immigrants and the ethnic Mexican community.

Santa Anna's army *13 days* to take the former Catholic mission, with the loss of several hundred men, which Santa Anna referred to as "a small affair." It is noteworthy that seven of the defenders of the Alamo were ethnic Mexicans, who shared the American's desire for liberty and self-government.

A few days later, a Texas force of about 400 surrendered at Goliad, hoping to avoid the post-battle slaughter of the Alamo. They were summarily shot. The Goliad Massacre, combined with the heroic defense of the Alamo, led to a surge of new recruits for the Texas army, led by General Sam Houston. On April 21, 1836, Houston surprised Santa Anna and defeated his army at the Battle of San Jacinto.

Houston forced the captured Santa Anna to recognize the independence of Texas, *with its border as the Rio Grande River*, and became the first elected president of the Republic of Texas in October of 1836. U.S. President Andrew Jackson recognized the independence of the Republic of Texas near the end of his term in early 1837. Britain and France also gave formal recognition to Texas.

### Texans' Troubles

What most Texans desired was admission into the United States as a state. Jackson balked at this, however, as did his immediate successor, Martin Van Buren. The United States had only a small army, and Mexico threatened war if the United States annexed Texas. Additional resistance came from many Northern states, which feared another state that would legalize slavery.

Following Santa Anna's ouster as dictator, subsequent Mexican governments refused to accept the loss of Texas, and rejected the recognition of Texas' independence by Santa Anna. Mexico made feeble attempts to invade the Texas Republic over the next few years, loudly informing the United States that any attempt to annex Texas would mean the immediate breaking of diplomatic relations and war.

While the annexation of Texas was shelved, largely to avoid war with Mexico, other issues led to a worsening of relations over the next several years. A chronic problem were the "claims issues," in which Mexico owed damages to American citizens, totaling about \$3 million.



**Tough opponent:** Americans today presume the Mexican War was a "walk in the park," but the truth is the American army was outnumbered in every major battle, and won only after both sides suffered heavy casualties.

During the independence effort against Spain, property of American citizens had been damaged. President John Quincy Adams had tried to settle the claims issue with Mexico but was unable to get any movement from south of the Rio Grande. The next president, Andrew Jackson, also failed to settle this dispute.

Finally, the exasperated Jackson administration broke diplomatic relations with Mexico in 1836. In 1839, relations were restored when Mexico accepted the decision of an international tribunal that they owed the claims. Appealing to popular opinion inside the country, Mexican politicians dragged their feet, and made only three of 20 payments scheduled over five years. Finally, they refused to make any more payments.

Another issue that caused friction with the United States was the American desire to purchase California, so as to secure a western port. At the time, very few Mexican citizens resided in California, which had no schools, no newspapers, no postal system, almost no police or courts, few books, and suffered from Indian raids. According to Odie Faulk, in *The Mexican War, Changing Interpretations*, there was little communication with the government in Mexico City. Alarming for the United States, the British

and the French were both clearly interested in obtaining California, and the British could use their territory in northern Oregon to launch an invasion.

Resentment toward the wealthier United States was frequently used for political advantage for Mexican politicians, which only further fanned the flames of hostility.

Texan frustration at the failure of the United States to consider annexation, and fear that Mexico was going to launch yet another invasion, led the Texas government to open negotiations with France and Great Britain, for the purpose of entering into some sort of alliance with one of those two nations. This concern that Texas might become part of the British Empire contributed to a resurgence in Texas as a political issue in the United States.

Then, in 1844, Democrat presidential candidate James Knox Polk of Tennessee made the annexation of Texas a campaign issue. Almost a decade had passed, making it difficult to reasonably argue that the United States had acted recklessly, risking war with Mexico over Texas. Polk's Whig opponent, Henry Clay of Kentucky, ran a cautious campaign, and was much less clear as to what he would do about Texas annexation.

Polk won the election of 1844, and out-

going Whig President John Tyler submitted the question to Congress shortly before Polk was to take office. On his last full day in office, Tyler signed the resolution that added Texas to the United States. Mexico fulfilled its promise to break diplomatic relations, and war seemed likely. In the 19th century, the breaking of diplomatic relations was the usual prelude to war.

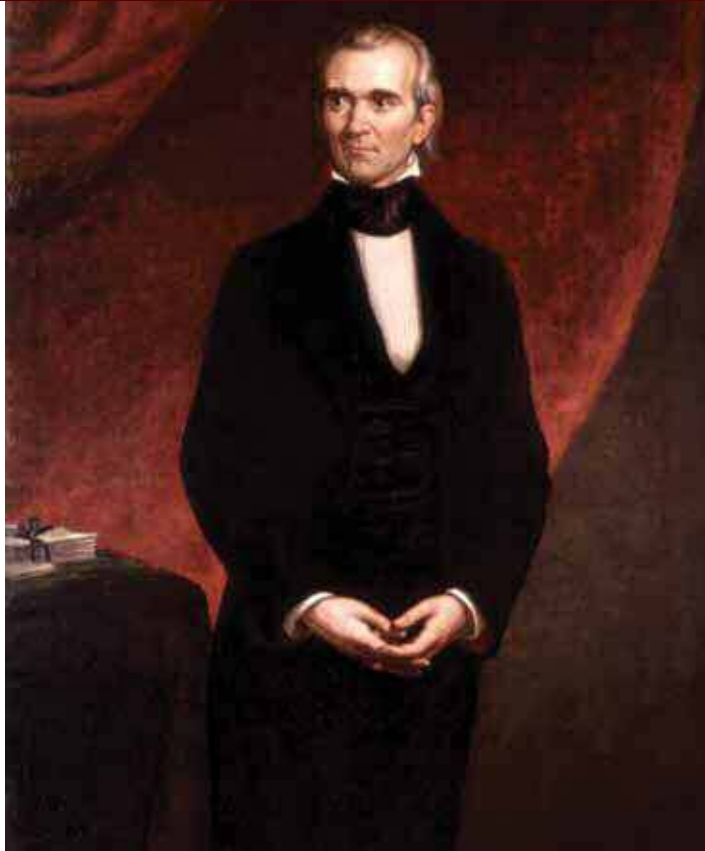
## Unrejoiced War

But President Polk did not want war with Mexico, rather he hoped for a peaceful settlement of the issues dividing the neighboring nations. After several rebuffs, Polk received what he took as an invitation to send a diplomatic representative to Mexico City to discuss terms. But finding a government in Mexico City with which to negotiate was a problem. The presidency of Mexico changed hands *four times* in 1846 alone. Nevertheless, still hoping to avert war, Polk

dispatched John Slidell to Mexico City with an offer to buy Upper California and New Mexico for \$25 million, and establish the Rio Grande as the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. state of Texas, with America promising to take over and pay the \$3 million in claims themselves.

Polk had reason to think the Mexican government might be open to such an offer, as the government was teetering on bankruptcy. But by the time Slidell arrived in Mexico City, his very presence infuriated most Mexican politicians. President José Joaquín de Herrera was denounced as a traitor for even considering talking to

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**His oath to defend against invasion:** While faulted by many today for supposedly “causing” the war, the fact is that Polk would have been derelict in his duty had he failed to defend the state of Texas from an invasion by military forces of a foreign power.

Slidell, and was deposed. The new government worked the populace into a war fever, and promised the Mexican flag would soon float over the White House.

At this point, Polk faced a decision. While Mexico considered the Nueces River, farther north than the Rio Grande River, as the actual boundary of Texas, and the United States insisted the boundary was the Rio Grande (as Santa Anna had agreed to in 1836), the Mexican government argued that Santa Anna had acted in duress. (Sam Houston threatened to hang him if he declined to agree to that border). Besides, the Mexican government argued, Santa Anna was no longer in power in Mexico, and was not even in Mexico, but instead was living in exile in Cuba, with his 14-year-old mistress.

Of even greater importance, Mexico did not consider the land *north* of the Nueces River as part of Texas, either, contending that

*all* of Texas remained part of the Republic of Mexico.

But the United States had now made Texas a state in the United States. Because of that, the United States had a constitutional obligation to Texas — the same obligation owed to all states according to the U.S. Constitution: to “guarantee ... a Republican Form of Government,” and to “protect ... against Invasion.” When Texas entered the Union in 1845, it was clear that the Rio Grande River had been its southern border for nearly a decade.

Accordingly, Polk dispatched troops to the Nueces River to protect against the coming invasion the Mexican government had been promising for months. Still hopeful for a peaceful settlement, Polk had first kept the forces under the command of General Zachary Taylor on the north side of the Nueces River. However, Polk knew that failure to control the land *south* of

the Nueces to the Rio Grande would be a de facto acceptance of the Mexican position that Texas’ border was the Nueces, not the Rio Grande. There was also no guarantee that Mexico would even accept the loss of Texas north of the Nueces.

One must ask, what else was Polk to do? Texas was now part of the United States, and the U.S. government was therefore obligated to protect the land between the Rio Grande and the Nueces from invasion, just as much as the land *north* of the Nueces.

*Failure to protect the Texas position with military force would have constituted a dereliction of Polk’s duty as president of the United States.*

This situation in which the territory of the United States was under the threat of invasion and occupation could not go on forever. For those who contend that Polk should have tried diplomacy, he did try diplomacy with the Slidell mission. It is difficult to negotiate with a government that will not even talk to you. Polk did *not* send Taylor’s forces south across the



**The spoils of war:** Santa Anna agreed to the independence of Texas after his defeat at San Jacinto. While some argued the Mexican government later repudiated Santa Anna's grant of independence to Texas, it must be noted that, as a dictator at the time, Santa Anna was the Mexican government.

Rio Grande, but only into territory that belonged to the United States. This can hardly be considered provocative.

Polk called together his Cabinet to discuss the matter, which he believed could not continue indefinitely. On April 18, 1846, Mexican President Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga wrote the commander of his Army of the North, Pedro de Ampudia: "It is indispensable that hostilities be commenced, yourself taking the initiative against the enemy." According to Faulk in *The Mexican War*, it was five days later that Paredes declared a "defensive war" had commenced against the United States. The next day, Ampudia was replaced by General Mariano Arista, who ordered his 1,600 men to cross the Rio Grande and attack American forces that were on the north side of the river. A small American patrol of less than 70 men under Captain William Thornton was attacked, resulting in the deaths of 16 American dragoons.

Polk's response was immediate, sending a war message to Congress, declaring that the Mexican government had invaded "our territory, and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil." Since that time, Polk has been lambasted and ridiculed for

those words by critics. But the fact of the matter was, American blood *was* shed on American soil, by an unprovoked and surprise attack from a vastly superior force. It was on the land claimed by Texas, after Texas had become part of the United States.

An attack on American soldiers *on American soil* was clearly an act of war. What else could it be?

### Whig Party Politics

Whig Party politicians, such as first-term Congressman Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, were quick to demagogue the issue, demanding that Polk tell Congress *exactly* where was the "spot" on which American blood had been shed. Lincoln was in full knowledge of these above facts, but chose to neglect his duty to an American state to protect it from a foreign invasion. As a member of Congress, it was Lincoln's duty under the Constitution to defend an American state from invasion.

The declaration of war by Congress was overwhelming, 170-14 in the House of Representatives, and 40-2 in the Senate. Yet, the Whig Party chose to play politics with the war, and its successor party, the Republicans, followed suit in the years *after* the Civil War, adding the claim that the war was simply a conspiracy of slaveholders to add more slave territory. President Grant, who served in the Mexican War, even had the audacity to call the war "unjust" in his autobiography. This is a reflection of the post-Civil War revisionism by northerners as to the genesis of the Mexican War.

During the Mexican War, Whig political leaders actually spoke with General Zachary Taylor *in Mexico*, urging him to run for president on their ticket in the 1848 election. Despite having never bothered to vote for president before in his life, Taylor did use the popularity he won from the Mexican War to win the White House in 1848. Another Whig, General Winfield Scott, was the party's nominee in 1852, but he lost. This could be considered hypocritical, since the Whigs had dismissed the whole war as "Mr. Polk's War."

Why has the *myth* that the Mexican War was the fault of President James K. Polk persisted until today?

One reason was the Whig Party chose to create this myth at the time, mostly for political reasons. Most of the history books of the time were written by Northerners who, writing in the aftermath of the Civil War, chose to perpetuate the myth that the war was simply a land grab to add another slave state to the Union. This position became accepted dogma, as illustrated by General Grant's "unjust" comment in his memoirs.

What is unjust is the libel perpetrated against President Polk, with the unfounded claim that Polk launched the war. This libel continues today as part of the template that the United States has been a nation that was built on the backs of slaves, American Indians, and "peace-loving" neighboring countries. Polk is not guilty of this libel, and should be exonerated. ■