

The War on Mexico

In *Occupied America*, Rodolfo Acuna argues that Anglo-Americans invaded Mexico for the sole purpose of forging an economically profitable North American empire. In justifying their use of conquest and violence to bring about progress, bitterness arose between two people—a bitterness that actually “gave birth to a legacy of hate.” Like Howard Zinn, Acuna demonstrates how President James K. Polk manufactured the war with Mexico.

The war with Mexico may have been one of America’s most unpopular wars from start to finish. Soldiers spoke out against the war, and many deserted; abolitionists abhorred the possibility that a victory might add more slave territory to the Union; others refused to pay their taxes for an unjust cause. For many reasons, resisters spoke out, acted upon their beliefs, and protested the actions of an expansionist president and a large segment of the American public that supported the philosophy of Manifest Destiny.

Document-Based Questions

ETHAN ALLEN HITCHCOCK

1. What are the “annexation resolutions of our Congress” to which Ethan Hitchcock refers?
2. Using a map of Texas, examine the difference in territory of the Mexican claim that the “original limit” of the Texas boundary was at the Neuces River, versus the American claim that the boundary was at the Rio Grande River. Whose claim does Hitchcock support and why?
3. Specifically, what “changes in character” and in “the real status and the principles for which are forefathers fought” is Hitchcock referring to? Do you agree with him that the Founding Fathers would have disagreed with Polk’s expansionist philosophy? How and why?

MIGUEL BARRAGAN

1. What sort of insults to both the Mexican government and the Mexican people does Miguel Barragan describe?
2. Barragan describes Mexico as “the civilized world.” How might the American colonists have responded to this description? Could both sides be civilized? Uncivilized? How and why?
3. How can both the Mexican government and the United States government fight a war for “God and Liberty”? How can “justice and power” be on both sides?

JUAN SOTO

1. What are the primary arguments for trying to convince Irish, French, and German Catholics to join Mexico in the fight against the United States?
2. Since the Mexican government lost the war, how do you think the victorious Americans treated the members of the San Patricio Battalion?

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

1. Why did Frederick Douglass consider the war with Mexico to be “a war against the free States”?
2. Twice in this speech there was “applause and hissing.” Who might have been applauding and why? Who might have been hissing and why?
3. What were the “compromises and guaranties” in the Constitution that favored the slave system?

NORTH STAR EDITORIAL

1. The author states: “No politician of any considerable distinction or eminence, seems willing to hazard his popularity with his party, or stem the fierce current of executive influence, by an open and unqualified disapprobation of the war.” What does the writer mean? Do you think this characteristic was common among nineteenth-century politicians? Among today’s politicians? How and why?

2. How does this editorial highlight the racial, class, and religious issues that the author feels fueled the war with Mexico? Do you think he makes a convincing argument? Why, or why not?
3. Why do the abolitionists and “the friends of peace” have no faith in the political parties and their stand on the war? What problems does the author attribute to the Democrats and Whigs?

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

1. Why does Henry Thoreau believe that “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable”? From what document does Thoreau derive this belief? Do you think people still believe in this “right of revolution”? Why, or why not?
2. Thoreau writes that what is legal is not necessarily right. Do you agree or disagree? Provide specific examples from his essay.
3. Do you agree with Thoreau that, “government is best which governs not at all”? What do you think he meant when he wrote, “It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right”? Do you agree or disagree with this statement? How and why?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 8, “The War on Mexico”

After reading Chapter 8 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. From the beginning of his presidency, Polk was determined to acquire California as part of his plan for expanding the continental boundaries of the United States.
2. The incident leading to the “war on Mexico” was largely manufactured by the powerful advocates of Manifest Destiny.
3. Attitudes against the war on Mexico were widespread, particularly among abolitionists.

4. After the Mexican government prohibited immigration into Texas, large numbers of American settlers illegally immigrated into Mexican territory.
5. Once settled, Texan colonists failed to abide by the national laws and customs of Mexico.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 8, “The War on Mexico,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 8, “We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapters 8 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. Despite the years between battles and the different issues that bring us into conflict, the language of those who favor war often shows strong continuity.
7. The war with Mexico was fought by ordinary Americans and Mexicans but was driven by the interests of elites from both countries.
8. The early foundations of the United States tradition of civil disobedience have their roots in the war with Mexico.
9. The war with Mexico was fueled by racist conceptions of Mexicans as inferior and a less “civilized” people.
10. President Polk provoked war with Mexico in order to gain California and other lands for the United States.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 8, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What do you think the typical soldier felt he was fighting for in the war with Mexico? What factors were influential in some soldiers’ decision to desert?

2. Why do you think ordinary citizens—workers or farmers, with no slaves and no plans to move into Mexican territory—might join demonstrations supporting the war?
3. What is civil disobedience? Can you provide various historical and contemporary examples of civil disobedience? Does civil disobedience constitute a legal or illegal action in the United States?
4. Why were many abolitionists against the war with Mexico?
5. Why was Texas such an attractive colonial opportunity for Americans?
6. All these voices of resistance share a few common grievances. What are they? What do you think bound together the antiwar resistance of American and Mexican soldiers, African-Americans, abolitionists, and an author?
7. How do Thoreau's suggestions for opposing the war compare and contrast with those of Frederick Douglass?
8. In what ways could it be said that the war with Mexico was based on racist attitudes? Could it also be argued that it was a war between classes? Why, or why not?
9. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?
10. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 8 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

11. By referring to Chapter 8 in *A People's History* as well as to a world map, explain why you think President Polk wanted to integrate California into the United States.
12. What would you do if you were alive in 1846 and felt the war with Mexico

was immoral? Whose antiwar actions presented in both chapters might you be willing to follow? Which would you reject?

13. In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn writes, "Accompanying all this aggressiveness was the idea that the United States would be giving the blessings of liberty and democracy to more people" (p. 154). Do you think this was a valid reason for going to war? What other acts of "aggressiveness" have been undertaken by the United States government in the name of liberty and democracy? Do you think this is a valid reason for going to war today? How and why?
14. What were the short- and long-term consequences of the war with Mexico for the American people? For the Mexican people?
15. What is the significance of the phrase—and the title of Chapter 8 in *A People's History*—"We take nothing by conquest, thank God"?
16. Why do you think that Congress not only "rushed to approve the war message," but also continued to support President Polk throughout the war?
17. Howard Zinn asks, "Were the newspapers reporting a feeling in the public, or creating a feeling in the public?" What do you think? Support your answer with specifics from the reading.
18. Howard Zinn reports that "Mexico was a despotism, a land of Indians and mestizos . . . controlled by criollos—whites of Spanish blood" (*People's History*, p. 159). Does this information make you think any differently about the war with Mexico? Why, or why not? Do you think this information helped fuel the war in 1846? How and why?
19. The war with Mexico was fought by the first all-volunteer army in United States history. Why did men volunteer? Why did men refuse to fight? Why did men desert? What were the recruits promised upon honorable discharge? What did most receive after the war?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework,

short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Learn as much as possible about anti-Mexican immigration efforts that have occurred in the last twenty years. What are the main reasons Anglo-Americans give for excluding documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants? What are the implications of this merger? What are your reactions to these reasons? How and why did the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) get incorporated into the Office of Homeland Security? Given the origins and nature of the war with Mexico, how might today's Mexicans respond to the efforts to exclude Mexicans from United States territory?
2. After reading Henry David Thoreau's entire essay titled "Civil Disobedience," write a letter to Thoreau in which you take one of the following approaches: Write Thoreau as his contemporary; tell him what you think about his ideas and how they might or might not be applied in 1846. Or write Thoreau as a citizen in the twenty-first century; tell him how you think his ideas about civil disobedience might or might not be applied to issues in your time.
3. Examine the war with Mexico from a Mexican perspective. Begin your research by reading an account of the war in a Mexican secondary-education textbook. Then learn as much as possible from other sources about Mexican perspectives and thoughts on the goals, conflicts, and consequences of the war. Compare and contrast these perspectives with an account of the war in your textbook. How do the two accounts compare and contrast? Write a new account for your textbook in which both the United States and Mexican perspectives are included.
4. Find out more about Lincoln's "spot resolutions." What was Lincoln's motivation for the resolutions? What do they tell you about Lincoln's support for the war with Mexico? What was the presidential and congressional response to the resolutions?
5. Read more about William Lloyd Garrison and his newspaper *The Liberator*. What events helped to shape Garrison's life as a political activist? Read at least four issues of *The Liberator* that were written during the war with

Mexico. What similarities do they share with the antiwar voices you heard in *Voices* (or both books)? How did Garrison's antiwar pleas compare and contrast with those of Frederick Douglass?

6. Learn more about the San Patricio Battalion. Who were the men who joined? What were their reasons for joining? How were they treated by the Mexican army? What was their fate after the war? How were they treated by the Americans? By the Mexicans?
7. Research the similarities and differences of both independence movements conducted by Americans who immigrated to Texas and California. Do you think one was more legitimate than the other? How did the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo help the Americans living in the newly acquired territories of the United States? How did it affect the Mexicans living in those territories?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Howard Zinn calls the Mexican-American War "Polk's War" and "the war on Mexico," and he indicates that the war was a pretense for taking California and the territory between. Agree or disagree with this position, using material from *Voices* (and *A People's History*).
2. Although most Americans supported the War with Mexico, a great deal of antiwar sentiment arose during this period. What were the sentiments and objectives of antiwar activists? Which of their objections do you find especially persuasive? Which are not persuasive? How and why?
3. Describe the similarities that existed between the War with Mexico and the wars against the Indians.
4. Using examples from *Voices* (or from both books), defend or refute the contention that the war with Mexico was based on both class and racial prejudice.
5. Howard Zinn claims that the war with Mexico was "a war of the American elite against the Mexican elite." Using evidence from *Voices* (or from both books), support or refute this contention.
6. Why was this war so unpopular with American soldiers? Who deserted, and why?

7. What voices of resistance in Chapters 8 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
8. How do the voices and information in these two chapters improve or change your understanding of the war with Mexico? What information was especially useful? How and why?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Design a monument or memorial exhibit to commemorate the war with Mexico. Decide which perspective your memorial will represent—one from the United States or one from Mexico. Be prepared to explain how the symbols you use demonstrate the perspective you choose.
2. Conduct a community discussion to which the following have been invited: Stephen Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, President Miguel Barragán, and President James Polk. The distinguished guests in the audience (class members) must ask one question of any of the speakers.
3. Write a brief children's book on the war with Mexico. Be sure to include both perspectives about the war—the American and the Mexican.
4. Make a thorough investigation of the way in which civil disobedience is discussed in your history textbook—especially in regard to the chapter(s) on the war with Mexico and/or civil rights. Using information from your reading in Zinn's books, revise the textbook portions to present a full and balanced discussion of civil disobedience. If there is no discussion of civil disobedience in your textbook, write an entry and explain where, how, and why it can be integrated into the textbook.