



*Was the United States' declaration of war against Mexico in 1864 justified?*

## Texas, Polk, Lincoln & The Mexican-American War

### Background Information

Toward the end of 1835, Texas began a revolution against its mother country Mexico. One year and a few Texan victories later, Mexico's president Antonio López de Santa Anna — a prisoner of war at the time — was forced to sign a treaty giving Texas its “freedom.” Texas declared its independence from Mexico on September 1836, calling itself the “Lone Star Republic.” However, the tensions between these two entities did not end there. Both Mexico and Texas disagreed on the actual western and southern boundaries of Texas. In addition, Mexico still disagreed on the validity of the signed treaty and continued to claim Texas as its own. To make matters worse, that same year Texas petitioned for annexation to the United States. Due to slavery expansion arguments and to avoid conflicts with Mexico, the petition was denied at the time, and Texas remained independent for another nine years.

This changed in 1845 when the United States Congress admitted Texas into the Union as a slave state. Mexico interpreted the annexation as an act of war. Moreover, the conflict over disputed territory had not been resolved. Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its southern border while Mexico claimed the Nueces River as the proper boundary between itself and Texas. While tensions continued to mount, James K. Polk sent an ambassador to Mexico to negotiate the purchase of the Mexican territories of New Mexico and California, as well as the settlement of the disputed borderlines and other claims against the Mexican republic. However, the Mexican government declined their offer of \$25 million.

Polk's next step was to station American troops at the disputed territory. In March of 1846, U.S. General Zachary Taylor and his men marched to the northern bank of the Rio Grande. Seeing this as an act of aggression, Mexico responded and moved an army to the southern bank of the river. Mexico immediately issued a proclamation of imminent hostilities if the American soldiers did not depart. A month later on April 25, Mexican forces attacked a U.S. patrol, killing and wounding 16 American soldiers. By May 11, 1846, the 11th president of the United States, James Knox Polk, appeared before Congress to ask for prompt action declaring war against its neighboring country. The subsequent two-year armed conflict was largely based on the argument that Mexico's army had invaded United States territory and had shed “American blood upon the American soil.”

### Lesson Description

In this lesson, students will analyze maps and governmental documents from the Mexican-American war. Students will evaluate the way these primary sources either challenge or support the U.S. government's justification for the war.

Grade Range: 8th-11th

Time to complete lesson: 120 minutes

Resources needed:

- Huntington Library materials (provided)
- Student readings (provided)
- Graphic organizers (provided)

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Although the war was largely popular among expansionist and slavery proponents, and while many rushed to volunteer to fight, other groups such as the Whigs—religious leaders and abolitionists—protested and raised concerns regarding the causes and justification for the fighting. Despite the dissent, the warfare continued and ended in complete victory for the United States. In February of 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed; in it, Mexico recognized the Rio Grande as the official border between the two nations. As part of the treaty, Mexico ceded more than 750,000 miles of land, not including Texas, in exchange for \$15 million and the cessation of hostilities.

To date, the dominant historical narrative in the U.S. celebrates the victory of the United States against their Mexican enemy, and applauds its resulting territorial expansion. A competing historical narrative views the United States' justification of the war as a “provocation” to take away more than half of Mexico's territory. In this lesson, students are invited to consider and critique both narratives as they explore primary sources regarding the United States' justification for the war.





By the end of this lesson, students will **know**:

- Texas independence (1836) and its later annexation to the Union (1845) caused severe political and military conflicts between Mexico and the United States.
- The land between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River was claimed by both Texas and the Mexican state of Coahuila.
- In 1846, Mexican soldiers attacked a small American military force at the disputed zone. The United States Congress declared war on Mexico later that year.
- The conflict ended with the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Through this treaty, Mexico seceded more than half of all its territory to the United States

By the end of this lesson, students will **be able to**:

- Utilize maps/geographic tools to corroborate textual information regarding the Mexican-American War and to analyze the changing geographical borders.
- Evaluate a major argument used to declare war against Mexico, including its competing claims, ideas, and opinions.
- Understand political, geographical, and cultural consequences of the Mexican-American armed conflict.
- Formulate and support an opinion on whether the United States' declaration of war against Mexico in 1846 was justified.

## Supported Standards

### California History– Social Science Framework

**Chapter 12:** Students study early territorial settlements, the political ambitions of James K. Polk and other proslavery politicians, and the war's aftermath on the lives of the Mexican families who first lived in the region.

### History-Social Science Content Standards

**8.5.2.** Know the changing boundaries of the United States and describe the relationships the country had with its neighbors (current Mexico and Canada) and Europe, including the influence of the Monroe Doctrine, and how those relationships influenced westward expansion and the Mexican American War.

**8.8.6.** Describe the Texas War for Independence and the Mexican American War, including territorial settlements, the aftermath of the wars, and the effects the wars had on the lives of Americans, including Mexican-Americans today.

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy

**RI.8.9.** Analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.

**W.8.1.B:** Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.



# Lesson Plan

## Introduction (20 minutes):

- 1) Project the [Mexican-American War Lithograph](#) from The Huntington Library's collection. Without telling students the conflict this image represents, ask them to name some of the elements they notice.
- 2) Lead students to question what two countries seemed to be at war in this illustration.
- 3) Once the United States and Mexico have been identified, explain this image represents an actual armed conflict that took place from May 13, 1846 to February 2, 1848 between the two countries.
- 4) Next, ask students to predict, write, and share with a partner what could have been some of the possible causes for the war.
- 5) After three minutes, lead a class discussion addressing some of the student's answers. Inform the students they will learn about the actual reasons for the war in the next activity.

## Activity One / Day One (10 minutes):

Supporting Question: What type of actions can lead to war: The United States' perspective

- 1) Gathering and Evaluating Sources:
  - Perspectives: Students read and analyze the reasons that, according to the then-President James P. Polk (11th U.S. President) and Secretary of State James Buchanan (15th U.S. President), led the United States to declare war against Mexico.
    - Teacher can use guided reading, close reading, small group activity or class discussion to analyze these two primary sources.
  - Maps: Students take a close look at [Map A](#) and [Map B](#) of the resources provided and discuss whether those maps corroborate the arguments given by Polk and Buchanan.
    - Teacher can use "See/Think/Wonder" activity, small group assignment or whole class discussion to analyze these two primary sources.
- 1) Performance Task:
  - Analyzing Resources: Using the [Analyzing Sources](#) handout students read and analyze the featured sources paying especial attention to the type of resources, date, author, purpose, claims and perspective.

**Activity Two / Day Two (50 minutes):**

Supporting Question: What type of actions can lead to war? – Mexico’s Perspective

## 1) Gathering and Evaluating Sources:

- Perspectives: Students will examine the writings of General Ampudia and Abraham Lincoln regarding the causes of the Mexican-American War. Then, they will analyze and discuss the opposing perspectives presented by the two previous sources and those exhibited in this activity.
  - Teacher can use guided reading, close reading, small group activity or whole class discussion to analyze these two primary sources.
- Maps: Students will take a close look at [Map C](#) and [Map D](#) of the resources provided and discuss whether or not those maps corroborate the arguments listed by President Lincoln or General Ampudia. Students will also examine how such maps may challenge the arguments provided by President Polk and Secretary of State Buchanan.
  - Teacher can use “See/Think/Wonder” activity, small group assignment or whole class discussion to analyze these two primary sources.

## 1) Performance Task:

- Evaluating Claims: Using the [Evaluating Claims](#) handout, students will assess the list of claims provided therein and examine the featured sources for evidence that either supports or refutes those claims.

**Conclusion (90+ minutes):**

## 1) Summative Performance Task:

- Instruct students to construct an argument (e.g. essay, poster, web page, podcast) that evaluates whether the 1846 United States’ declaration of war against Mexico was justified or not and why. Have students select an audience they hope to convince. Students must use specific evidence and claims relevant to the primary sources utilized in this lesson. Their argument should also acknowledge the competing views presented.

**Extension:**

- 1) Students can re-write the Mexican-American War lesson provided in their textbooks to reflect some of the arguments they used in their performance task.



# Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Variations to Use (and Encourage Students to Use)</u>	<u>Notes</u>
<b>Secession</b>	Formal separation from an alliance or federation, the act of breaking away or withdrawing from.	Give up land	
<b>Annexation</b>	The formal act of acquiring something (especially territory) by conquest or occupation, incorporation, appropriation.	Join the Union	



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Analyzing Sources

Source 1 Title:		
Author:	Purpose/Claim/Perspective	Summary/Notes/Evidence
Date of Publication:		

Source 2 Title:		
Author:	Purpose/Claim/Perspective	Summary/Notes/Evidence
Date of Publication:		

Source 3 Title:		
Author:	Purpose/Claim/Perspective	Summary/Notes/Evidence
Date of Publication:		

Source 4 Title:		
Author:	Purpose/Claim/Perspective	Summary/Notes/Evidence
Date of Publication:		



# Evaluating Claims

Directions: Read the claims listed below. As you examine the sources provided for this lesson, find evidence that either supports or refutes these claims. Use the graphic organizer to address a particular claim, name the source, and decide whether the evidence supports or refutes the claim.

Claim	Source	Evidence	Supports or Refutes Claim
Mexico illegally sent soldiers so the American territory near Rio Grande/Rio del Norte provoking a U.S. military response.			
Mexico unjustly attacked a small group of American soldiers, killing and wounding 16 of them.			
In the year before the war with Mexico began, Texas's border with Mexico was the Rio Grande/Rio del Norte.			
Texas's border before the war with Mexico was the Nueces River.			
Maps C and D may prove more accurate in assessing Texan borderlines regarding the issue in question because of their date of			
President Abraham Lincoln believed the arguments or justification for the war offered to him by General Polk.			
According to President Lincoln, The Texas Treaty was not legal for several reasons listed in his speech.			







## Links to Huntington Collection Materials:

- The Mexicans evacuating Vera Cruz. And surrendering their Arms to the U.S. Army, under Genl. Scott (1847).  
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p16003coll4/id/2253/rec/66>
- Map A: New map of Texas: with the contiguous American & Mexican States / by J.H. Young (1835).  
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/3927/rec/54>
- Map B: Map of Texas with parts of the adjoining states / compiled by Stephen F. Austin (1835).  
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/3722/rec/55>
- Map C: A Correct Map of the Seat of the War in Mexico: Being a copy of Genl. Arista's Map, taken at Resaca de la Palma, with additions and corrections; embellished with diagrams of the Battles of 8th and 9th May, and capture of Monterey, with a memorandum of forces engaged, results, etc. and Plan of Vera Cruz and Castle of San Juan de Ulua : Designed by J.G. Bruff (1847).  
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/2571/rec/58>
- Map D: Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Mejico : segun lo organizado y definido por las varias actas del Congreso de dicha Republica y construido por los mejores autoridades.  
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/2704/rec/56>