



# The War with Mexico

## MAIN IDEA

Tensions over the U.S. annexation of Texas led to war with Mexico, resulting in huge territorial gains for the United States.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The United States has achieved its goal of expanding across the continent from east to west.

## Terms & Names

- James K. Polk
- Zachary Taylor
- Stephen Kearny
- Republic of California
- Winfield Scott
- Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
- Gadsden Purchase
- forty-niners
- gold rush

Robert E. Lee was born into a prominent Virginia family in 1807. His father had been a hero of the American Revolution. In 1846, the war with Mexico provided the 39-year-old captain with his first combat experience. Among the soldiers whom Lee directed in battle was his younger brother, Sidney Smith Lee. The elder Lee wrote about the battle.

### A PERSONAL VOICE ROBERT E. LEE

“No matter where I turned, my eyes reverted to [my brother], and I stood by his gun whenever I was not wanted elsewhere. Oh, I felt awfully, and am at a loss what I should have done had he been cut down before me. I thank God that he was saved. . . . [The service from the American battery] was terrific, and the shells thrown from our battery were constant and regular discharges, so beautiful in their flight and so destructive in their fall. It was awful! My heart bled for the inhabitants. The soldiers I did not care so much for, but it was terrible to think of the women and children.”

—a letter cited in *R. E. Lee* by Douglas Southall Freeman

In recoiling at the ugliness of the war with Mexico, Lee hardly stood alone. From the start, Americans hotly debated whether the United States should pursue the war.



▲ Robert E. Lee followed his father into a military career, graduating from the new U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

## Polk Urges War

Hostilities between the United States and Mexico, which had flared during the Texas Revolution in 1836, reignited over the American annexation of Texas in 1845. The two countries might have solved these issues peaceably if not for the continuing instability of the Mexican government and the territorial aspirations of the U.S. president, **James K. Polk**.



▲ James Polk, also known as “Polk the Purposeful”

Polk now believed that war with Mexico would bring not only Texas but also New Mexico and California into the Union. The president supported Texas’s claims in disputes with Mexico over the Texas-Mexico border. While Texas insisted that its southern border extended to the Rio Grande, Mexico insisted that Texas’s border stopped at the Nueces River, 100 miles northeast of the Rio Grande.

**SLIDELL’S REJECTION** In 1844, Santa Anna was ousted as Mexico’s president. The Mexican political situation was confusing and unpredictable. In late 1845, “Polk the Purposeful” sent a Spanish-speaking emissary, John Slidell, to Mexico to purchase California and New Mexico and to gain approval of the Rio Grande as the Texas border. When Slidell arrived, Mexican officials refused to receive him. Hoping for Mexican aggression that would unify Americans behind a war, Polk

then issued orders for General **Zachary Taylor** to march to the Rio Grande and blockade the river. Mexicans viewed this action as a violation of their rights.

Many Americans shared Polk’s goals for expansion, but public opinion was split over resorting to military action. Slavery would soon emerge as the key issue complicating this debate.

**SECTIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD WAR** The idea of war unleashed great public celebrations. Volunteers swarmed recruiting stations, and the advent of daily newspapers, printed on new rotary presses, gave the war a romantic appeal.

Not everyone cheered. The abolitionist James Russell Lowell considered the war a “national crime committed in behoof of slavery, our common sin.” Even proslavery spokesman John C. Calhoun saw the perils of expansionism. Mexico, he said, was “the forbidden fruit; the penalty of eating it would be to subject our institutions to political death.”

Many Southerners, however, saw the annexation of Texas as an opportunity to extend slavery and increase Southern power in Congress. Furthermore, the Wilmot Proviso, a proposed amendment to a military appropriations bill of 1846, prohibited slavery in lands that might be gained from Mexico. This attack on slavery solidified Southern support for war by transforming the debate on war into a debate on slavery.

Northerners mainly opposed the war. Antislavery Whigs and abolitionists saw the war as a plot to expand slavery and ensure Southern domination of the Union. In a resolution adopted by the Massachusetts legislature, Charles Sumner proclaimed that “the lives of Mexicans are sacrificed in this cause; and a domestic question, which should be reserved for bloodless debate in our own country, is transferred to fields of battle in a foreign land.” **A**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

**A** How did the issue of slavery affect the debate over the war with Mexico?

## The War Begins

As Taylor positioned his forces at the Rio Grande in 1845–1846, John C. Frémont led an exploration party through Mexico’s Alta California province, another violation of Mexico’s territorial rights. The Mexican government had had enough.

Mexico responded to Taylor’s invasion of the territory it claimed by sending troops across the Rio Grande. In a skirmish near Matamoros, Mexican soldiers killed 9 U.S. soldiers. Polk immediately sent a war message to Congress, declaring that by shedding “American blood upon American soil,” Mexico had started the war. Representative Abraham Lincoln questioned the truthfulness of the message, asking “whether our citizens, whose blood was shed, as in his message declared, were or were not, at that time, armed officers and soldiers, sent into that settlement by the military order of the President.” Lincoln introduced a “Spot Resolution,” asking Polk to certify the spot where the skirmish had occurred.



Truthful or not, Polk's message persuaded the House to recognize a state of war with Mexico by a vote of 174 to 14, and the Senate by a vote of 40 to 2, with numerous abstentions. Some antislavery Whigs had tried to oppose the war but were barely allowed to gain the floor of Congress to speak. Since Polk withheld key facts, the full reality of what had happened on the distant Rio Grande was not known. But the theory and practice of manifest destiny had launched the United States into its first war on foreign territory. **B**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**B** How did President Polk provoke Mexico to attack U.S. forces?

**KEARNY MARCHES WEST** In 1846, as part of his plan to seize New Mexico and California, Polk ordered Colonel **Stephen Kearny** to march from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, across the desert to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Kearny earned the nickname "the Long Marcher" as he and his men crossed 800 miles of barren ground. They were met in Santa Fe by a New Mexican contingent that included upper-class Mexicans who wanted to join the United States. New Mexico fell to the United States without a shot being fired. After dispatching some of his troops south to Mexico, the Long Marcher led the rest on another long trek, this time to southern California. **C**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Motives

**C** How do Kearny's actions support the idea of manifest destiny?

**THE REPUBLIC OF CALIFORNIA** By the turn of the 19th century, Spanish settlers had set up more than 20 missions along the California coast. After independence, the Mexican government took over these missions, just as it had done in Texas. By the late 1830s, about 12,000 Mexican settlers had migrated to California to set up cattle ranches, where they pressed Native Americans into service as workers. By the mid-1840s, about 500 U.S. settlers also lived in California.

Polk's offer to buy California in 1845 aroused the indignation of the Mexican government. A group of American settlers, led by Frémont, seized the town of Sonoma in June 1846. Hoisting a flag that featured a grizzly bear, the rebels proudly declared their independence from Mexico and proclaimed the nation of the **Republic of California**. Kearny arrived from New Mexico and joined forces with Frémont and a U.S. naval expedition led by Commodore John D. Sloat. The Mexican troops quickly gave way, leaving U.S. forces in control of California.

**THE WAR IN MEXICO** For American troops in Mexico, one military victory followed another. Though Mexican soldiers gallantly defended their own soil, their army labored under poor leadership. In contrast, U.S. soldiers served under some of the nation's best officers, such as Captain Robert E. Lee and Captain Ulysses S. Grant, both West Point graduates.



▲ This 19th-century wood engraving shows Colonel Stephen Kearny capturing Santa Fe, New Mexico.





# War with Mexico, 1846–1848



**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**

- 1. Location** From which locations in Texas did U.S. forces come to Buena Vista?
- 2. Region** In which country were most of the battles fought?

The American invasion of Mexico lasted about a year and featured a pair of colorful generals, Zachary Taylor and **Winfield Scott**. Affectionately nicknamed “Old Rough and Ready” because he sported a casual straw hat and plain brown coat, Taylor attacked and captured Monterrey, Mexico, in September 1846, but allowed the Mexican garrison to escape.

Meanwhile, Polk hatched a bizarre scheme with Santa Anna, who had been living in exile in Cuba. If Polk would help him sneak back to Mexico, Santa Anna promised he would end the war and mediate the border dispute. Polk agreed, but when Santa Anna returned to Mexico, he resumed the presidency, took command of the army and, in February 1847, ordered an attack on Taylor’s forces at Buena Vista. Though the Mexican army boasted superior numbers, its soldiers suffered from exhaustion. Taylor’s more rested troops pushed Santa Anna into Mexico’s interior.

Scott’s forces took advantage of Santa Anna’s failed strategy and captured Veracruz in March. General Scott always wore a full-dress blue uniform with a yellow sash, which won him the nickname “Old Fuss and Feathers.” Scott supervised an amphibious landing at Veracruz, in which an army of 10,000 landed on an



island off Veracruz in 200 ships and ferried 67 boats in less than 5 hours. Scott's troops then set off for Mexico City, which they captured on September 14, 1847. Covering 260 miles, Scott's army had lost not a single battle.

## America Gains the Spoils of War

For Mexico, the war in which it lost at least 25,000 lives and nearly half its land marked an ugly milestone in its relations with the United States. America's victory came at the cost of about 13,000 lives. Of these, nearly 2,000 died in battle or from wounds and more than 11,000 perished from diseases, such as yellow fever. However, the war enlarged U.S. territory by approximately one-third.

**THE TREATY OF GUADALUPE HIDALGO** On February 2, 1848, the United States and Mexico signed the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**. Mexico agreed to the Rio Grande border for Texas and ceded New Mexico and California to the United States. The United States agreed to pay \$15 million for the Mexican cession, which included present-day California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, most of Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The treaty guaranteed Mexicans living in these territories freedom of religion, protection of property, bilingual elections, and open borders.

Five years later, in 1853, President Franklin Pierce would authorize his emissary James Gadsden to pay Mexico an additional \$10 million for another piece of territory south of the Gila River. Along with the settlement of Oregon and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the **Gadsden Purchase** established the current borders of the lower 48 states. **D**


**TAYLOR'S ELECTION IN 1848** In 1848 the Democrats nominated Lewis Cass for president and hesitated about the extension of slavery into America's vast new holdings. A small group of antislavery Democrats nominated Martin Van Buren to lead the Free-Soil Party, which supported a congressional prohibition on the extension of slavery into the territories. Van Buren captured 10 percent of the popular vote and no electoral votes. The Whig nominee, war hero Zachary Taylor, easily won the election. Taylor's victory, however, was soon overshadowed by a glittering discovery in one of America's new territories.

## The California Gold Rush

In January 1848, James Marshall, an American carpenter working on John Sutter's property in the California Sierra Nevadas, discovered gold at Sutter's Mill. Word of the chance discovery traveled east.

**THE RUSH BEGINS** Soon after the news reached San Francisco, residents traveled to the Sacramento Valley in droves to pan for gold. Lacking staff and readers, San Francisco's newspaper, the *Californian*, suspended publication. An editorial in the final issue, dated May 29, complained that the whole country "resounds with the sordid cry of gold, GOLD, GOLD! while the field is left half-plowed, the house half-built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes."

**ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE**



**LOS NIÑOS HÉROES**

Though most Americans know little about the war with Mexico, Mexicans view the war as a crucial event in their history.

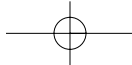
On September 14, 1847, General Winfield Scott captured Mexico City after the hard-fought Battle of Chapultepec, the site of the Mexican military academy. There, six young cadets leaped from Chapultepec Castle to commit suicide rather than surrender to the U.S. Army. A monument (*shown above*) that honors *los Niños Héroes* (the boy heroes) inspires pilgrimages every September.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**D** Explain the importance of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Purchase.





## Analyzing Political Cartoons

### “THE WAY THEY GO TO CALIFORNIA”

This cartoon lithograph by Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888) was inspired by the California gold rush. Currier was a founder of the Currier and Ives company, which became famous for detailed lithographs of 19th-century daily life.

Here Currier portrays some of the hordes of prospectors who flocked from all over the world to California in 1849. The mob wields picks and shovels, desperate to find any means of transport to the “Golden West.” While some miners dive into the water, weighed down by heavy tools, one clever prospector has invented a new type of airship to speed him to the treasure.

#### SKILLBUILDER Analyzing Political Cartoons

1. How has the cartoonist added humor to this portrayal of the gold seekers?
2. What clues tell you that this cartoon is about the California gold rush?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK,  
PAGE R24.



On June 6, 1848, Monterey’s Mayor Walter Colton sent a scout to report on what was happening. After the scout returned on June 14, the mayor described the scene that had taken place in the middle of the town’s main street.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE WALTER COLTON

“The blacksmith dropped his hammer, the carpenter his plane, the mason his trowel, the farmer his sickle, the baker his loaf, and the tapster his bottle. All were off for the mines. . . . I have only a community of women left, and a gang of prisoners, with here and there a soldier who will give his captain the slip at first chance. I don’t blame the fellow a whit; seven dollars a month, while others are making two or three hundred a day!”

—quoted in *California: A Bicentennial History*

As gold fever traveled eastward, overland migration to California skyrocketed, from 400 in 1848 to 44,000 in 1850. The rest of the world soon caught the fever. Among the so-called **forty-niners**, the prospectors who flocked to California in 1849 in the **gold rush**, were people from Asia, South America, and Europe. **E**

**IMPACT OF GOLD FEVER** Because of its location as a supply center, San Francisco became “a pandemonium of a city,” according to one traveler. Indeed, the city’s population exploded from 1,000 in 1848 to 35,000 in 1850. Ferrying people and supplies, ships clogged San Francisco’s harbor with a forest of masts.

Louisa Clapp and her husband, Fayette, left the comforts of a middle-class family in New England to join the gold rush for adventure. After living in San Francisco for more than a year, the Clapps settled in a log cabin in the interior

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Comparing

**E** What common dreams did people who sought gold in California share with those who settled in Oregon?



mining town of Rich Bar. While her husband practiced medicine, Louisa tried her hand at mining and found it hardly to her liking.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

LOUISA CLAPP

“I have become a mineress; that is, if having washed a pan of dirt with my own hands, and procured therefrom three dollars and twenty-five cents in gold dust . . . will entitle me to the name. I can truly say, with the blacksmith’s apprentice at the close of his first day’s work at the anvil, that ‘I am sorry I learned the trade;’ for I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love.”

—quoted in *They Saw the Elephant*



▲ These miners are prospecting in Spanish Flat, California, in 1852.

**GOLD RUSH BRINGS DIVERSITY** By 1849, California’s population exceeded 100,000. The Chinese were the largest group to come from overseas. Free blacks also came by the hundreds, and many struck it rich. By 1855, the wealthiest African Americans in the country were living in California. The fast-growing population included large numbers of Mexicans as well. The California demographic mix also included slaves—that is until a constitutional convention in 1849 drew up a state constitution that outlawed slavery.

California’s application for statehood provoked fiery protest in Congress and became just one more sore point between irate Northerners and Southerners, each intent on winning the sectional argument over slavery. Nevertheless, California did win statehood in 1850.



**ASSESSMENT**

**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- James K. Polk
- Republic of California
- Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
- forty-niners
- Zachary Taylor
- Winfield Scott
- Gadsden Purchase
- gold rush
- Stephen Kearny

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

Draw a chart showing how the boundaries of the contiguous United States were formed.

Effect: Present-Day U.S. Borders

Causes:

How did the United States pursue its goal of expanding in the 1840s?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. EVALUATING**

How would you evaluate President Polk’s attitude and behavior toward Mexico? Use specific references to the chapter to support your response. **Think About:**

- Polk’s position on expansion
- his actions once in office
- his relationship with Santa Anna

**4. ANALYZING EFFECTS**

What were some of the effects of the California gold rush?

**5. EVALUATING DECISIONS**

Would you have supported the controversial war with Mexico? Why or why not? Explain your answer, including details from the chapter.