


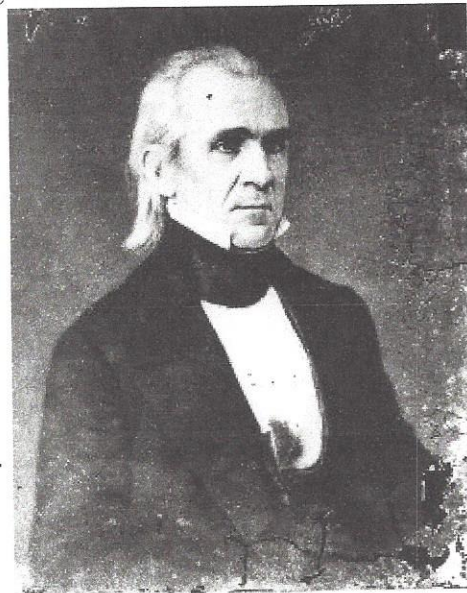
Mexican-American War, 1846-48

Additional Documents and Information on the war

1. [Chronology of the War](#)
2. [PBS Site on US-Mexican War](#) Includes excellent time line, interpretive essays
3. [More Links and Resources on US-Mexican War](#)

Special Message of President James K. Polk, asking Congress to declare war on Mexico, May 11, 1846

- [Message is abridged. You may read the [complete text of Polk's message](#) if you wish.]
- To the Senate and House of Representatives:
The existing state of the relations between the United States and Mexico renders it proper that I should bring the subject to the consideration of Congress. In my message at the commencement of your present session the state of these relations; the causes which led to the suspension of diplomatic intercourse between the two countries in March, 1845, and the long-continued and unredressed wrongs and injuries committed by the Mexican Government on citizens of the United States in their persons and property were briefly set forth.
- As the facts and opinions which were then laid before you were care fully considered, I can not better express my present convictions of the condition of affairs up to that time than by referring you to that communication. The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico on liberal and honorable terms, and the readiness of this Government to regulate and adjust our boundary and other causes of difference with that power on such fair and equitable principles as would lead to permanent relations of the most friendly nature, induced me in September last to seek the reopening of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Every measure adopted on our part had for its object the furtherance of these desired results. In communicating to Congress a succinct statement of the injuries which we had suffered from Mexico, and which have been accumulating during a period of more than twenty years, every expression that could tend to inflame the people of Mexico or defeat or delay a pacific result was carefully avoided. An envoy of the United States repaired to Mexico with full powers to adjust every existing difference. But though present on the Mexican soil by agreement between the two Governments, invested with full powers, and bearing evidence of the most friendly dispositions, his mission has been unavailing. The Mexican Government not only refused to receive him or listen to his propositions, but after a long-continued series of menaces have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil.
- It now becomes my duty to state more in detail the origin, progress,  Map of Mexico and failure of that mission. In pursuance of the instructions given in



September last, an inquiry was made on the 13th of October, 1845, in the most friendly terms, through our consul in Mexico, of the minister for foreign affairs, whether the Mexican Government "would receive an envoy from the United States intrusted with full powers to adjust all the questions in dispute between the two Governments," with the assurance that "should the answer be in the affirmative such an envoy would be immediately dispatched to Mexico." The Mexican minister on the 15th of October gave an affirmative answer to this inquiry, requesting at the same time that our naval force at Vera Cruz might be withdrawn, lest its continued presence might assume the appearance of menace and coercion pending the negotiations. This force was immediately withdrawn. On the 10th of November, 1845, Mr. John Slidell, of Louisiana, was commissioned by me as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the United States to Mexico, and was intrusted with full powers to adjust both the questions of the Texas boundary and of indemnification to our citizens. The redress of the wrongs of our citizens naturally and inseparably blended itself with the question of boundary. The settlement of the one question in any correct view of the subject involves that of the other. I could not for a moment entertain the idea that the claims of our much-injured and long-suffering citizens, many of which had existed for more than twenty years, should be postponed or separated from the settlement of the boundary question.

- Mr. Slidell arrived at Vera Cruz on the 30th of November, and was courteously received by the authorities of that city. But the Government of General Herrera was then tottering to its fall. The revolutionary party had seized upon the Texas question to effect or hasten its overthrow. Its determination to restore friendly relations with the United States, and to receive our minister to negotiate for the settlement of this question, was violently assailed, and was made the great theme of denunciation against it. The Government of General Herrera, there is good reason to believe, was sincerely desirous to receive our minister; but it yielded to the storm raised by its enemies, and on the 21st of December refused to accredit Mr. Slidell upon the most frivolous pretexts. These are so fully and ably exposed in the note of Mr. Slidell of the 24th of December last to the Mexican minister of foreign relations, herewith transmitted, that I deem it unnecessary to enter into further detail on this portion of the subject. . . .

- Mr. Slidell, in obedience to my direction, addressed a note to the Mexican minister of foreign relations, under date of the 1st of March last, asking to be received by that Government in the diplomatic character to which he had been appointed. This minister in his reply, under date of the 12th of March, reiterated the arguments of his predecessor, and in terms that may be considered as giving just grounds of offense to the Government and people of the United States denied the application of Mr. Slidell. Nothing therefore remained for our envoy but to demand his passports and return to his own country.

- [Painting shows the "Battle of Buena Vista, 22-23 February 1847, painted by Carl Nebel.] Thus the Government of Mexico, though solemnly pledged by official acts in October last to receive and accredit an American envoy, violated their plighted faith and refused the offer of a peaceful adjustment of our difficulties. Not only was





the offer rejected, but the indignity of its rejection was enhanced by the

manifest breach of faith in refusing to admit the envoy who came because they had bound themselves to receive him. Nor can it be said that the offer was fruitless from the want of opportunity of discussing it; our envoy was present on their own soil. Nor can it be ascribed to a want of sufficient powers; our envoy had full powers to adjust every question of difference. Nor was there room for complaint that our propositions for settlement were unreasonable; permission was not even given our envoy to make any proposition whatever. Nor can it be objected that we, on our part, would not listen to any reasonable terms of their suggestion; the Mexican Government refused all negotiation, and have made no proposition of any kind. In my message at the commencement of the present session I informed you that upon the earnest appeal both of the Congress and convention of Texas I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte." This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union, and under these circumstances it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil. . . .

- From this quarter invasion was threatened; upon it and in its immediate vicinity, in the judgment of high military experience, are the proper stations for the protecting forces of the Government. In addition to this important consideration, several others occurred to induce this movement. Among these are the facilities afforded by the ports at Brazos Santiago and the mouth of the Del Norte for the reception of supplies by sea, the stronger and more healthful military positions, the convenience for obtaining a ready and a more abundant supply of provisions, water, fuel, and forage, and the advantages which are afforded by the Del Norte in forwarding supplies to such posts as may be established in the interior and upon the Indian frontier.

- The movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made by the commanding general under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens and to regard the relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful unless she should declare war or commit acts of hostility indicative of a state of war. He was specially directed to protect private property and respect personal rights. The Army moved from Corpus Christi on the 11th of March, and on the 28th of that month arrived on the left bank of the Del Norte opposite to Matamoras, where it encamped on a commanding position, which has since been strengthened by the erection of fieldworks. A depot has also been established at Point Isabel, near the Brazos Santiago, 30 miles in rear of the encampment. The selection of his position was necessarily confided to the judgment of the general in command.



- The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude, and on the 12th of April General Ampudia, then in command, notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours and to retire beyond the Nueces River, and in the event of his failure to comply with these demands announced that arms, and arms

alone, must decide the question. But no open act of hostility was committed until the 14th of April. On that day General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated to General Taylor that "he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them." A party of dragoons of 63 men and officers

were on the same day dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, "became engaged with a large body of these troops, and after a short affair, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender." The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens throughout a long period of years remain unredressed, and solemn treaties pledging her public faith for this redress have been disregarded. A government either unable or unwilling to enforce the execution of such treaties fails to perform one of its plainest duties.

- Our commerce with Mexico has been almost annihilated. It was formerly highly beneficial to both nations, but our merchants have been deterred from prosecuting it by the system of outrage and extortion which the Mexican authorities have pursued against them, whilst their appeals through their own Government for indemnity have been made in vain. Our forbearance has gone to such an extreme as to be mistaken in its character. Had we acted with vigor in repelling the insults and redressing the injuries inflicted by Mexico at the commencement, we should doubtless have escaped all the difficulties in which we are now involved.

- Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

- As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country. Anticipating the possibility of a crisis like that which has arrived, instructions were given in August last, "as a precautionary measure" against invasion or threatened invasion, authorizing General Taylor, if the emergency required, to accept volunteers, not from Texas only, but from the States of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and corresponding letters were addressed to the respective governors of those States. These instructions were repeated, and in January last, soon after the incorporation of "Texas into our Union of States," General Taylor was further "authorized by the President to make a requisition upon the executive of that State for such of its militia force as may be needed to repel invasion or to secure the country against apprehended invasion. " On the 2d day of March he was again reminded, "in the event of the approach of any considerable Mexican force, promptly and efficiently to use the authority with which he was clothed to call to him such auxiliary force as he might need." War actually existing and our territory having been invaded, General Taylor, pursuant to authority vested in him by my direction, has called on the governor of Texas for four regiments of State troops, two to be mounted and two to serve on foot, and on the governor of Louisiana for four regiments of infantry to be sent to him as soon as practicable.

- In further vindication of our rights and defense of our territory, I involve the prompt action of Congress to recognize the existence of the war, and to place at the disposition

of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace. To this end I recommend that authority should be given to call into the public service a large body of volunteers to serve for not less than six or twelve months unless sooner discharged. A volunteer force is beyond question more efficient than any other description of citizen soldiers, and it is not to be doubted that a number far beyond that required would readily rush to the field upon the call of their country. I further recommend that a liberal provision be made for sustaining our entire military force and furnishing it with supplies and munitions of war. I transmit herewith a copy of the correspondence between our envoy to Mexico and the Mexican minister for foreign affairs, and so much of the correspondence between that envoy and the Secretary of State and between the Secretary of War and the general in command on the Del Norte as is necessary to a full understanding of the subject.

- James K. Polk

Senate and House Debate on the Declaration of War with Mexico

Historical Background:

- President James K. Polk was an expansionist president who sought to gain territory from Mexico and did not mind going to war to get it. Congress, likewise, had expansionist ambitions, even though some members complained that the reasons for going to war with Mexico were trumped up to make Mexico look like the aggressor. The origins of the war with Mexico can be traced to the struggle to annex Texas in 1836. By the 1840s the idea of "Manifest Destiny" had claimed the imagination of many Americans. This grandiose concept held that God had ordained the United States to expand its empire from sea to sea. Polk, an early champion of the annexation of Texas, used the idea of Manifest Destiny as his campaign theme in the presidential election of 1844. Texas became a state shortly after Polk was inaugurated in 1845.
- Polk sent a letter to Congress outlining the situation with Mexico. It was read before Congress on May 11, 1846. The previous month Mexican troops had attacked U.S. soldiers under the command of General Zachary Taylor, after much provocation by the Americans. Once shots had been fired, Polk lost no time declaring that American blood had been shed on American soil—even though it was unclear exactly where the blood had been shed. Polk's assertion that a state of war existed between the United States and Mexico touched off a brief congressional debate focusing on the language of the statement and on the maintenance of constitutional balance regarding the right of Congress to declare war. Polk's message did not ask explicitly for a declaration of war. He asked for congressional support in funding the military and a call to enlist more volunteers in Texas. The tone of his message implied that a state of war existed. After listening to the president's message, the House took less than half an hour to approve Polk's request and pass a resolution that was the equivalent of a declaration of war, by an overwhelming majority of 173-14. The Senate likewise wasted no time approving the resolution the same day by a vote of 40-2.
- Among those participating in the debate who were critical of Polk but who ended up voting for war anyway were John C. Calhoun (D-S.C.) in the Senate and Garrett Davis (Whig-Ky.) in the House. Calhoun said Polk's message that war existed was deceptive since only the legislative branch of government had the constitutional power to declare war. Davis pointed an accusing finger at Polk for instigating a confrontation and then placing the blame on Mexico.
- The war with Mexico ended in 1848, after many military triumphs by the United States. As the war progressed, Congress became less reluctant to support Polk's conduct

of the war. The war resulted in huge territorial gains for the United States, including California, New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. It left Mexico shorn of half its territory. Despite some token payments for the land acquired, Mexico was devastated financially and politically. In the United States the acquisition of the new territory raised anew the specter of the expansion of slavery into the new territories. House member David Wilmot (D-Pa.) devised a proviso to keep slavery out of any land acquired in the war with Mexico.

Debate in the United States Senate

- Mr. CALHOUN then rose, and said: The question now submitted to us is one of the gravest character and the importance of the consequences which may result from it we cannot now determine. I do hope that this body will give to it that high, full, and dispassionate consideration which is worthy the character of the body and the high constitutional functions which it is called on to exercise. I trust that we will weigh everything calmly and deliberately, and do all that the Constitution, interests, and honor of the country may require. I hope that in the present state of the question nothing further will be done than is usual--that is, to print the document for the use of the Senate, and after we have had the subject under consideration, it will be time enough to determine the number of copies to be printed. I say this because no man can make up his opinion from the mere reading of the message, and the printing of an extra number may seem to be a committal of this body in favor of all which is contained in the message. It is eminently proper that, in this case, the deliberate sense of the body should be expressed. It is always understood that printing a large number of documents is an endorsement. At all events, I think it would be undignified in the Senate to print on this occasion more than the usual number.
- Mr. SPEIGHT said, I rise to respond to every sentence--every word--which has been uttered by the honorable Senator from South Carolina. My motive in moving to print an extra number of copies of the message and accompanying documents was the suggestion of Senators around me. I had supposed that the country would be anxious to read those documents, and I cannot see why the printing of it should be necessarily considered as an endorsement of that message. But I take occasion to state here in my place that I endorse every word of that message. I approve of it. The President has recommended what I am prepared to carry out. It is useless to conceal the fact that he has recommended no declaration of war. He only asks Congress to place at his disposal a sufficient military force to repel any invasion of the territory of the United States.
- I apprehend that there is not a single Senator who will not cordially respond to that portion of the message; and I am confident I only do justice to the Senator from South Carolina, [Mr. Calhoun,] when I say that none will more cordially respond to it than himself. If I apprehended that my motion was at all inconsistent with the dignity of the Senate, I need not say that I would at once withdraw it. Far be it from me to entertain any desire to precipitate the action of the body in this important affair. But the document will appear in the newspapers, and there will be a general anxiety in the country to read it; and I cannot see the impropriety of printing such a number of extra copies as will ensure the most extended circulation of the message. It is an important document, and we seem to have approached an important crisis, and I agreed with the Senator that we should meet it firmly, calmly, and with deliberation. For my part, I am prepared so to meet the crisis.
- Mr. ALLEN. . . . these are facts about which there can be no dispute; and if ever there was a case in which it becomes important to give an extended circulation to a great

public fact, this is that case. What is it? The honorable Senator has told us that the President recommends no declaration of war; but he did not tell us what the President has told us, which is the far more important fact, that war actually exists, and he asks the Congress of the United States to acknowledge that fact by such a public act as shall nationalize the troops, and put the United States in that relation to the nations of the world which she has a right to assume, as growing out of a state of war. Sir, it has been said that time for deliberation is necessary; but the time of deliberation should be measured by the crises presented by the state of facts upon which that deliberation is to be had; and what is the crises here! The crises is existing war. The deliberation can tend to no point, if it have a useful object, except the great point of the defence of the country against invasion. And as for the suggestion thrown out that the arm of the Government should be limited to its own soil--that we should be required to fight over one square of the board, while Mexico fights over the whole board--seems to me to involve a most suicidal policy. How can this war be brought to a successful issue? How can any permanent peace be expected to result from all this conflict with Mexico, unless she is given distinctly to understand that when she makes war upon the United States she incurs all the penalties which the condition of war inflicts upon nations? But I am sensible that this is digressive. I desire that these documents may be printed in large numbers, for the reasons that I have given; and for the sake of testing the sense of the Senate, I ask the yeas and nays.

- Mr. MOREHEAD said: I regret that I cannot concur with my friend from Delaware in his suggestion as to the proper direction which this document should take. I think that in the first instance the reference should be made to the Committee on Foreign Relations; and I do so because I concur with the Senator from South Carolina, [Mr. Calhoun,] that before war does exist, according to the Constitution of the United States, there must be some action on the part of Congress. Thus far, if war does now exist--if the people of the United States now find themselves in a state of war with Mexico, it is a war which has not been brought about or declared by the legislative department of the United States, to which constitutionally the power of declaring war belongs. It does, therefore, seem to me that before we can occupy a proper position in the estimation of the nations of the world--(whose opinion on subjects of this sort, I think, we dare not disregard, at all events it is our duty to pay respect to it)--before we assume a hostile position, which in all probability it will be our duty to assume--this subject ought to be referred to that committee which in all cases of this sort has charge of these subjects; that this ought to be done before the Congress of the United States shall recognise the existence of war, and perform that part assigned to them by the Constitution. It is with this view, and with regret, that I cannot concur with the Senator from Delaware, and I hope that the subject will take the usual direction.

- Mr. J. M. CLAYTON. It is perfectly clear in my mind that this Message should go to the Committee on Military Affairs, and not to that on Foreign Relations. The President has announced to the Senate of the United States that there is war--that war does exist between this country and Mexico, and he calls upon us for millions of money to aid him in carrying on that war; he pronounces it necessary, and demands of us the needful supplies. He also asks for tens of thousands of volunteers. Now I am quite willing--although I so not take upon myself any portion of the responsibility of this war--that devolves upon the President and upon him alone, with those who have brought it about--but I say I am quite ready to fight it out. I will not undertake to decide, in the first instance, whether it was right or not; but I go for the soldiers and the millions at once, to support the honor of the country and army. The Committee on Foreign Relations can

decide at their leisure any grave questions touching the constitutionality of this war. We shall have all that undoubtedly in debate here from day to day; but the first duty of the Senate, in my judgement, is to vote the supplies. Well, what has the Committee of Foreign Relations to do with that? What does it know about the manner of furnishing these supplies? That is the appropriate duty of the Committee of Military Affairs. I would say to my friend from South Carolina--if he will allow me to call him my friend--that I entertain opinions perhaps closely allied to his own on this general subject. I do not mean to express any opinion as to the sending of troops to the Rio Grande, by voting for the supplies. The President has announced the existence of war. What is the first duty of Congress? I hold that its first duty is to vote the supplies; to lose no time in defending the country. . . .

- Mr. ARCHER proceeded. It has been stated, on the highest authority that the President of the United States cannot declare war. The intervention of Congress is absolutely indispensable to constitute war. What is the import of the message received this morning? A certain state of facts has reached the President, which has rendered it necessary for him, in the discharge of his duty, to inform Congress of the necessity of inquiring what action of Congress may be necessary, and whether there shall or shall not be war on the part of the United States. Does the existence of hostilities on one of the frontiers of the United States necessarily put us in a state of war with any foreign Power? Clearly not. Suppose we have misunderstood the state of things on the Rio Grande, and that the Mexican authorities have acted justifiably under the circumstances: the danger of admitting the doctrine that a state of war can exist except by the constitutional action of the Government of the United States will then be evident. There can be no question about that. There can be no war till the ascertained facts be submitted to the Congress of the United States, to be pronounced upon by them, and till they authorize war. That is the question. . . .

- Mr. BENTON said: I apprehend that there are two very distinct questions presented to the consideration of the Senate in the message of the President. He announces the fact of the invasion of the territory of the United States, that's one thing.

- He then proposes to Congress to carry on war against Mexico on a scale commensurate with the exigency of the occasion, in order to bring it to an immediate close. These are two distinct subjects; and on these two subjects a different form of action is, I think, required. It is not merely the constitutional authority, but the duty of the President to repel invasion at once, and by all the means which the law has put into his hands. He has a regular army and navy for that purpose. The act of Congress of 1795 authorized him to call out the militia from the neighboring States for that purpose; but their services is limited to a period of three months; and as often as emergencies of this kind have occurred, it has been deemed proper, both for the purpose of getting troops more promptly into action, and also, such as could be retained in the service for a longer period--it has, I say, been usual for Congress on all such occasions, when in session, and when not in session, it has been usual for the President to call for volunteers. . . .

Debate in the US House of Representatives

- Mr. GARRETT DAVIS. . . . Sir, if the bill contained any recitation upon that point in truth and justice, it should be that this war was begun by the President. The river Nueces is the true western boundary of Texas. The country between that stream and the Del Norte is part of Mexico; and that Power had people and establishments on it. Months ago the President, of his own will, orders General Taylor and his army to take post at Corpus Christi, on the west bank of the Nueces, where they remained until a

considerable time after the beginning of this session of Congress. In March last, under the positive orders of the President, he moves through the disputed country upon Del Norte. The Mexican authorities meet him at several points with the declaration that he has invaded their country, and with protests against the aggression. They warn him that unless he retires east of the Nueces, he will be deemed to be making war upon Mexico, and they will resort to force. He refers to the positive orders of the Executive, and in the execution of them he presses on to Matamoras; strongly fortifies a position overlooking the city, and mounts a battery of cannon within three hundred yards of it, bearing upon its public square, and from whence he could, in a few hours, batter it down. He then blockades the port of Matamoras, orders off English and American vessels, and directs the capture of a Spanish schooner. The Mexican commander treats all these as acts of war; and, on the 25th of April, General Taylor is informed, by a messenger from the Mexican camp, that hostilities exist, that the Mexicans will prosecute them according to the usages of civilized nations. That night a detachment of the Mexican army crosses the Rio Grande, General Taylor sends out a scouting party to reconnoitre, which attacks the Mexicans, and is defeated and captured by the Mexicans, and thus war is raging in bloody earnestness. It is our own President who began the war. He has been carrying it on for months in a series of acts. Congress, which is vested exclusively by the Constitution with the warmaking power, he has not deigned to consult, much less to ask it for authority. Now, forsooth, when it has unexpectedly broke forth in bloody reverses, a position must be taken by the friends of the President in Congress to protect him by charging Mexico with being the author of the war; and he, in cold blood, teaches others to sacrifice a brave and veteran officer, whenever it may become necessary to cover his mistakes and incompetency.

- I have yet another objection to this bill. All that is proposed to be voted by this bill is to be trusted to him. He is to conduct this war. He is our Commander-in-Chief, our Generalissimo of army and navy. He knows, or ought to know, how much money and how many men the present exigency requires; and yet he has not named any sum or any number of troops, as has been invariably the usage in such cases by all former Presidents. He leaves us to act upon our information and judgement in the premises. Are we to understand that he abandons the responsibilities and duties as President and Commander-in-Chief in the conduct of this war? Does he intend to be understood by Congress as saying to them, (what must be now apparent to the whole nation,) "I am unequal to the high position which I now occupy. I know not how to advise you as to the amount of money and the number of men you must raise to rescue the military renown of the country from the passing cloud which now covers it. In this important matter you must assume my duties and my responsibilities, and adopt the necessary measures to vindicate the suffering honor of the nation?" If this be the position of the President, he has exhibited more good sense in assuming it than in all the acts of his Administration besides; if it be not, he exhibits his usual reprehensible secretiveness.

- But, Mr. Speaker, the essence of this measure is the supplies. They will all be required before the nation gets out of this difficulty. I will vote for the supplies of the bill with a hearty alacrity, at the same time protesting against its falsehoods. Since the play has begun, I am for fighting Mexico on our soil, on hers, everywhere, until we drive her across the Rio Grande, and retrieve our ancient renown. I am then for withdrawing our army to the east side of the Nueces, and then settling by treaty all our points of dispute with that weak and distracted country upon the most liberal terms.

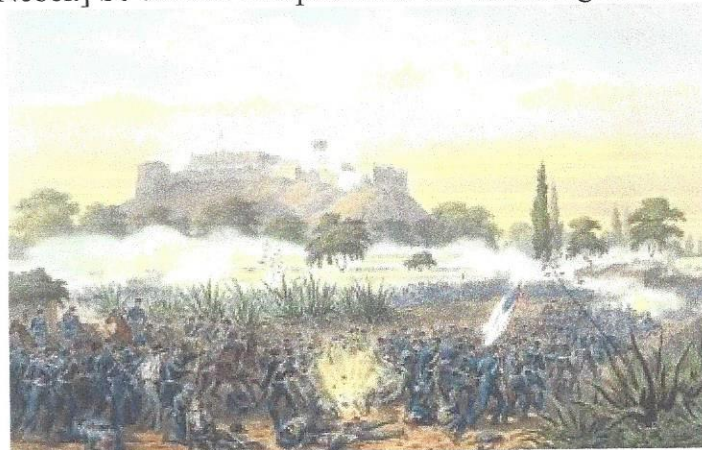
- Mr. BAYLY rose and said: Mr. Speaker: I ask to be excused from voting. I cannot vote in silence, without placing myself in a false position. I consider this bill virtually a

declaration of war, made without Executive recommendation; for I do not understand the message, from hearing it read, as recommending a declaration of war, and made, too, when we do not know that the invasion of our territory and the aggressive acts are sanctioned by the Mexican Government. They may yet be disavowed, and reparation made. I am unwilling, therefore, at this time, and under the circumstances, to vote for a declaration of war. I do not think such a declaration necessary to meet the emergency. On the other hand, I am anxious to vote such supplies of men and money as will afford succor to our army, and repel the invasion. I must, as I am now situated, decline to do this, or vote for the bill before the House, I shall vote for the bill, if not excused, as I can never withhold supplies, under the circumstances, as the greater evil. Mr. B. then withdrew his request to be excused.

- The question, "Shall this bill pass?" was then taken, and decided as follows:
- [Painting to the right shows the Battle of Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, 13 September 1847, painted by Carl Nebel.] So the bill was passed in the following form, viz [Declaration of War with Mexico]:

Whereas, by the act of the Republic of Mexico, a state of war exists between that Government and the United States:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of American in Congress assembled, That, for the purpose of enabling the Government of the United States



to prosecute said war to a speedy and successful termination, the President be, and he is hereby, authorized to employ the militia, naval, and military forces of the United States, and to call for and accept the services of any number of volunteers, not exceeding fifty thousand, who may offer their services, either as cavalry, artillery, or riflemen, to serve twelve months after they shall have arrived at the place of rendezvous, or to the end of the war, unless sooner discharged; and that the sum of ten millions of dollars out of any moneys in the Treasury, or to come into the Treasury, not otherwise apportioned, for the purpose of carrying the provisions of this act into effect.

Sec. 2. And be it further enacted, That the militia, when called into the service of the United States by virtue of this act, or any other act, may, if in the opinion of the President of the United States the public interest requires it, be compelled to serve for a term not exceeding six months, after their arrival at the place of rendezvous, in any one year, unless sooner discharged.

Sec. 3. And it be further enacted, That the said volunteers shall furnish their own clothes, and if cavalry, their own horses; and when mustered into service shall be armed and equipped at the expense of the United States.

Sec. 4. And be it further enacted, That said volunteers shall, when called into actual service, and while remaining therein, be subject to the rules and articles of war, and shall be in all respects, except as to clothing and pay, placed on the same footing with similar corps of the United States Army; and in lieu of clothing every non-commissioned officer and private, in any company, who may this offer himself, shall be entitled, when called into actual service, to receive in money a sum equal to the cost of clothing of a non-

commissioned officer or private (as the case may be) in the regular troops of the United States. . . .

Source: *Congressional Globe*, 29th Congress, 1st session, May 11, 1846, 782-795.



Manifest Destiny

A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States

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The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. U.S. historians refer to this event as "The Mexican War," while in Mexico we prefer to use the term "The U.S. Invasion." These contrasting conceptualizations are not based on mere whims, but on different perceptions of the conflict. When the U.S. Congress authorized a declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, [President Polk's](#) viewpoint was officially accepted. It held that the posture of the Mexican government —or better said, the Mexican governments — had left the United States with no other alternative for defending its national security and interests, and that Mexico was to blame for causing the war. That argument has been the object of debate in Mexican and U.S. historiographies, with those who have defended it and criticized it trying to explain the conduct of Mexican political leaders and opinion makers. U.S. historians have found it difficult to explain the attitude adopted by the Mexican governments and the national press in those years. Their interpretations have been biased, taking some official declarations and newspaper articles out of context and using them as supposed evidence of Mexico's exaggerated belligerency. If these very documents are studied in the context of Mexico's internal situation at that time, however, we can see the other side of the coin. Indeed, in order to understand Mexico's viewpoint with regard to the war with the United States, it is necessary to consider three important issues: first, Mexico's internal state of affairs during the 1840s; second, the problem of Texas; and third, the U.S. invasion of Mexican territory.

Between 1841 and 1848, Mexico experienced one of the most critical periods in the formation of its State. First, there was the [Santa Anna](#) dictatorship between 1841 and 1843, and then, the second Centralist Republic, in power until December 1845. This was followed by the Mariano Paredes dictatorship, which lasted eight months and during which the possibility of setting up a monarchy was once again discussed. The federal republican government was finally restored in 1847, after six presidents had succeeded one another from June 1844 to September 1847. With the exception of Manuel de la Peña y Peña, the rest came to power as a result of popular or military uprisings against their predecessors. Thus, all confronted opposition forces that questioned their legitimacy and were eager to overthrow them. As a result of these conditions, the problems of the separation of Texas and its annexation to the United States, as well as [John Slidell's](#) mission, became part of the debate among political parties and factions and a pretext for one faction or another to downplay the legitimacy of its opponents.

As pointed out in an article in the daily "El Siglo XIX," the issue of Texas separation and the attempts to bring it back under Mexican sovereignty were used to justify, enhance, tear down or revive the reputations of important figures and political parties, and above all, as an excuse to justify any type of "revolutionary" movement.¹ In the same way, efforts during 1845 and 1846 to seek negotiated

solutions for avoiding the annexation of Texas to the United States and later, for the war, were denounced by the opposition press as acts of weakness and even treason.

The [José Joaquín de Herrera](#) administration, for example, had only very precarious support for negotiating with the Texas government in April and May 1845, and also for receiving envoy John Slidell at the end of that same year. Mariano Paredes confronted the same situation in 1846. And in 1847, Santa Anna would face the constant suspicion of treason, which prevented him from establishing direct contact with [Nicholas Trist](#) after the [Cerro Gordo](#) defeat. The fragile state of authority was therefore an obstacle to any attempt at negotiated solutions. The political limitations characterizing the Mexican governments' negotiating capacity were even acknowledged by U.S. representatives beginning in 1844, when Secretary Wilson Shannon reported the following to his government with regard to the Texas annexation:



"...many intelligent Mexicans privately entertain and express opinions favorable to the amicable arrangement of the difficulties...But there are few who have the boldness to express these opinions publicly, or who [would] be willing to stem the current popular prejudice by undertaking to carry them out."²

It is also worth emphasizing here that constitutional changes made during this period imposed restrictions on the actions of those in power. Some examples include: an article added to the constitution prohibiting the transfer of control over territory;³ and amendments to the 1824 Federal Constitution which were approved in 1847 and which disqualified "the Executive from signing a peace agreement and concluding negotiations with foreign nations."⁴

From the Mexican perspective, there were two facets to the problem of Texas: one was related to its separation from Mexico and the other to its annexation to the United States. With regard to the first, Mexico asserted from 1836 to 1845, perhaps a bit inflexibly that the secession of Texas was illegitimate, and it reaffirmed its right to reincorporate this part of its territory by any means necessary, including the use of force. Furthermore, it considered that despite the recognition Texans had gained in other countries, the conflict was an internal problem. Let it be said in passing that Mexico's position was very similar to that adopted by the U.S. government when it faced the problem of the succession of its southern states years later. But in addition, the potential emancipation of Texas forewarned of the vulnerability of the New Mexico and California territories, due to both the intentions of Texas to define its border along the Río Grande and those of the United States to expand its territory to the Pacific Ocean.

The impossibility of reincorporating Texas through military submission of the rebels was already clear in 1843 when the Santa Anna government agreed to sign an armistice. In that year, the option of negotiations leaning toward recognition of Texan independence began to take shape. By that time, however, the United States had already revived its old project of annexing the region.

From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it reaffirmed the posture it had expressed a year before that Mexico would consider such an act "a declaration of war." And later, when the Congress approved the joint resolution inviting Texas to join the United States, Mexico suspended diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Mexico asserted that the annexation of Texas—whether by treaty or in a U.S. Congressional resolution—was a violation of the 1828 border treaty, which had acknowledged Mexico's sovereignty over that territory.⁵ Consequently, such acts were a violation of the fundamental principles of international law, and furthermore, they established a dangerous precedent threatening Mexico's territorial security, since the same formulas could be used to annex other areas along the border.

Faced with this situation, the José Joaquín de Herrera administration attempted a double-edged diplomacy by, first, denouncing the U.S. Congressional resolution as illegal,⁶ and secondly, establishing negotiations with Texas with two objectives in mind: to avoid the annexation of Texas and elude an armed conflict with the United States. The option of negotiations leaning toward recognizing Texas independence was accepted under the condition that it would reject annexation. To this end, the good offices of British representatives in Mexico and Texas were used but this attempt turned out to be too long overdue and unfruitful.

While these negotiations were underway, the Mexican press was divided between those opposed to negotiating with Texas and those supporting the government's actions. The opposition, represented mainly by those referred to as "purists," insisted that Texas should be recovered through an armed expedition. The "moderates," who originally supported a negotiated solution with Texas, switched to the other side when in the end, Texas accepted annexation. Both sides chose to launch their campaigns against Texas and not declare war on the United States. The opinion of Mexican journalists and politicians regarding annexation was that Mexico had no other choice but "to impede the United States from appropriating Texas using all means necessary."⁷ The objective was to make it clear that whatever desire the United States might have to expand its territory at Mexico's cost would not be accepted passively.

Once the Texas government had agreed to the annexation, on July 4, 1845, the Herrera administration ordered the mobilization of federal troops to protect the northern border. The order was in accordance with a decree approved by Congress exactly one month earlier, authorizing the government "within its full rights. To use all available resources to resist such an annexation to the very end."⁹ This was later reaffirmed in the bill presented to Congress on July 21, which maintained that the military mobilization was aimed at:

...preserving the integrity of Mexican territory according to the old borders recognized by the United States in treaties dating back from 1828 to 1836.¹⁰

Thus, the order was given on the twenty-third day of the same month to strengthen the defensive line along the bank of the Río Grande with the army's Fourth Division under the command of General [Arista](#).¹¹ The posture in favor of seeking a negotiated solution was, however, maintained. One month earlier the Mexican government's position had been communicated by U.S. agent William Parrot to Secretary of State Buchanan in the following terms:

I have satisfactorily ascertained through the indirect channel of communication ...that the present government will not declare war against the United States, even if Texas be annexed.¹²

Mexico's anti-belligerent posture in favor of negotiations was confirmed October 15, 1845, when its foreign relations minister, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, notified U.S. consul John Black

...that although the Mexican nation was gravely offended by the United States due to its actions in Texas — belonging to Mexico — the government was willing to receive a commissioner who would arrive in this capital from the United States possessing full faculties to settle the current dispute in a peaceful, reasonable and respectable way.¹³

Any possibilities for entering into negotiations, however, faced serious obstacles. First opposition from public opinion and certain political interests to an agreement signifying a recognition of Texas' annexation had increased.¹⁴ Thus, the government lacked the internal consensus necessary for negotiations. Secondly, the U.S. proposal included in the instructions given to envoy John Slidell did not have much to offer in terms of negotiations. Those instructions not only included the demand that the Río Grande serve as the Texas border when, in fact, the Nueces River had always been defined as such, but also a demand for the cession of the territories of New Mexico and California linked to claims which had been resolved since the signing of the Convention of 1843.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Polk administration had accredited Slidell as a plenipotentiary secretary and not as an ad hoc commissioner with faculties only for initiating negotiations, as the Mexican government had agreed to. The Slidell mission was, therefore, used to force the Mexican government into tacitly recognizing the annexation of Texas and the cession of the disputed territory. This last point was the initial obstacle for beginning negotiations and was a recurrent issue in the correspondence between the U.S. envoy and Ministers Manuel de la Peña y Peña and Joaquin Maria del Castillo y Lanzas between December 8, 1845 and March 21, 1846.[16](#)

To analyze President Polk's intentions for the Slidell mission, it is worth highlighting comments made earlier by William Parrot to Secretary Buchanan:

There are other considerations important to the government and people of the United States, which incline me to believe that it would be far better that Mexico should declare a war now, than that it should propose to open negotiations for the settlement of pending differences; among these, that of tracing certain geographical lines drawn upon the maps of the northwest coast of America, is not the least important; these lines could be satisfactorily run in a case of war; but not in a negotiation, now or at any future period.[17](#)

The demands made by John Slidell and the U.S. government's refusal to modify the terms of his accreditation, accompanied by the formalization of the admission of Texas to the United States and the order given to [General Taylor](#) to occupy the territory between the Río Grande and the Nueces River, were the factors that confirmed to Mexicans that the objective of the mission was none other than to lay out

...a crude trap...with an outrageous Machiavellian objective. The dilemma was after all quite simple: either the Mexican government admitted a regular government secretary, which would be equivalent to reestablishing friendly relations between the two countries without the dispute being resolved, thus approving the usurpation of Texas and proving to the world that despite any matter of offense and divestment, Mexico would always be dependent on. And a slave to the United States or — the more likely possibility- the Mexican government would not agree to such an excessive humiliation and a pretext would thus exist for resorting to war and for more cases of usurpation.[18](#)

Scarcely a week after Slidell received his credentials and began his trip back to the United States, the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Río Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation. This provocation by President Polk would be acknowledged even by John C. Calhoun, who had been the main promoter of the annexation of Texas.[19](#) In the eyes of the Mariano Paredes government, the mobilization of the U.S. army was an outright attack on Mexico's territorial integrity and clearly demonstrated that the United States had no intention of subjecting itself to the terms of the 1828 border treaty. As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Río Grande and the Nueces River—an order which led to the battles of [Palo Alto](#) and Resaca de la Palma.

Even before these incidents, President Polk had already decided to ask the U.S. Congress to declare war against Mexico, but the battles provided a pretext to mobilize the opinions of both U.S. legislators and the public in favor of such a measure. He held that

Mexico had crossed over the U.S. border, had invaded our territory and had cawed the shedding of U.S. blood in U.S. territory.[20](#)

This declaration not only implied a unilateral definition of the U.S. border with Mexico. but also clearly defined the reason for the war as the defense of U.S. territorial security. Nevertheless, Polk immediately ordered the occupation of the territory south of the Río Grande, as well as the New Mexico and California territories and the blocking of Mexican ports. The question was and continues

to be: were these actions in defense of U.S. territorial security or the flagrant invasion of Mexican territory? From the viewpoint of Mexicans, the answer was clear: the U.S. government was not seeking to protect its territorial security, nor did it have other supposed demands. but rather it was determined to take over a territory legitimately belonging to Mexico. This posture was reiterated in an article in the daily "El Tiempo" which stated: "The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveler."²¹ The daily "El Republicano" published the following opinion:

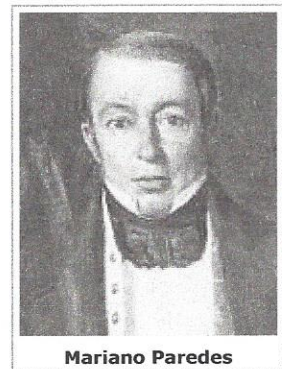
No one has any doubts about the intentions the Washington cabinet has had for some time now with respect to Mexico...One fights in the name of usurpation; the other defends justice... the war has begun and the [Mexican] nation has a great deal at stake, since even if justice is on its side, that is unfortunately not enough to triumph. and hold back the excesses of a powerful enemy The war...has now begun, to our misfortune, and it is urgent that time not be wasted.²²

Most people in Mexico believed the use of arms was the only option available to defend their rights and territorial integrity. Thus, on July 6, 1846, President Mariano Paredes enacted the Congressional decree that sustained such principles in the following terms:

Article 1. The government, in the natural defense of the nation, will repel the aggression initiated and sustained by the United States of America against the Republic of Mexico, having invaded and committed hostilities in a number of the departments making up Mexican territory.

Article 3. The government will communicate to friendly nations and to the entire republic the justifiable causes which obliged it to defend its rights, left with no other choice but to repel force with force, in response to the violent aggression committed by the United States.²³

If we carefully analyze the text of this decree, we find that war was never declared against the United States. Rather, reference was only made to the need for defending the country's territorial integrity and repelling the U.S. invasion. This is even more important to note if we consider that by that time, General Taylor's forces had already crossed the Río Grande and seized the city of Matamoros; Mexican ports had been blocked; Captain John Frémont was promoting a revolt in California; and [Colonel Stephen Kearny](#) had received orders to occupy New Mexico and California.



Mariano Paredes

On August 8, 1846, President Polk asked the U.S. Congress for a special two million dollar fund to cover the costs of the war. In a message accompanying his request, he declared that these resources would also be used to make adjustments in the border with Mexico, thus making it clear that the intention was to forcefully acquire Mexican territory. When the news of this message reached Mexico, the daily "El Republicano" commented that a war started for such motives was "unjust and barbaric, and those responsible should be considered enemies of Humanity."²⁴ A month later, it reiterated that:

A government...that starts a war without a legitimate motive is responsible for all its evils and horrors. The bloodshed, the grief of families, the pillaging, the destruction, the violence, the fires, and its works and its crimes...Such is the case of the U.S. Government, for having initiated the unjust war it is waging against us today.²⁵

The U.S. army continued to advance during the second half of 1846 and the first months of the following year. On March 3, 1847, the U.S. Congress approved a three million-dollar fund for allowing the president to reach a treaty of "peace, boundaries and borders" with Mexico. A month later Nicholas Trist was appointed to negotiate with Mexican authorities. But by this time a new offensive had been initiated under the command of [General Winfield Scott](#), who was ordered to attack the

territory between the port of Veracruz and Mexico City. The opinion shared by Mexican society and government was against signing a peace agreement in disgrace.²⁶ And even after the first contacts between Trist and Mexican authorities, "El Diario del Gobierno" stated:

[The peace] that could be established right now between the Republic of Mexico and the United States would be ignominious for the former, and would lead to so much discontentment toward other nations and such negative impacts within the country that Mexico would soon become a stage for war once again, and would disappear from the list of free and independent nations.²⁷

The events of the following months dramatically prevented Mexicans from pursuing the stubborn, however just, defense of their territory. and they finally had to accept a negotiation that was difficult, painful and undignified for negotiators on both sides. This is revealed by comments made by Nicholas Trist to his wife regarding the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the attitude assumed by Mexicans with regard to the U.S. invasion:

Just as they were about to sign the treaty...one of the Mexicans, Don Bernardo Couto, remarked to him, "this must be a proud moment for you; no less proud for you than it is humiliating for us." To this Mr. Trist replied "we are making peace, let that be our only thought." But, said he to us in relating it, "Could those Mexicans have seen into my heart at that moment, they would have known that my feeling of shame as an American was far stronger than theirs could be as Mexicans. For though it would not have done for me to say so there, that was a thing for every right minded American to be ashamed of, and I was ashamed of it, most cordially and intensely ashamed of it."²⁸

Indeed, during the entire conflict, from the separation of Texas to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico defended its territory and if at any time its position was belligerent, it was belligerent in the defense of national security and for the preservation of international legal order. Therefore, it was not a result of arrogance, nor of irresponsibility, but rather the only possible response to the arguments and the actions of the U.S. government. In conclusion, the armed conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the product of deliberate aggression and should therefore be referred to as "The U.S. War Against Mexico."

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Published by the Center for Research on North America (CISAN), National Autonomous University of Mexico

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John L. O'Sullivan on *Manifest Destiny*, 1839

Excerpted from "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Democratic Review*, Volume 6, Issue 23, pp. 426-430. The complete [article](#) can be found in *The Making of America Series* at Cornell University

The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.

It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal. It presides in all the operations of the physical world, and it is also the conscious law of the soul -- the self-evident dictates of morality, which accurately defines the duty of man to man, and consequently man's rights as man. Besides, the truthful annals of any nation furnish abundant evidence, that its happiness, its greatness, its duration, were always proportionate to the democratic equality in its system of government. . . .

What friend of human liberty, civilization, and refinement, can cast his view over the past history of the monarchies and aristocracies of antiquity, and not deplore that they ever existed? What philanthropist can contemplate the oppressions, the cruelties, and injustice inflicted by them on the masses of mankind, and not turn with moral horror from the retrospect?

America is destined for better deeds. It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battle fields, but in defence of humanity, of the oppressed of all nations, of the rights of conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement. Our annals describe no scenes of horrid carnage, where men were led on by hundreds of thousands to slay one another, dupes and victims to emperors, kings, nobles, demons in the human form called heroes. We have had patriots to defend our homes, our liberties, but no aspirants to crowns or thrones; nor have the American people ever suffered themselves to be led on by wicked ambition to depopulate the land, to spread desolation far and wide, that a human being might be placed on a seat of supremacy.

We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that "the gates of hell" -- the powers of aristocracy and monarchy -- "shall not prevail against it."

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the

excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High -- the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere -- its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood -- of "peace and good will amongst men." . . .

Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. Equality of rights is the cynosure of our union of States, the grand exemplar of the correlative equality of individuals; and while truth sheds its effulgence, we cannot retrograde, without dissolving the one and subverting the other. We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission -- to the entire development of the principle of our organization -- freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man -- the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be *the great nation of futurity*?

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