



U.S.– Mexican War



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HISTORY LAB

OVERVIEW

During this lab students work in groups to analyze eight primary sources in order to examine the underlying causes of the U.S.-Mexican War. Students share their conclusions and defend their claims in a four corners activity. The lab culminates with an assessment writing assignment in which students create a “This Day in History” entry for the History Channel.

ESTIMATED TIME

One to two days

RELEVANT TEKS

Grade 7 (4) History

The student understands how individuals, events, and issues shaped the history of the Republic of Texas and early Texas statehood. The student is expected to: (C) identify individuals, events, and issues during early Texas statehood, including the U.S.-Mexican War, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, slavery, and the Compromise of 1850.

Grade 7 (20) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about Texas. (B) analyze information by applying absolute and relative chronology through sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main Idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions. (D) Identify bias and points of view from the historical context surrounding an event (E) support a point of view on a social studies issue or event (F) evaluate the validity of a source based on corroboration with other sources and information about the author

Grade 7 (22) Social studies skills

The student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms. The student is expected to: (B) use effective written communication skills, including proper citations and avoiding plagiarism (C) create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information

Acknowledgements: Written by Renee Blackmon.

Grade 8 (6) History

The student understands westward expansion and its effects on the political, economic, and social development of the nation. The student is expected to: (C) explain the causes and effects of the U.S.-Mexican War and their impact on the United States; and

Grade 8 (29) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about the United States. (B) analyze information by applying absolute and relative chronology through sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions. (D) identify bias and points of view created by the historical context surrounding an event (E) support a point of view on a social studies issue or event (F) evaluate the validity of a source based on corroboration with other sources and information about the author

Grade 8 (30) Social studies skills

The student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms. The student is expected to: (B) use effective written communication skills, including proper citations and avoiding plagiarism (C) create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information

STEPS TO CONDUCTING THE LAB

Initiate the Investigation

Compare textbook accounts about the U.S.-Mexican War. One account from a textbook used in Mexico and one from a textbook used in the United States. Discuss with students how the two versions compare and why the two versions would differ.

Build Background Knowledge

Provide historical context about the beginning of the war. See the provided handout or use other sources.

Introduce the Focus Question

What was the primary motivation for the United States going to war with Mexico in 1846?

- to expand slavery
- to fulfill Manifest Destiny
- to gain more land and wealth
- to defend against a dangerous enemy

Clarify with students the meaning of primary and motivation. Discuss how a motivation may be different from what is stated as a cause of an event.

Conduct Investigation

Student groups of (4) are given a set of documents and an evidence organizer. Groups are instructed to assign the following roles:

- recorder – responsible for recording group work on the evidence organizer
- presenter – responsible for presenting the group's findings
- reader – responsible for reading the sources to the group
- time keeper – responsible for managing the time so the group completes its work

Groups examine the following sources and are tasked to come to a consensus answer to the focus question. Findings are recorded on the evidence organizer.

- Source 1 – *Heroine of Fort Brown*. 1847 line drawing depicting Sarah Borginnes providing aid to American troops during Siege of Fort Texas
- Source 2 – Excerpt from *Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major-General Ethen Allen Hitchcock*
- Source 3 – Excerpt from Massachusetts Legislature Resolutions on the War with Mexico, April 26, 1847
- Source 4 – Excerpt from article in the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, 1847
- Source 5 – Excerpt from a letter from George Bancroft, 1846
- Source 6 – Excerpt from pamphlet “The War in Texas” by Benjamin Lundy, 1836
- Source 7 – Excerpt from a speech by Major Auguste Davezac, 1844
- Source 8 – Excerpt from Polk’s war message, May 11, 1846

Groups complete the following sentence stem in writing:

We believe that President Polk’s primary motivation was _____ because . . .

Report conclusions or interpretations

Conduct a 4-Corners Activity by instructing groups to move to the corner that represents their consensus conclusion to the focus question. Each corner of the room is labeled with the primary motivation choices given in the focus question. Group presenters then report findings, using the sentence stem response if needed.

Debrief the investigation

Conduct a class discussion to consolidate the historical content and provide content about the effects of the U.S. - Mexican War. Discuss which sources were the most informative, how the sources revealed the points of view of the author, how the sources reflected other issues of the time period.

Be sure to examine the territorial changes that resulted from the war. Discuss if knowing the effects of the war would change any student’s answer to the focus question. Discuss how the U.S.-Mexican War may impact relations with Mexico today.

Assess student comprehension of content

Students produce a “This Day in History, May 13, 1846” entry for the History Channel website.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE U.S.–MEXICAN WAR

Please read the two textbook narratives about the U.S.–Mexican War and compare the two accounts by identifying what is similar and different about the accounts.

Mexican Textbook Excerpt

Mexican textbook excerpt found in an article titled “Mexico’s Loss of Land: Perspectives from Mexico and the United States,” written by Octavio Madigan Ruiz, Amy Sanders and Meredith Sommers. The article was published in the Organization of American Historians Magazine of History: Latinos in the United States, Vol. 10, No. 2, (Winter, 1996), pp. 24-35.

Texas was annexed to the United States by the treaty of April 2, 1844, despite the protests of our government and even though the treaty was rejected in the American Congress. Then the annexation of Texas was proposed in the House of Representatives and approved on March 1, 1845, forcing our Minister in Washington to leave. Then Texas, with the support of the U.S. government, claimed that its boundary extended to the Rio Grande, even though in fact the true limit was the Nueces River. From this boundary dispute came a long controversy during which the United States negotiated in bad faith. They ordered troops to invade places within our territory, operating with the greatest treachery [*terrible lying*], and pretended that it was Mexico that had invaded their territory, making Mexico appear as the aggressor [*started the fight*]. What they were really seeking was to provoke [*instigate or start*] a war—a war in which the southern states of the U.S. were greatly interested, in order to acquire new territories for slavery.

We saw how the U.S. aggressively proposed territorial expansion at Mexico’s expense. The U.S. achieved this expansion with frightening ease and quickness. The U.S. acquired Louisiana in 1803 by paying France \$15 million, Oregon through explorations and invasions, and Florida in 1819 by purchase from Spain for \$5 million. But its thirst for land was not quenched [*fulfilled, satisfied*].

The Mexican War was a brilliant move cleverly planned by the United States. The magnificent lands of Texas and California—with their ports on both oceans, gold soon to be discovered, and the increase in territory that allowed the growth of slavery—paid back the United States many times over for the costs in men and money of the unjust acquisition.

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U.S. Textbook Excerpt

American textbook excerpt taken from A History of the Republic published by Prentice-Hall in 1986. The excerpt was taken from the chapter titled “Westward Ho! (1820-1860)” which included content about the trails westward, Texas’ independence, and the California Gold Rush.

In 1845, the United States and Mexico stood on the brink of war. Mexicans were furious when the United States annexed Texas. They had never accepted the independence of Texas. Also, they were afraid that Americans in California and New Mexico might rebel, as the Texans had done.

Americans, in turn, were angry with Mexico. President Polk offered to buy California and New Mexico from the Mexicans. But Mexico refused. Americans felt that Mexico was standing in the way of Manifest Destiny.

In January 1846, President Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to Texas. Taylor’s mission was to cross the Nueces River and set up posts along the Rio Grande. Polk knew that Mexico claimed this land and that the move might push Mexico into war. In April 1846, Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and fought a brief battle with the Americans. Soldiers on both sides were killed.

President Polk claimed that Mexico had “shed American blood on American soil.” He asked Congress to declare war on Mexico. Congress did as Polk wanted, but America was divided over the war. Many people in the South and West were eager to fight because they wanted more land. People in the North opposed the war. They saw it as a southern plot to add more slave states to the Union.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Following the Battle at the Alamo, Texans defeated General Santa Anna and the Mexican army on April 21, 1836, at the Battle of San Jacinto. General Santa Anna of Mexico was taken captive and released after he was forced to sign the Treaty of Velasco. The treaty Santa Anna signed recognized the independence of the Republic of Texas. The treaty also set the Rio Grande River as the boundary between Texas and Mexico.



The Mexican government, however, refused to acknowledge the new border or Texas' independence. The government argued that General Santa Anna had not been given authority by the Mexican government to concede (give up) anything to the Texans, nor had he been given the authority to negotiate on behalf of Mexico. The Mexican government, as a result, never ratified (approved) the treaty.

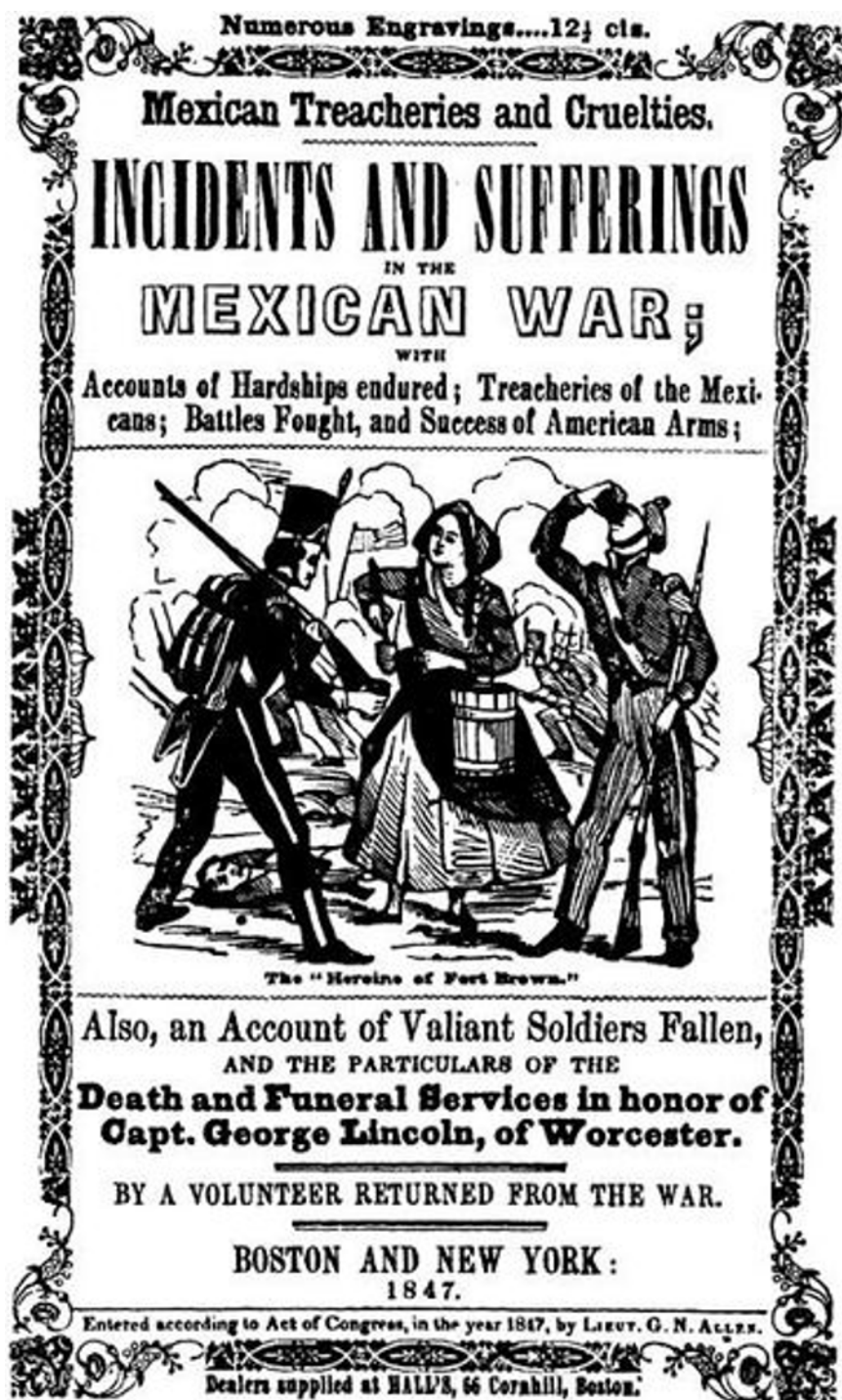
When the U.S. annexed Texas in 1845, the Mexican government broke diplomatic [political] relations with the United States. The United States supported Texas' claim to all land north of the Rio Grande. Mexico disputed the U.S. claim.

In June 1845, the American President James Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to Texas, and by October there were 3,500 Americans on the Nueces River. Later in 1846, U.S. President Polk ordered General Taylor and his forces to march south to the Rio Grande. Mexico claimed the Nueces River, about 150 miles north of the Rio Grande, as its border with Texas; the United States claimed it was the Rio Grande, citing the 1836 Treaty of Velasco. General Taylor ignored Mexican demands to withdraw back to the Nueces River. He constructed a military fort on the banks of the Rio Grande opposite the Mexican city of Matamoros. Mexican forces saw General Taylor's fort and the growing American military presence as a threat. On April 25, 1846, a 2,000-strong Mexican cavalry attacked a 63-man U.S. patrol, which had been sent into the disputed territory between the Rio Grande and Nueces River. The Mexican cavalry defeated the patrol, killing 11 U.S. soldiers.

When President Polk heard this news he said in his message to Congress on May 11, 1846 that "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil." Congress approved the declaration of war and officially declared war on Mexico on May 13, 1846.

SOURCE 1

Heroine of Fort Brown. 1847 line drawing depicting Sarah Borginnes providing aid to American troops during Siege of Fort Texas.



Source: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

SOURCE 2

United States Lieutenant Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock was a career military man, born in Vermont. During the U.S.-Mexican War he led troops deep into Mexico and helped maintain an occupation of Mexico City for a short time. In 1846, after the first shots of the war were fired, Hitchcock was in the command of troops in Texas, where he came into conversation with other military leaders.

It looks as if the [U.S.] government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a **pretext** for taking California and as much of this country as possible; for, whatever becomes of this army, there is no doubt of a war between the United States and Mexico.

— *Fifty Years in Camp and Field:*

Diary of Major-General Ethen Allen Hitchcock, 1846

VOCABULARY

pretext – a reason that you give to hide your real motive for doing something

SOURCE 3

This was part of a resolution (decision) made and approved by the Massachusetts Legislature during heated discussions about the War with Mexico.

The object of the bold measure of [Texas] **annexation** was not only to extend slavery, but to strengthen the “Slave Power,” [of the slave owners in the South]. The same object is now proposed by the Mexican War. . . . It is a War Against the Free States. Regarding it as a war to strengthen the “Slave Power,” we are **conducted** to a natural conclusion, that it is virtually, and in its consequences, a war against the free states of the Union. Conquest and robbery are attempted in order to obtain a political control at home; and distant battles are fought, less with a special view of **subjugating** Mexico than with the design of overcoming the power of the free States, under the Constitution.

— *Massachusetts Legislature Resolutions on the War with Mexico,*
April 26, 1847

VOCABULARY

annexed – taking a land area by political force

conduct – organize and carry out

subjugating – to bring under control by a government

SOURCE 4

This is an excerpt from the *New York Herald*, a newspaper in wide circulation in New York City and surrounding areas in the northeast United States. In 1845 it was the most widely circulated and read newspaper in the United States.

The universal Yankee nation can **regenerate** and **disenthrall** the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is a part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country and enable its **inhabitants** to appreciate some of the many advantages and blessings they enjoy.

— *James Gordon Bennet*, *New York Herald*, 1847

VOCABULARY

regenerate – formed or created again

disenthrall – to free from bondage; liberate

inhabitant – a person or animal that lives in or occupies a place

SOURCE 5

Secretary of the Navy of the United States, during the Polk administration, from 1845-1846 George Bancroft was a Democrat from Massachusetts. He opposed slavery, but strongly supported the expansion of the United States into the West. He gave the orders which led to the occupation of California and he sent General Zachary Taylor into the disputed territory between Texas and Mexico in 1846. This excerpt is from a letter Bancroft wrote to his friend Samuel Hooper.

We were driven **reluctantly** to war; we must make a solid peace; that shall open the far west to religious freedom, political rights, schools, **commerce** and industry. The time will come when you may pass on railroads and steamers from Boston to San Francisco.

— *Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft, 1846*

VOCABULARY

reluctant – unwilling and hesitant

commerce – the activity of buying and selling on a large scale

SOURCE 6

Benjamin Lundy, a Philadelphia Quaker, became active in the antislavery movement in the 1820s. He organized abolitionist societies, lectured about the evils of slavery, and contributed to many abolitionist publications. The excerpt is from a pamphlet written by Lundy.

We have been asked to believe that the inhabitants of Texas [Americans and Mexicans living in Texas] have been fighting to maintain the sacred principles of Liberty, and the natural, **inalienable** Rights of Man:---whereas, their motives have been exactly the opposite. The immediate cause and main goal of this war--led by the slaveholders of this country, (with land speculators and slave traders)--has been to grab the large and valuable territory of Texas from the Mexican Republic, in order to re-establish the SYSTEM OF SLAVERY; to open a **vast** and profitable SLAVE MARKET; and, ultimately, to annex it to the United States.

— Benjamin Lundy, *“The War in Texas,”* 1836

VOCABULARY

inalienable – unable to be taken away or given away

vast – of great extent or quantity

SOURCE 7

Major Auguste Davezac was an American diplomat who travelled to and worked in the Netherlands from 1831-39 and 1845-50. The following is an excerpt from a speech he made at the New Jersey State Democratic Convention in 1844, two years before the war, but after Congress passed legislation that empowered incoming President Polk to annex Texas.

Land enough—land enough! Make way, I say for the young American Buffalo—he has not yet got land enough; he wants more land as his cool shelter in the summer—he wants more land for his beautiful **pasture** grounds. I tell you, we will give him Oregon for his summer shade and the region of Texas as his winter pasture. . . Well, he shall have the use of two oceans—the mighty Pacific and turbulent Atlantic shall be his... He shall not stop his career until he **slakes** his thirst in the frozen ocean.

— *Major Auguste Davezac, 1844*

VOCABULARY

pasture – land covered with grass suitable for grazing animals such as cattle or sheep

slakes – to quench or satisfy (one's thirst)

SOURCE 8

James K. Polk served as President of the United States from 1845 to 1849 and for the duration the U.S. - Mexican War. He was born and raised in North Carolina, a slave state in the South. Polk ran for president on the promise to annex Texas. While serving as president he strongly supported getting California and its prized San Francisco Bay as a trade port and connection to Asia.

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.

— *United States President James Polk's war message
to the U.S. Congress, May 11, 1846*

VOCABULARY

reconciliation – to restore friendly relations

reiterated – say something again, or a number of times, usually for emphasis and clarity

menaces – a person or thing likely to cause harm

hostilities – hostile behavior; unfriendliness or opposition

commenced – begin; start

notwithstanding – (preposition) in spite of; regardless

vindicate – to clear someone of blame or suspicion

Activity Sheet

EVIDENCE ORGANIZER

Primary Motivation	Document title and quote that supports this motivation
to expand slavery	
to fulfill Manifest Destiny	
to gain more land and wealth	
to defend against a dangerous enemy	