

DOCUMENTARY PHOTO AIDS, INC.

P.O. BOX 956

MOUNT DORA, FLORIDA 32757

THE WAR WITH MEXICO

The decade of the 1840s was a successful era for the United States. During this period the U.S. expanded its borders, waged a successful war against Mexico, and discovered gold in the new territory of California. The era is often called the "Roaring Forties," a description reflecting growth and expansion. (The nation's population, for example, almost doubled in size, from 11 million to 17 million.) Unfortunately, the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico once again raised the specter of sectionalism, and fused slavery with every political, economic and moral issue of the era.

Until 1789, the southern section hoped to dominate the Union. This hope was dashed by the industrialization of the North. Commerce and industry were helping to swell the North's population and establish its economic and political hegemony. When the South lost control of the House of Representatives, it sought to maintain equality with the North in the Senate by favoring the conquest and admission of cotton-growing areas like Texas into the Union.

After Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836, the South favored annexing the new country into the Union. Mexico delayed the procedure by refusing to recognize Texas independence and condemning U.S. support and sympathy for the Texans during the revolt. Annexation might have led to war and was delayed until 1844. Finally, two days before Mr. Polk's inauguration, Texas was admitted into the Union. Mexico considered the annexation theft of her property and broke off diplomatic relations.

President Polk was committed to territorial expansion and called for a peaceful and negotiated settlement of America's territorial designs. He sent John Slidell to Mexico City with an offer to purchase the disputed area between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers, California and the New Mexico territory. The President authorized Slidell to offer up to \$50 million, though he expected to pay only \$20 million. President Polk's direct approach disguised other options. If the Mexican government proved intransigent, Polk was determined to resolve American grievances by military means.

The Mexican government refused to talk with Slidell. The failure of his mission prompted Polk to order General Taylor to move his army up to the Rio Grande and maintain the U.S. claim to the 200-mile-wide area. Although Taylor was instructed to appear defensive, Polk hoped the Mexicans would attack first and give Taylor an excuse to invade Mexico.

When a small skirmish developed between the opposing armies, Polk declared that Mexico "invaded our Territory and shed American blood upon American soil." He then asked Congress for a declaration of war. The Senate (42 to 2) and the House of Representatives (174 to 14) voted to declare war on Mexico. (In the House, Abraham Lincoln, a Whig Congressman from Illinois, introduced a series of resolutions opposing the war. His "spot" resolution asked the President to specify the spot on American soil where blood had been shed.)

The war began in 1846 and lasted until 1848. U.S. casualties included: 1,721 killed or died of wounds; 11,155 died of disease; 4,102 wounded. The military expenditures amounted to almost \$98,000,000. Benefits from the victory were considerable. They included: 1. The size of the U.S. was increased by 529,017 square miles. 2. The war

provided a training exercise for many officers destined to serve in the Civil War. Men like Sherman, McDowell, McClellan, Meade, Grant, Lee, Bragg, Jackson, etc., served during the war with Mexico.

The poorly equipped and poorly led Mexican army was decisively beaten. But the conflict left a bitter legacy. The issue of slavery in the lands taken from Mexico had severely agitated anti-war feelings and split the Whig and Democrat parties. When the words of the Northwest Ordinance (an ordinance that kept the territory north of the Ohio River free of slavery) were deliberately incorporated into the Wilmot Proviso ("neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part" . . . of the lands taken from Mexico) the debate over slavery spilled over. The political forces of the nation had been realigned around the slave issue.

QUESTIONS

1. Would you have favored or opposed the war with Mexico?
2. Would you have volunteered to fight?
3. Did an aggressive "slaveocracy" provoke the war?
4. Do you think slavery and Manifest Destiny made the war inevitable?
5. Would you have approved the annexation of Texas?
6. If an American state seceded from the Union and was annexed by Mexico, how would you feel about it?
7. What could have been done to avert the war with Mexico?
8. If slavery existed in the U.S. today, would you be pro- or anti-slave?
9. If you lived during the 1840s, would you be pro- or anti-slave?
10. Was Lincoln unpatriotic when he opposed the war with Mexico?
11. Assign students to give pro- and anti-Mexican war speeches.
12. Were American designs on Mexican lands different in any way from the behavior of the U.S. at the start of the Spanish-American War in 1898?