

# The War with Mexico

## TERMS & NAMES

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

**LEARN ABOUT** the American war with Mexico  
**TO UNDERSTAND** how the United States pursued its goal of expanding across the continent.

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

Robert E. Lee was born into a prominent Virginia family in 1807. His father had been a hero of the American Revolution. He graduated from the new U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1829. After decades of distinguished service, Lee eventually would resign his commission in the U.S. Army to lead the Confederate Army in the Civil War. In 1846, however, the war with Mexico provided the 39-year-old captain with his first combat experience. Among the soldiers whom Lee directed in battle was his younger brother, Sidney Smith Lee. The elder Lee wrote about the battle.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

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

ROBERT E. LEE, in a letter cited in *R. E. Lee* by Douglas Southall Freeman

In a letter to his son a month later, Robert E. Lee repeated his disgust at the ugliness of war, saying, "You have no idea what a horrible sight a field of battle is." In recoiling at the ugliness of the war with Mexico, Lee hardly stood alone. From the start, Americans hotly debated whether the United States should pursue the war.



William Edward West painted Robert E. Lee in the dress uniform of a U.S. Army lieutenant of engineers.

## Polk Urges War

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

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

**SLIDELL'S REJECTION** Meanwhile, the Mexican political situation was confusing and unpredictable. In 1844, Santa Anna had been ousted by General José Herrera. In November 1845, "Polk the Purposeful" sent a Spanish-speaking emissary, John Slidell, to Mexico to purchase California and New Mexico and to gain Mexican approval of the Rio Grande as the Texas border. When Slidell arrived in Mexico City, Herrera refused to receive him. Hoping for Mexican



aggression that would unify Americans behind a war, Polk then issued orders for General **Zachary Taylor** to march to the Rio Grande and blockade the river. Mexicans viewed this action as a violation of their territorial rights. Though many Americans shared Polk's goals for expansion, public opinion was divided over resorting to military action. Slavery would soon emerge as the key issue complicating this debate.

**SECTIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD WAR** At first, Southern Whigs denounced the Democratic president's attitude toward war. Even John C. Calhoun, who had earlier plotted to annex Texas as a slave state, opposed the seizure of so much land from Mexico. However, many Southerners saw Texas as an opportunity to extend slavery and increase Southern power in Congress. Furthermore, the Wilmot Proviso, a proposed amendment to a military appropriations bill of 1846, prohibited slavery in lands that might be gained from Mexico. This attack on slavery solidified Southern support for war by transforming the debate on war into a debate on slavery.

Many Northerners opposed war. A Whig representative from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, questioned the war's justification. Antislavery Whigs and abolitionists saw the war as a plot to expand slavery and ensure Southern domination of the Union. In a resolution adopted by the Massachusetts legislature, Charles Sumner proclaimed that "the lives of Mexicans are sacrificed in this cause; and a domestic question, which should be reserved for bloodless debate in our own country, is transferred to fields of battle in a foreign land."

## The War Begins

With General Taylor positioned at the Rio Grande in 1846, John C. Frémont led an American military exploration party into California's Salinas Valley, another violation of Mexico's territorial rights. The Mexican government had had enough.

Mexico responded to Taylor's invasion of the territory it claimed by sending troops across the Rio Grande. In a skirmish near Matamoros, Mexican soldiers killed 11 U.S. soldiers. Polk immediately sent a war message to Congress, declaring that by shedding "American blood upon American soil," Mexico had started the war. Representative Abraham Lincoln questioned the truthfulness of the message, asking "whether our citizens, whose blood was shed, as in his message declared, were or were not, at that time, armed officers and soldiers, sent into that settlement by the military order of the President." Lincoln introduced the "Spot Resolution," asking Polk to certify the spot where the skirmish had occurred. Truthful or not, Polk's message swayed Congress, which voted overwhelmingly in favor of war, despite dissent across the country.

**KEARNY MARCHES WEST** In 1846, as part of his plan to seize New Mexico and California, Polk ordered Colonel **Stephen Kearny** to march from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, across the desert to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Kearny earned the nickname "the Long Marcher" as he and his men crossed 800 miles of barren ground on their way to Santa Fe. They were met there by a New Mexican contingent that included upper-class Mexicans who wanted to join the United States. New Mexico fell to the United States without a shot.

After dispatching some of his troops south to Mexico, the Long Marcher led the rest on another long trek, this time to southern California.

**THE BEAR FLAG REPUBLIC** By the beginning of the 19th century, Spanish settlers had established more than 20 missions along the California coast. After independence, the Mexican government took over these missions, just as it had done in Texas. By the late 1830s, about 7,000 Mexican settlers had migrated to California to set up cattle ranches, where they pressed Native Americans into

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**A. Recognizing Effects** How did the issue of slavery affect the debate over the war with Mexico?

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**B. Analyzing Causes** How did President Polk provoke Mexico to attack U.S. forces?

## The War with Mexico, 1846–1848



**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**  
**LOCATION** From which locations in Texas did U.S. forces come to Buena Vista?  
**REGION** Which territory was added to the United States in 1853? Why was that addition so significant?

*"The lives of Mexicans are sacrificed in this cause."*

**CHARLES SUMNER,**  
SENATOR FROM  
MASSACHUSETTS

service as workers. By the mid-1840s, about 700 Americans also made their homes in California.

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Polk hatched a bizarre scheme with Santa Anna, who had been living in exile in Cuba since August 1845. If Polk would help him sneak back to Mexico, Santa Anna promised he would end the war and mediate the border dispute in Polk's favor. Polk agreed, but Santa Anna returned to Mexico, resumed the presidency, and took command of the army. In February 1847, he ordered an attack on Taylor's forces at Buena Vista. Though the Mexican army boasted superior numbers, its

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

### LOS NIÑOS HÉROES

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

On September 14, 1847, General Winfield Scott captured Mexico City after the hard-fought Battle of Chapultepec, the site of the Mexican military academy. There, six young cadets leaped from Chapultepec Castle, to commit suicide rather than surrender to the U.S. Army. A monument that honors *Los Niños Héroes* (the boy heroes) inspires pilgrimages every September 13 to commemorate the battle.



soldiers suffered from exhaustion. Taylor's more rested troops pushed Santa Anna into Mexico's interior.

Scott's forces took advantage of Santa Anna's disrupted strategy and captured Veracruz in March. The regal General Scott always wore a full-dress blue uniform with a yellow sash, which won him the nickname "Old Fuss and Feathers." Scott supervised an amphibious landing at Veracruz, in which an army of 10,000 men landed on an island off Veracruz in 200 ships and ferried 67 boats in less than 5 hours, an extraordinary military feat at the time. Scott's troops then set off for Mexico City, which they captured on September 14, 1847. Covering 260 miles, Scott's army had lost not a single battle.

## America Claims the Spoils of War

For Mexico, the war in which it lost 50,000 men and nearly half its land marked an ugly milestone in its relations with the United States. America's victory came at the cost of about 13,000 men. Of these, nearly 2,000 died in battle or from wounds and more than 11,000 perished from diseases, such as yellow fever. However, the magnitude of the land gained by the United States was astounding. It enlarged U.S. territory by approximately one-third.

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

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

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

**THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH** In January 1848, James Marshall, an American carpenter working on John Sutter's property in the California Sierra Nevadas, discovered gold at Sutter's Mill. Word of the chance discovery traveled with lightning speed.

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

On June 6, 1848, Monterey's Mayor Walter Colton sent a scout to

### NOW & THEN

#### BLUE JEANS: THE HOT COMMODITY

Though gold miners in 1848 counted on striking it rich, some of the largest fortunes went to those who clothed the miners. Levi Strauss, founder of Levi Strauss and Company, the San Francisco blue jeans manufacturer, originally intended to sell canvas tents to the California miners. However, he soon found that the canvas could be made into sturdy pants with rivets on the seams and pockets for the miners' tools.

What began as an article of clothing designed to meet a simple need today is woven into the fabric of American culture and the global economy. Having cashed in on the California gold rush, in the late 1900s Levi Strauss and Company is panning for blue jeans "gold" in India, where the market for blue jeans is estimated at \$130 million. Blue jeans, the universal souvenir, are carried in countless suitcases to countries all over the world.



The crowded buildings and the forest of masts in this 1850 photograph of San Francisco (above right) contrast sharply with the scene in Victor Prevost's 1847 painting, *View of San Francisco* (above left).

report on what was happening. When the scout returned on June 14, the mayor described the scene that had taken place in the middle of the town's main street.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

The blacksmith dropped his hammer, the carpenter his plane, the mason his trowel, the farmer his sickle, the baker his loaf, and the tapster [bartender] his bottle. All were off for the mines, some on horses, some on carts, and some on crutches, and one went in a litter. . . . I have only a community of women left, and a gang of prisoners, with here and there a soldier who will give his captain the slip at first chance. I don't blame the fellow a whit; seven dollars a month, while others [prospectors] are making two or three hundred a day!

WALTER COLTON, quoted in *California: A Bicentennial History*

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

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

By 1849, California's population exceeded 100,000, including Mexicans, free African-American miners, and slaves. A constitutional convention in 1849 drew up a state constitution that outlawed slavery. California's application for statehood provoked fiery protest in Congress and became just one more sore point between irate Northerners and Southerners, each intent on winning the sectional argument over slavery.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**D. Analyzing Motives** What common dream did people who sought gold in California share with those who settled in Oregon?

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**C. Summarizing** Explain the importance of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Purchase.

### Section 4 Assessment

#### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify:

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

#### 2. RECOGNIZING EFFECTS

Draw a chart showing how the boundaries of the U.S. mainland were formed.



**3. EVALUATING** How would you evaluate President Polk's attitude and behavior toward Mexico? Use specific references to the chapter to support your response.

#### THINK ABOUT

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

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

#### THINK ABOUT

- the positions of the North and the South on the war
- the different viewpoints of the United States and Mexico



On May 15, Scott's army entered Puebla, the second-largest Mexican city. There Scott lost about a third of his army because men whose twelve-month enlistments had expired felt free to go home, leaving Scott with about 7,000 troops in all. There was nothing to do but hang on until reinforcements and supplies came up from the coast. Finally, after three months, with his numbers almost doubled, Scott set out on August 7 through the mountain passes into the Valley of Mexico, cutting his supply line to the coast.

Scott directed a brilliant flanking operation around the lakes and marshes that guard the eastern approaches to Mexico City. After a series of battles in which they overwhelmed Mexican defenses, U.S. forces entered Mexico City on September 13, 1847. At the national palace a battalion of marines raised the American flag and occupied "the halls of Montezuma." News of the victory led some expansionists to new heights of land lust. The editor John O'Sullivan, who had coined the term *manifest destiny*, shouted, "More, More, More! Why not take all of Mexico?"

**THE TREATY OF GUADALUPE HIDALGO** After the fall of the capital, Santa Anna resigned and a month later left the country. Meanwhile, Polk had appointed as peace negotiator Nicholas P. Trist, chief clerk of the State Department and a Virginia Democrat. Formal talks got under way on January 2, 1848, at the village of Guadalupe Hidalgo, just outside the capital, and dragged on through the month. By the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848, Mexico gave up all claims to Texas above the Rio Grande and ceded California and New Mexico to the United States. In return the United States agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million and assume the claims of U.S. citizens against Mexico up to \$3.25 million. Like the Louisiana Purchase, it was a remarkable bargain.

Polk submitted the treaty to the Senate. A growing movement to annex all of Mexico briefly excited the president, but as Polk confided in his diary, rejecting the treaty would be too risky. If he should spurn a treaty made in accord with his own original terms in order to gain more territory, "the probability is that Congress would not grant either men or money to prosecute the war." In that case he might eventually have to withdraw the army and lose everything. So the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo went to the Senate, which ratified it on March 10, 1848. By the end of July, the last remaining U.S. soldiers had left Mexico.

**THE WAR'S LEGACIES** The Mexican War cost the United States 1,733 killed in battle, 4,152 wounded, and, as usual, far more—11,550—dead of disease, mostly dysentery and chronic diarrhea ("Montezuma's revenge"). It

remains the deadliest war in American history in terms of the percentage of combatants killed. Out of every 1,000 soldiers in Mexico, some 110 died. The next highest death rate would be in the Civil War, with 65 dead out of every 1,000 participants.

The Mexican War was a crushing defeat for Mexico and a defining event for the United States. As a result of the conflict, the United States acquired more than 500,000 square miles of territory (almost 1 million, counting Texas), including the splendid Pacific harbors of San Diego, Monterey, and San Francisco. Except for a small addition made by the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, these annexations rounded out the continental United States and doubled its size.

Several important firsts are associated with the Mexican War: the first successful offensive American war, the first occupation of an enemy capital, the first war in which martial law was declared on foreign soil, the first in which West Point graduates played a major role, and the first reported by war correspondents. It was also the first significant combat experience for a group of junior officers who would later serve as leading generals during the Civil War: Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, George B. McClellan, George Meade, and others.

Initially the victory in Mexico unleashed a surge of national pride, but as the years passed, the Mexican War was increasingly seen as a war of conquest directed by a president bent on expansion. Ulysses S. Grant later called it "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation." America's terrible Civil War fifteen years later, he added, was "our punishment" for the unholy Mexican War. For a brief season the glory of conquest added political luster to the names of Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Despite Polk's best efforts, he had manufactured the next, and last, two Whig candidates for president. One of them, Taylor, would replace him in the White House, with the storm of sectional conflict already on the horizon.

The acquisition of Oregon, Texas, California, and the New Southwest made the United States a transcontinental nation. Extending authority over this vast new land greatly expanded the scope of the federal government. In 1849, for example, Congress created the Department of the Interior to supervise the distribution of land, the creation of new territories and states, and the "protection" of the Indians and their land. President Polk naively assumed that the dramatic expansion of American territory to the Pacific would strengthen "the bonds of Union." He was wrong. No sooner was Texas annexed and gold discovered in California than a violent debate erupted over the extension of slavery into the new territories. That debate would culminate in a war that would nearly destroy the Union.