

Odie B. Faulk is the author of *Arizona: A Short History* (University of Oklahoma Press) and of other standard volumes of Southwestern history. The following article first appeared in the August 1987 edition of *Chronicles* and is reprinted by permission.

The War of Mexican Aggression

By Odie B. Faulk

Much of the news recently, especially in the Southwest, concerns the problem of illegal immigration from south of the border. Another frequent subject of media attention is the snowballing Mexican debt and the threat that this nation will not be able to meet its obligations. The two problems — a stagnant economy and mass exodus northward — are inter-related and show no signs of easy resolution.

Many of the reporters on Mexico's present financial and social chaos take pains to say that our neighbor would have a far greater ability to handle its debts and its problems had not the United States taken so large a slice of its territory in the war of 1846-1848. The Mexican War, as this conflict is mistakenly called, is pictured as a case of American aggression — what some commentators call "the most disgraceful episode in American history."

Every reader of textbooks about the American experience, from grade school to college level, *knows* that the United States instigated the war with Mexico in 1846, that James K. Polk deliberately plotted a conflict of aggression against a weak and helpless neighbor to acquire territory he coveted, and that every American should feel guilty about this episode.

This past week, when I heard this lie repeated yet again, I pulled from the shelf the first *Instructor's Manual* for a college American history text that came to hand. In it I found this suggested multiple-choice question: "President James K. Polk deliberately provoked war with Mexico in order to acquire (a) New Mexico (b) California (c) Texas (d) all of the above." The correct answer was "d." There was no asking *if* Polk had started the conflict. Rather, the only question was the amount of territory he intended to acquire. The cause of the war was American imperialism, pure and simple.

Even a cursory look at the facts reveals greater complexity than the standard textbook simplism — and a far different picture of where guilt should be assigned. Among the several reasons often cited as causes of the war between the United States and Mexico are:

First, Manifest Destiny. According to this theory, Americans in 1846 were united in believing that their nation had a divinely ordained destiny to rule all of North America. I suspect most frontiersmen, if accused of Manifest Destiny, would have shot first and inquired later what this might mean. Americans in 1846 were no

more united in a single belief than are their descendants now. It is patently absurd to assert such a claim.

Second, cultural conflict. There have been charges that Americans and Mexicans hated each other, and this led to war. In the years since that war, there has been no great increase in love between the two nationalities, but this has not led to another war.

Third, the vacuum theory. This is the belief that "nature abhors a vacuum." Thus in 1846, when much of the Southwest was thinly populated, Americans rushed in to fill the empty space. A cursory glance at population statistics for Mexico in the 1980s shows that Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua still are thinly populated, but Americans have not rushed in to claim this land.

Fourth, a "slaveocracy conspiracy." In Congress in the 1840s the question of annexing Texas had been joined with the Whig Party's fight against the institution of slavery and any extension of it to additional territory. Southerners, according to some Whig orators, had conspired to introduce settlers in Texas, settlers who, at the proper moment would revolt against Mexico, then seek annexation to the United States so that slavery could spread westward. This claim was patently false. No evidence of such a conspiracy survives.

To justify this theory, a few Whigs proclaimed that Mexico owned all of Texas, a claim so ludicrous that most prominent Whigs contented themselves with asserting that Mexico owned at least that part of Texas between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. This claim of the Nueces River as the rightful boundary, incidentally, was not made by any Mexican prior to the war. Whigs made it, because they saw it as an issue that might win them the next election, not because they necessarily believed it.

Fifth, a desire to annex California. That James K. Polk wanted California cannot be disputed. However, to argue that he would have started a war to get it is slanderous. The only war he ever dreamed about was the war on the Whigs.

In 1846 California was already lost to Mexico. The only question to be resolved was who would get it: England, the United States, or possibly France. California in the spring of 1846 had no schools or newspapers, no postal system, almost no police or court system, few books, and little protection against Indian raids from the interior. Even communication with

Mexico was rare. Many Californians openly expressed their desire for annexation with the United States, while others favored English sovereignty. To add to the confusion there was a virtual civil war raging in the province as Governor Pio Pico contended with Colonel José Castro for domination. President Polk was aware of these currents of intrigue and would have been derelict in his duty to protect U.S. national interests, had he not tried to offset British and French designs in the region. With this in mind, Polk had the Pacific Squadron of the U.S. Navy standing by, just as he had Captain John Charles Fremont and a detachment of American soldiers operating in the area waiting for the right moment to intervene on behalf of American interests.

Sixth, the claims question. This concerned the payment of debts owed to American citizens by the Mexican government — legitimate debts somewhat inflated but which in that era were considered just cause for war. In 1838 France invaded Mexico (the so-called Pastry War) over claims owed French citizens. The claims issue had simmered between the United States and Mexico since 1829. In 1846 these had not been settled, but they did not cause the outbreak of fighting.

Finally, it was not the annexation of Texas to the Union that began the war with Mexico, although many historians have argued this. On March 1, 1845, president John Tyler signed the joint resolution calling for the annexation of Texas, and five days later Mexican Ambassador Juan N. Almonte demanded his passport and stormed out of the United States, asserting that the annexation of Texas amounted to a declaration of war. However, his actions were motivated by Mexican internal politics, not by any belief that Texas was still owned by Mexico. Texans had declared independence in 1836, had maintained that independence for almost ten years, and had been recognized as independent by the United States, England, France, and several other nations. Even Mexico in the summer of 1845 offered to totally recognize Texas independence, provided Texas would not join the Union.

Then what did cause the war between the United States and Mexico?

"...it was not the annexation of Texas to the Union that began the war with Mexico, although many historians have argued this."

After Mexico won its independence from Spain, two political parties emerged: The Centralists and the Federalists. The Centralists favored a strong central government, while the Federalists wanted a government patterned after that of the United States. In 1822-1823

the Centralists were in power. Then the Federalists assumed control and wrote the Constitution of 1824 establishing a federal republic.

Stable constitutional government lasted only until 1829 when there began a series of revolutions which culminated in 1835 when Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna overthrew the constitution and set himself up as dictator (which, incidentally, led to rebellion in seven Mexican states, including Texas.) Chaos followed with coup and counter-coup, revolution and counter-revolution. In 1845, when Texas sought annexation to the United States, the Federalists had regained power. Ambassador Almonte was the representative of a Centralist regime and expected to be ordered home momentarily. His protest at the annexation of Texas, therefore, was intended more to embarrass the Federalists and solidify popular support for the Centralists than to represent any genuine Mexican claim to Texas.

During the remainder of the year 1845, the Centralists used the issue of the annexation of Texas to work a majority of Mexicans into a war fever. President Polk that year tried every honorable means to avoid war. Early in his administration he inquired if the Federalist government in Mexico would receive a minister empowered to negotiate all points of difference between the two nations. Assured that such an ambassador would be received, Polk dispatched John Slidell with an offer to purchase New Mexico and California.

However, by the time Slidell arrived in Mexico, the Centralists had created such a climate of hatred that no government there could even talk with the United States. Slidell left Mexico without being able to discuss the issues. Then early in 1846 came yet another revolution in Mexico with the Centralists returning to power under the leadership of Mariano Paredes.

"The conflict of 1846-1848 was one in which the United States was clearly justified in its actions."

War broke out in 1846, primarily because Mariano Paredes and his advisors believed that such a war would be won by Mexico. They thought they could count on British aid in the event of war (a belief the British encouraged, for in 1845-46 they were negotiating the boundary between American and British holdings in Oregon country.) Moreover, French military observers were telling the Mexicans that they could win an easy victory over the United States. In 1846 Mexico had a regular army of 27,000 men, while the American army numbered 7,200. Moreover, the Mexicans were armed with more modern weapons and were better trained. The United States would have to fight with volunteers, and, reasoned the French

observers, in any contest between regulars and volunteers the regulars would prevail. Also, for the United States to win, its army would have to invade Mexico across broad deserts where problems of supply alone would defeat them. However, if Mexicans invaded the United States, they would be joined by slaves revolting against their masters, and possibly by Indians, and there would be a triumphant march on Washington, D.C. This explains President Paredes' statement in the spring of 1846 that before he would negotiate with the Americans he would see the "Eagle and Serpent" of Mexico floating over the White House.

This attitude also explains President Paredes' letter to the commander of the Army of the North, General Pedro de Ampudia, on April 18, 1846: "At the present time I suppose you to be at the head of our valiant army, either fighting already or preparing for the operations of the campaign. ... It is indispensable that hostilities be commenced, yourself taking the initiative against the enemy." Paredes confidently expected the first news of victory from the north would cause the Mexican populace to rise up and proclaim him king.

Five days later, on April 23, 1846, the Mexican Senate in secret session declared a "defensive war" against the United States. The next day, April 24, long before either President Paredes' letter or the secret declaration of the Mexican Senate could have reached the Rio Grande, General Mariano Arista replaced General Ampudia as commander of Mexican forces on the northern frontier. Arista immediately issued orders for some 1,600 calvary to cross the Rio Grande and attack American forces on the north side of the river. That same afternoon a Mexican force came upon Captain William Thornton and about 60 American dragoons, and "American blood was shed on American soil."

The conflict of 1846-1848 was one in which the United States was clearly justified in its actions. It was a conflict in which our armed forces performed brilliantly and in which we exacted the just fruits of our victory. This also was a conflict which the Mexican government deliberately sought, one which they confidently expected to win. This war, more properly, should be called the "War of Mexican Aggression."

I can understand that Mexicans today, through a sense of national pride, may "whimper" that their inheritance was less than they expected. What I cannot understand is what impels so many Americans deliberately to ignore the facts and call this a disgraceful episode in our history. ■