

Origins Of Anti-Mexican Sentiments And U.S-Mexican War

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Anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States did not begin with modern immigration debates. Its roots can be traced to European religious prejudice, anti-Spanish propaganda, racial assumptions, territorial expansion, and political conflict in the borderlands. Raymund Paredes's influential article, "The Origins of Anti-Mexican Sentiment in the United States," argues that Anglo-American attitudes toward Mexicans were shaped before large numbers of Americans had direct contact with Mexico. Images inherited from England portrayed Spaniards as cruel, corrupt, religiously intolerant, and culturally inferior. These ideas were later combined with negative stereotypes about Indigenous and mixed-race peoples in Latin America. During the nineteenth century, such prejudices influenced the way American travelers, settlers, soldiers, politicians, and journalists described Mexico and its citizens. They also helped make territorial expansion appear natural or justified to many Americans.

The Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 cannot be explained by prejudice alone. It developed from a combination of Texas colonization, slavery, the Texas Revolution, the annexation of Texas, conflicting boundary claims, diplomatic failure, and the expansionist policies of President James K. Polk. Nevertheless, anti-Mexican attitudes helped shape public interpretations of these conflicts. Mexicans were often presented as incapable of governing their territory, culturally backward, politically unstable, or racially inferior. These claims made it easier for expansionists to describe the seizure of Mexican land as progress rather than conquest. A complete explanation must therefore examine both the material causes of the war and the cultural ideas used to defend it. The history demonstrates how racial and religious stereotypes can become connected with national policy and military expansion.

Origins of Anti-Mexican Sentiment

In his article, Paredes (1977) analyzes the origins of anti-Mexican sentiment by examining the cultural collision between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans. This collision became increasingly visible after Mexican independence in 1821 and during the American settlement of Mexican Texas. However, Paredes argues that Anglo-American prejudice did not originate entirely from direct disagreements in Texas. It was partly inherited from older European attitudes toward Spain, Catholicism, Indigenous peoples, and people of mixed ancestry. English political and religious culture had long portrayed Spain as an oppressive Catholic power. These inherited images later influenced British North American colonists and citizens of the United States. When Americans entered Mexican territory, many interpreted unfamiliar customs through stereotypes they already possessed. Cultural conflict therefore reinforced prejudices that had existed before sustained contact between the two populations.

The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 provides important background to the territorial relationship between the United States and Spanish North America. Through the treaty, Spain transferred Florida to the United States and the two governments defined the western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase. In exchange, the United States recognized Spanish sovereignty over Texas. The treaty was signed in 1819 and ratified in 1821, shortly before Mexico completed its independence from Spain. After independence, the new Mexican government inherited a vast northern frontier that was difficult to defend and sparsely populated in comparison with central Mexico. Mexican leaders wanted settlers who could develop the land, increase the population, and strengthen the frontier economy. At the same time, they feared that immigration from the United States could eventually weaken Mexican authority. These competing objectives influenced Mexico's colonization policies throughout the 1820s.

Mexico's independence was consolidated through the Plan of Iguala and the Treaty of Córdoba in 1821. The treaty was signed on August 24, 1821, by Agustín de Iturbide and Juan O'Donojú, Spain's highest political representative in New Spain. Although the Spanish government initially rejected the agreement, Mexican forces entered Mexico City the following month and established an independent government. The new nation inherited enormous political, financial, and administrative challenges after more than a decade of warfare. Mexico also had to govern distant territories with limited roads, military forces, communication systems, and government institutions. Texas formed part of this vulnerable northern borderland. Mexican leaders considered colonization a practical method of increasing population and agricultural production. Their decision to invite foreign settlers, however, eventually created political and cultural tensions that became difficult to control.

The General Colonization Law of 1824

The new Mexican government passed the General Colonization Law on August 18, 1824. The law allowed Mexican states to establish regulations for distributing public land and attracting settlers, subject to federal limitations. It encouraged colonization while restricting land grants near international borders and coastlines unless federal approval was obtained. The state of Coahuila y Texas adopted its own colonization law in 1825 and offered generous terms to settlers. Empresarios such as Stephen F. Austin received contracts to introduce families and establish colonies. Many settlers arrived from the United States because land in Texas was inexpensive and available in large quantities. They were expected to follow Mexican law, become members of the Mexican nation, and observe requirements established by the government. Over time, however, many Anglo-American colonists retained stronger cultural, economic, and political connections with the United States than with Mexico.

The original conflict was not simply a struggle between Mexican officials and all settlers from the United States. Some Anglo colonists cooperated with Mexican authorities, while Tejanos and other Mexican citizens held different positions on federalism, centralism, trade, slavery, and local government. Nevertheless, differences involving language, religion, law, political culture, and slavery created significant tension. Mexico was officially Catholic, while many immigrants from the United

States came from Protestant backgrounds. Settlers were also accustomed to local political institutions and legal practices that did not always correspond with Mexican law. The growing economic relationship between Texas and the United States further reduced the influence of central Mexico. These conditions encouraged some settlers to view Mexican regulations as foreign interference. Mexican officials, meanwhile, increasingly feared that the United States intended to absorb Texas.

The Spanish Black Legend and Anti-Catholicism

Paredes traces part of anti-Mexican prejudice to the Spanish Black Legend. This term refers to a body of political propaganda, historical writing, religious criticism, and cultural stereotypes that portrayed Spain as exceptionally cruel, fanatical, corrupt, and oppressive. Rival European powers used reports of Spanish violence in the Americas to condemn Spain while overlooking abuses committed within their own empires. The legend was strongly connected with the religious conflicts of the Protestant Reformation and competition among European states. English writers often presented Protestant England as the defender of liberty and Catholic Spain as the representative of tyranny. These assumptions became deeply rooted in the political culture inherited by British North American colonists. Long after Mexico became independent from Spain, many Americans continued to interpret Mexican society through inherited anti-Spanish images. As a result, the actions of independent Mexico were frequently understood as evidence of supposed Spanish cruelty or incompetence.

Anti-Catholicism also contributed to negative perceptions of Mexico. Protestant political traditions in England and the United States often associated Catholicism with absolute monarchy, superstition, corruption, and obedience to foreign religious authority. During the nineteenth century, American nativist movements frequently treated Catholic immigrants and Catholic institutions as threats to republican government. Since Mexico was predominantly Catholic, Americans sometimes used religious differences to depict Mexicans as politically unfit for democracy. This interpretation ignored the complexity of Mexican political life and the diversity of opinions among Mexican liberals, conservatives, federalists, centralists, military leaders, clergy, and ordinary citizens. It also overlooked the fact that Mexico established a federal republic and adopted a constitution in 1824. Anti-Catholicism did not cause every disagreement between the two countries, but it provided a language through which Americans could interpret Mexico as culturally inferior. Religious prejudice consequently became connected with racial stereotypes and territorial ambition.

Paredes also emphasizes that Anglo-American attitudes incorporated false ideas about Indigenous and mixed-race populations. Nineteenth-century racial theories commonly placed White Anglo-Saxon Protestants above people identified as Indigenous, African, Spanish, or racially mixed. Since Mexico contained Indigenous, European, African, and mixed populations, American observers often treated the entire nation as racially inferior. This judgment was not based on a serious understanding of Mexican society. It reflected a racial hierarchy used to justify slavery, Indigenous removal, and colonial expansion within the United States itself. Mexican political instability was then interpreted as proof of racial incapacity rather than as the result of war, financial crisis, regional divisions, foreign

intervention, and institutional weakness. Such stereotypes denied Mexicans the complexity routinely granted to citizens of the United States. They also helped convert a political conflict over land and sovereignty into a supposed confrontation between superior and inferior civilizations.

The Fredonian Rebellion

The rebellion associated with Haden Edwards was one of the earliest serious disputes between Anglo settlers and the Mexican government in Texas. Haden Edwards received an empresario grant in 1825 to settle families near Nacogdoches. Conflict developed when Edwards challenged existing land claims and required earlier residents to prove their ownership. Many established settlers believed that his actions threatened rights previously recognized by Spanish or Mexican authorities. The Mexican government eventually canceled his contract. In response, Haden's brother Benjamin Edwards and a small group of supporters declared the short-lived Republic of Fredonia in December 1826. The rebellion collapsed in early 1827 after it failed to gain broad support from other Anglo settlers and Native American allies.

The Fredonian Rebellion did not immediately create a general movement for Texas independence. Stephen F. Austin and many other colonists opposed the rebellion and supported the Mexican government. Nevertheless, the incident increased Mexican concerns about the loyalty of settlers arriving from the United States. It suggested that a dissatisfied empresario or group of colonists might challenge Mexican sovereignty when government decisions conflicted with private land interests. Mexican officials therefore began studying conditions in Texas more carefully. General Manuel de Mier y Terán was sent to investigate the region and concluded that American cultural and economic influence was becoming dominant. He recommended stronger Mexican settlement, increased military presence, and greater regulation of immigration and trade. His findings helped produce the restrictive Law of April 6, 1830. The rebellion was therefore significant because it intensified distrust even though it was small and unsuccessful.

Slavery and the Guerrero Decree

Slavery became one of the deepest differences between Mexico and many Anglo-American colonists in Texas. Settlers from the southern United States wanted to expand cotton cultivation and brought enslaved African Americans into Mexican territory. Mexican governments moved gradually toward abolition after independence, although the laws and their enforcement were complex. President Vicente Guerrero issued a decree abolishing slavery in most of Mexico in September 1829. Texas received temporary or practical exemptions, and settlers used labor contracts and other legal arrangements to preserve slavery. Even so, Mexico's antislavery direction alarmed slaveholding colonists. They feared that national policy would eventually destroy the labor system on which they intended to build the Texas cotton economy.

Slavery was not the only cause of the Texas Revolution, but it cannot be separated from the political conflict. Anglo settlers also objected to customs enforcement, immigration restrictions, military authority, and the movement of the Mexican government from federalism toward centralization. Many Tejanos opposed centralism as well and initially cooperated with Anglo rebels in defense of the federal Constitution of 1824. However, slaveholding interests had a direct reason to resist Mexican authority. After becoming independent, the Republic of Texas explicitly protected slavery and expanded the institution. Texas later entered the United States as a slave state in 1845. The different policies of Mexico and Texas therefore reveal that the conflict concerned economic and racial systems as well as constitutional government. Anti-Mexican portrayals often concealed this issue by presenting settlers only as defenders of liberty against oppression.

The Law of April 6, 1830

In order to restrict immigration to Texas from the United States, the Mexican government passed the Law of April 6, 1830. The law emerged partly from the warnings of Mier y Terán, who believed that the growing Anglo-American population endangered Mexican control. It attempted to limit further immigration from the United States, strengthen customs enforcement, encourage Mexican and European settlement, and increase the military presence in Texas. It also prohibited the further introduction of enslaved people into Mexico. From the Mexican government's perspective, these measures were efforts to defend national territory and enforce federal law. Many settlers, however, viewed the restrictions as violations of earlier promises and threats to economic growth. Enforcement at customs posts produced additional confrontations and complaints.

The law became an important grievance on the road to the Texas Revolution, but it should be understood from both perspectives. Anglo settlers believed that Mexico was changing the conditions under which they had migrated and invested in the region. Mexican leaders believed that immigrants were ignoring national laws, expanding slavery, and maintaining stronger loyalty to a neighboring country. The United States had also shown an interest in purchasing Texas, increasing Mexican suspicion that colonization could lead to annexation. The problem was therefore not merely a misunderstanding between different cultures. It involved sovereignty, demographic change, economic power, slavery, and territorial competition. Both governments recognized that control of Texas would influence the future balance of power in North America. Cultural prejudice made compromise more difficult because each side increasingly interpreted the other's actions as evidence of dishonesty or hostility.

Issues Leading to the Texas Revolution

The political structure of Mexico immediately after independence in the early 1820s was unstable and contested. The country had experienced a destructive war for independence, the brief empire of Agustín de Iturbide, the establishment of a federal republic, military uprisings, regional divisions, and

serious financial problems. The military and the Catholic Church remained powerful institutions, but Mexican politics cannot be reduced to a simple coalition between the two. Liberals and conservatives disagreed about federalism, centralism, religious authority, local government, economic policy, and the power of the presidency. The Constitution of 1824 created a federal system that gave substantial authority to the states. Many residents of Texas supported this system because it protected a degree of local control. When President Antonio López de Santa Anna moved toward centralism, opposition developed in several regions of Mexico, not only in Texas.

The Texas Revolution began in 1835 amid these constitutional and political disputes. Some rebels initially claimed that they were defending the federal Constitution of 1824 rather than seeking complete independence. Tejanos such as Juan Seguín joined the resistance against Santa Anna's centralist government. Nevertheless, the movement eventually declared Texas independent in March 1836. The Battle of the Alamo became a powerful symbol of the Texas struggle against Mexican forces. It was not, as the original article stated, a cornerstone of Mexico's struggle for independence from Spain. Mexico had achieved its independence approximately fifteen years earlier. The Alamo instead became part of the historical memory used to define Texas identity and, in some interpretations, to portray Mexicans as cruel enemies.

Popular accounts of the Alamo have sometimes reinforced anti-Mexican sentiment by presenting the conflict as a simple racial confrontation between freedom-loving Americans and tyrannical Mexicans. This narrative ignores the Tejanos who supported Texas independence, the Mexicans who opposed Santa Anna elsewhere, and the interests of slaveholding settlers. It also overlooks the fact that the battle occurred within Mexican territory during a rebellion against the Mexican government. The killing of surviving defenders at the Alamo and prisoners at Goliad intensified anger toward Santa Anna and Mexican troops. At the same time, revenge narratives frequently generalized the actions of Santa Anna's army to all Mexican people. Historical memory transformed a complicated civil and international conflict into a moral story involving heroic Anglos and villainous Mexicans. That simplified interpretation influenced later attitudes during the Mexican-American War.

The Treaties of Velasco

The Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, ended the main military phase of the Texas Revolution. Texan forces commanded by Sam Houston defeated Santa Anna's army and captured the Mexican president. While in captivity, Santa Anna signed two agreements at Velasco on May 14, 1836. The public treaty called for the end of hostilities, the withdrawal of Mexican troops, and the exchange of prisoners. The secret agreement required Santa Anna to seek Mexican recognition of Texas independence and a boundary at the Rio Grande. Texas authorities also agreed to arrange his release. These agreements are commonly known as the Treaties of Velasco.

The treaties did not permanently resolve the conflict because the Mexican government rejected them. Mexican officials argued that Santa Anna had signed while a prisoner and lacked the authority to

surrender national territory under coercion. Mexico continued to regard Texas as a rebellious province, although it was unable to restore lasting control. The Republic of Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its southern boundary, while Mexico treated the Nueces River as the limit of Texas. The large area between the two rivers consequently remained disputed. The United States recognized the Republic of Texas in 1837 but initially delayed annexation because of possible war with Mexico and political controversy over adding another slaveholding territory. This unresolved boundary dispute became one of the immediate causes of the Mexican-American War after the United States annexed Texas.

Manifest Destiny and American Expansion

In the early nineteenth century, American political leaders increasingly emphasized territorial expansion. The phrase “Manifest Destiny” became popular in 1845, but the desire to extend United States territory had existed for decades. Expansionists believed that the nation was destined to spread its institutions across the continent. Some described this movement as the extension of liberty, agriculture, commerce, and republican government. However, the ideology also rested on racial and cultural assumptions about the supposed superiority of White Anglo-American civilization. Indigenous nations, Mexicans, and other populations were often treated as obstacles to progress rather than as peoples with political and territorial rights. Manifest Destiny therefore combined national ambition with ideas about race, religion, and civilization.

Paredes’s argument helps explain how anti-Mexican sentiment supported this expansionist project. If Mexico could be portrayed as corrupt, weak, racially inferior, Catholic, and incapable of developing its northern territories, Americans could claim that United States control would improve the land. Political leaders and newspaper writers often described Mexican territory as underused or misgoverned. These claims ignored Mexican sovereignty and the communities already living in Texas, New Mexico, California, and other northern regions. They also presented conquest as the inevitable outcome of historical progress. Such language reduced public sympathy for Mexicans who resisted American expansion. Prejudice did not create the desire for land, but it gave territorial ambition a moral and cultural justification.

The Annexation of Texas

The United States annexed Texas in 1845 during a period of intense expansionist enthusiasm. Mexico had repeatedly warned that annexation would be treated as a hostile act because it had never formally recognized Texas independence. The annexation also intensified the existing border dispute. Texas and the United States claimed that the Rio Grande marked the boundary, while Mexico maintained that Texas ended at the Nueces River. The territory between the two rivers was therefore claimed by both sides. President James K. Polk supported the broader American claim and pursued the acquisition of additional Mexican territory. His administration was particularly interested in

California and New Mexico.

Polk sent diplomat John Slidell to Mexico in 1845 with instructions to discuss the boundary dispute and negotiate the purchase of New Mexico and California. The Mexican government, facing domestic political pressure and refusing to accept the loss of Texas, declined to receive him formally. Polk then ordered General Zachary Taylor to move American troops from the Nueces area toward the Rio Grande. This movement placed United States soldiers inside the territory disputed by Mexico and the United States. Mexican forces crossed the Rio Grande and attacked an American patrol north of the river on April 25, 1846. Polk declared that Mexico had shed American blood on American soil and asked Congress to recognize a state of war. Congress approved the declaration on May 13, 1846.

The Causes of the Mexican-American War

The immediate cause of the Mexican-American War was the military clash in the disputed border region, but the deeper causes were more extensive. The annexation of Texas had created a direct conflict between Mexico and the United States. The unresolved boundary question made armed confrontation increasingly likely. Polk's desire to acquire California and New Mexico added a wider territorial objective. Mexico's refusal to sell the territories frustrated American expansionists. Domestic politics also influenced the conflict because territorial growth promised commercial access to the Pacific while raising the question of whether slavery would expand westward. Manifest Destiny provided a popular ideology through which these ambitions could be defended.

Anti-Mexican sentiment shaped the way many Americans interpreted these events. Rather than treating Mexico as a sovereign nation defending disputed territory, expansionist arguments depicted it as an obstacle to American progress. Mexico's political instability was used to suggest that it did not deserve to control its northern lands. Anti-Catholic ideas portrayed the conflict as one between Protestant republicanism and Catholic despotism. Racial theories presented Mexicans as incapable of resisting the supposed advance of a superior civilization. These claims helped turn a debatable border confrontation into a broader campaign of conquest. They also reduced attention to the fact that American troops had entered territory whose ownership remained contested.

Not all Americans accepted Polk's explanation of the war. Whigs and antislavery politicians accused the president of provoking Mexico in order to seize land and expand slaveholding power. Representative Abraham Lincoln introduced his "Spot Resolutions" in December 1847, demanding that Polk identify the exact spot where the first blood had been shed and prove that it was unquestionably part of the United States. Former President John Quincy Adams and other critics also opposed the war. Writer Henry David Thoreau's resistance to taxes became associated with his opposition to slavery and the Mexican conflict. These objections demonstrate that the war was politically controversial within the United States. Expansionism was powerful, but it was not universally accepted. The debate also reveals that territorial ambition and slavery were recognized as central issues by contemporary critics.

President James K. Polk and Military Expansion

President Polk entered office with an ambitious territorial program. His administration resolved the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain, completed the annexation of Texas, and pursued western expansion toward the Pacific. Polk initially attempted to obtain California and New Mexico through negotiation and purchase. When diplomacy failed, military events created an opportunity to pursue these objectives through war. American forces invaded northern Mexico, occupied New Mexico and California, blockaded Mexican ports, and eventually captured Mexico City. The United States possessed greater financial and military resources, although Mexican forces and civilians resisted in several major campaigns.

The statement that the United States simply “regained” land through financial and military means is inaccurate because the territories had not previously belonged to the United States. They were part of the Spanish Empire and later independent Mexico. American leaders claimed some regions through the asserted Texas boundary, but California and New Mexico were clearly recognized as Mexican territories before the war. Polk’s government sought to purchase them and then acquired them after military victory. Referring to this process as regaining land would therefore adopt the expansionist viewpoint rather than provide a neutral historical description. The war dramatically enlarged the United States, but it did so through the defeat of another sovereign country. Understanding this distinction is necessary when evaluating the relationship between Manifest Destiny and anti-Mexican sentiment.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

The Mexican-American War ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848. Mexico recognized the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas and relinquished its claims to the territory north of the river. It also transferred a vast area that included present-day California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of several other states. In return, the United States paid Mexico \$15 million and agreed to assume certain claims held by American citizens. The territorial transfer represented approximately 55 percent of the territory Mexico claimed before the war. It expanded the United States to the Pacific Ocean and transformed the political future of North America. It also intensified the national conflict over whether slavery would be permitted in the newly acquired western territories.

The treaty addressed the rights of Mexicans living in the transferred territories. Residents could relocate to Mexico or remain in their homes and eventually become citizens of the United States. The agreement also contained protections related to liberty, property, and religion. In practice, these guarantees were not always respected. Many Mexican landowners later lost property through legal expenses, unfamiliar American procedures, taxation, fraud, violence, or judicial decisions. Mexican Americans also faced political exclusion, racial discrimination, economic displacement, and physical

violence. The end of the war therefore did not end anti-Mexican sentiment. Instead, many Mexican residents became a subordinated population within land that had previously belonged to their country.

The Long-Term Effects of Anti-Mexican Sentiment

The prejudices identified by Paredes continued after the territorial conflict ended. Mexicans and Mexican Americans were frequently described as foreigners even when their families had lived in the Southwest before it became part of the United States. Racial stereotypes were used to justify unequal wages, segregated schools, land dispossession, exclusion from juries, and political discrimination. Violence and intimidation occurred in several western and southwestern communities. American popular culture repeatedly presented Mexicans as bandits, passive laborers, dangerous revolutionaries, or people unable to govern themselves. These images changed over time but continued to influence immigration policy and public debate. The historical connection between territorial conquest and racial prejudice therefore extended well beyond the war itself.

The concept of cultural collision is useful, but it should not suggest that the conflict resulted only from misunderstandings between equal groups. The United States possessed growing military and economic power and used it to acquire an enormous portion of Mexican territory. Anglo-American settlers entered Texas under Mexican laws and later participated in a movement that separated the region from Mexico. Slavery, commercial interests, and territorial ambition influenced these developments alongside religious and cultural differences. Anti-Mexican sentiment helped portray American expansion as legitimate and Mexican resistance as unreasonable. The unequal results of the war then strengthened racial and political hierarchies in the conquered territories. Historical analysis must therefore connect cultural prejudice with power, land, labor, and state policy.

Conclusion

The origins of [anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States](#) can be traced to a combination of inherited European prejudice and nineteenth-century territorial conflict. Paredes demonstrates that anti-Spanish ideas, the Black Legend, anti-Catholicism, and racial stereotypes shaped American perceptions of Mexicans before and during direct contact in the Southwest. The Adams-Onís Treaty, Mexican independence, the General Colonization Law, Anglo settlement, the Fredonian Rebellion, slavery, and the Law of April 6, 1830 created the political background for growing conflict in Texas. The Texas Revolution, the Battle of the Alamo, the Treaties of Velasco, and the disputed border left Mexico and Texas without a final settlement. The annexation of Texas and Polk's decision to move troops into the disputed region then contributed directly to the Mexican-American War. Manifest Destiny supplied an ideological justification for acquiring land, while anti-Mexican prejudice helped portray conquest as progress.

The war ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the transfer of more than half of Mexico's claimed territory to the United States. Although the treaty promised rights to Mexican residents, many later experienced land loss, discrimination, and political exclusion. This outcome demonstrates that the war cannot be separated from the history of race and citizenship in the American Southwest. Anti-Mexican sentiment was not merely an emotional reaction to military conflict. It was a collection of cultural ideas that helped justify expansion and continued to shape the treatment of Mexican Americans after the fighting ended. Studying these origins allows readers to understand how prejudice can influence national policy and historical memory. It also encourages a more balanced interpretation of the Mexican-American War that recognizes Mexican sovereignty, American expansionism, internal disagreements, and the experiences of people on both sides of the border.

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