

Was the Mexican War An Exercise In American Imperialism?

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Manifest Destiny and the Expansion of American Territory

The United States has a long history of expansion and territorial acquisition. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the country had become interested in expanding toward the Pacific Ocean. The belief in Manifest Destiny strongly influenced this expansion. Manifest Destiny was the idea that the United States had a divine and natural right to expand across the North American continent. This belief encouraged Americans to settle western territories and justified the removal of Native Americans, the annexation of new lands, and the war with Mexico (Horsman, 1981; Greenberg, 2012).

The Mexican-American War began in 1846 and ended in 1848. The conflict resulted in the United States gaining a large amount of Mexican territory, including present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The war has often been debated as either a necessary defensive action or an exercise in American imperialism. Imperialism refers to the expansion of a nation's power through military force, political influence, or economic control over other territories. The Mexican War can be understood as an exercise in American imperialism because the United States intentionally provoked conflict, used military strength to acquire territory, and justified expansion through the ideology of Manifest Destiny (Greenberg, 2012; Henderson, 2007).

Texas Annexation and the Dispute Over the Border

One of the main causes of the Mexican War was the annexation of Texas. Texas had previously been part of Mexico, but American settlers living there declared independence in 1836. Mexico did not officially recognize Texas as an independent nation and continued to consider it part of Mexican territory. In 1845, the United States annexed Texas, which increased tensions with Mexico. The annexation was controversial because Mexico viewed it as an illegal seizure of its land (Henderson, 2007).

Another important issue was the disagreement over the border between Texas and Mexico. The United States claimed that the Rio Grande was the southern boundary of Texas, while Mexico argued that the Nueces River was the correct border. The disputed area between the two rivers became a major source of conflict. President James K. Polk sent American troops under General Zachary Taylor into the disputed territory. When Mexican forces attacked an American patrol, Polk declared that

Mexico had “shed American blood upon American soil.” However, the land was disputed, and many critics argued that Polk had intentionally placed American troops in the area to provoke Mexico into war (Greenberg, 2012; Henderson, 2007).

President Polk and the Pursuit of Western Territory

President Polk was a strong supporter of territorial expansion. Before the war, he attempted to purchase California and New Mexico from Mexico, but the Mexican government refused. Polk believed that acquiring these territories would help fulfill the idea of Manifest Destiny and provide the United States with access to the Pacific Ocean. When diplomatic negotiations failed, military conflict became a way to achieve the same goal (Greenberg, 2012).

The actions of Polk suggest that the war was not simply defensive. The United States had clear territorial ambitions before the conflict began. Polk wanted California because of its ports and economic potential. He also wanted New Mexico and other western lands to strengthen the United States politically and economically. By sending troops into disputed territory and later invading Mexico, the United States used military power to force Mexico to surrender land it had refused to sell (Greenberg, 2012; Henderson, 2007).

Military Victory and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

The United States had a stronger military and greater resources than Mexico. American forces invaded northern Mexico, occupied California and New Mexico, and eventually captured Mexico City. The war ended with the [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) in 1848. Under the treaty, Mexico agreed to recognize the Rio Grande as the border of Texas and surrendered a vast area of territory to the United States. In return, the United States paid Mexico \$15 million and agreed to settle certain claims made by American citizens (Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848).

Although the United States paid Mexico for the land, the transfer occurred after military defeat and occupation. Mexico did not freely choose to sell the territory under normal conditions. The treaty was signed while American troops controlled the Mexican capital, which shows that the agreement was made under pressure. This supports the argument that the war was imperialistic because the United States used military force to acquire land from a weaker neighboring country (Henderson, 2007; Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848).

Domestic Opposition and the Moral Critique of the

War

Not all Americans supported the Mexican War. Many members of the Whig Party, abolitionists, and intellectuals opposed the conflict. They believed that the war was unjust and designed to expand slavery into new territories. Congressman Abraham Lincoln questioned Polk's claim that Mexico had attacked Americans on American soil. Through the "Spot Resolutions," Lincoln asked the president to identify the exact location where the first blood had been shed. This challenge suggested that the land may have belonged to Mexico rather than the United States (Greenberg, 2012).

Henry David Thoreau also opposed the war and refused to pay taxes because he believed the government was supporting slavery and an unjust conflict. His resistance later influenced his essay "Civil Disobedience." Critics argued that the war was an act of aggression against Mexico and that the language of Manifest Destiny was used to hide the real motives of territorial expansion and the extension of slavery (Greenberg, 2012).

Race, Slavery, and the Ideology of Expansion

The ideology of Manifest Destiny was closely connected to racial attitudes. Many Americans believed that Anglo-Americans were culturally and politically superior to Mexicans and Native Americans. These beliefs were used to justify the seizure of land and the displacement of local populations. Expansion was presented as a way to spread democracy and civilization, but it often involved violence, discrimination, and the loss of land by other groups (Horsman, 1981).

The acquisition of Mexican territory also intensified the national debate over slavery. Southern politicians hoped that the new territories would become slave states, while many Northerners opposed the expansion of slavery. The Wilmot Proviso attempted to prohibit slavery in territory acquired from Mexico, although it was not passed into law. The conflict over whether slavery would be allowed in the new lands increased sectional tensions and contributed to the political crisis that eventually led to the Civil War (Greenberg, 2012).

The Mexican War as an Exercise in American Imperialism

The Mexican War can be classified as an exercise in American imperialism because the United States expanded its territory through military force and political pressure. The war was influenced by Manifest Destiny, racial beliefs, economic interests, and the desire for access to the Pacific. President Polk's actions demonstrate that territorial acquisition was a major objective before the conflict began. The placement of troops in disputed territory, the invasion of Mexico, and the forced transfer of land all show that the United States acted as an expansionist power (Greenberg, 2012; Horsman, 1981).

Supporters of the war argued that Texas had chosen to join the United States and that Mexico had attacked American troops. They also believed that territorial growth was necessary for the nation's future. However, these arguments do not fully explain why the United States occupied Mexico City and demanded extensive western territories. The outcome of the war benefited the United States greatly while leaving Mexico politically weakened and territorially reduced (Henderson, 2007).

In conclusion, the Mexican-American War was more than a simple border conflict. It was an important stage in the territorial expansion of the United States and reflected the imperial ambitions of the country during the nineteenth century. Manifest Destiny provided the ideological justification, while military power made expansion possible. The war resulted in the United States gaining vast territories but also increased conflict over slavery and raised serious moral questions about national expansion. Therefore, the Mexican War should be understood as an exercise in American imperialism (Greenberg, 2012; Henderson, 2007; Horsman, 1981).

References

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