

LESSON 6: MEXICO AND OREGON, 1846

Student Handout 2: Outcomes

Problem 1: Texas

President Polk decided to provoke Mexico by claiming all the territory to the Rio Grande (Option A) and by sending American troops into the disputed area (Option B). According to some historians, Polk took a tough stance, thinking that the Mexican government would give the U.S. what it wanted in the negotiations. Other historians see the decision to send troops into the disputed area as a deliberate provocation of war. Polk repeatedly asked General Zachary Taylor to move his troops closer to the Rio Grande. The president had encouraged Texas leaders in their claim to the Rio Grande.

Polk did not demand all of California, but sent a diplomat, John Slidell, to offer to buy the area (Option C). The Mexican government refused to meet with the diplomat because it had specifically said that the only issue to be discussed was the annexation of Texas by the U.S. Instead, the U.S. sent Slidell to negotiate the boundary at the Rio Grande and to buy Mexican land in California. The Mexican public was expecting the government to get Texas back, not negotiate away more land to the Americans. President Polk felt the United States had to take strong action in response to this refusal by the Mexican government in order to maintain respect for the United States. He threatened war if the Mexican government did not see the American diplomat.



John Slidell

Although there were no negotiations over California, that area was involved in the president's thinking. Before fighting started, Polk ordered American naval commander John Sloat to occupy as many ports as possible in California if war should start. He also sent instructions for American leaders in the area to encourage separation from Mexico and to reassure the California rebels of American support.

Two important themes stand out about the president's thinking. First, he felt that Mexico was very weak, so the U.S. could take military action if negotiations failed. He always felt he was negotiating from a position of strength. Second, he misread the real situation of the Mexican government. He correctly saw the Mexicans as weak, but he wasn't aware of the political pressures on the government. For example, he never understood the reasons why it was so difficult for the Mexicans to negotiate with John Slidell.

The war with Mexico dragged on for more than a year. President Polk apparently hoped that after a short time, the Mexicans would recognize the hopelessness of the situation and return to negotiating with the U.S. It didn't happen that quickly. While most of the American public supported the war, there was continued criticism of the war aims and the

way the war was being fought. Some Americans supported the “All Mexico Movement,” proposing that the U.S. take over all of Mexico (Option E). President Polk did not support taking all of Mexico, but he did state that he wanted to take several more Mexican provinces in addition to California and New Mexico.

The Mexican War had beneficial effects for the U.S., as the country gained an enormous amount of new land. In addition, America had shown its military strength by defeating a larger army. Americans’ national pride, as well as pride in the U.S. military (“From the Halls of Montezuma [Mexico City]...” begins the official Marine Corps hymn), increased as a result of the war. Nevertheless, many Americans wondered if the war was justified. Was it right to convert a border dispute into a war to take land from a weaker country? Others put the blame on the Mexicans for their pride in refusing American offers to settle disputes. Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott became war heroes, while other American officers gained experience that proved useful in the Civil War. The war clearly extended sectional tensions over the expansion of slavery, increasing the likelihood of armed conflict. Opponents and supporters of the expansion of slavery argued for years over the expansion of slavery into Mexico. About 1700 Americans died in combat, while 11,000 died of disease. Of course, casualties for Mexico were much higher and the effects of the war on Mexico were almost completely negative. However, if Mexican leaders had simply given in to American demands, they may well have been overthrown by angry Mexican citizens, so it is difficult to imagine them taking a different course than resistance, however futile.



A battle scene from the war

Problem 2: Oregon

President Polk decided to negotiate a compromise with the British over Oregon (Option D) taking the area up to 49° (the states of Oregon and Washington today), leaving the British the area north of that line, along with Vancouver Island and the right to navigate the Columbia River for several years. Polk had previously demanded all of the area, up to 54°40’, but then decided to compromise. His tough words actually made it more difficult to negotiate. British leaders did not want to appear weak to the British public, which was outraged by Polk’s demands. To compromise with the Americans after perceived insults

would have seemed cowardly. Meanwhile, expansionists in the U.S. were encouraged by Polk's strong language to pressure the government into taking everything.

Ironically, the basic outline of the final agreement had first been proposed more than two years earlier by an American diplomat to Britain, Louis McLane. At the beginning of his presidency, Polk proposed a compromise settlement, which a British diplomat, contrary to his orders, rejected. President Polk was insulted; he said repeatedly that the British had to make the next offer for compromise. The British, meanwhile, wouldn't make any offer, lest they look weak. After compromises on trade between the two countries, the British felt the political climate was right for proposing a compromise on Oregon.

As in the Texas case, President Polk wanted to negotiate from a position of strength. His strong statements, however, only made negotiations more difficult. With war looming with Mexico in the spring of 1846, Polk was more open to working out the compromise with Britain over Oregon, a compromise he could have had in 1843.

The settlement of the Oregon dispute was hailed as a great gain for the country. Nevertheless, the settlement divided the members of the Democratic Party, some of whom had wanted all of Oregon, and others who didn't want so much expansion.