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Mexico's Loss of Land: Perspectives from Mexico and the United States

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## LESSON 11

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*An Exploring the Connections Lesson*

# Mexico's Loss of Land

*Perspectives from Mexico  
and the United States*

**T**his lesson examines an important time in both US and Mexican history. In the early-mid 1800s, the US acquired vast new territories while Mexico lost almost half of its territory. How did this happen? How did people in the US and Mexico feel about the critical decisions that changed their borders? The period of time which includes the annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War is often given little coverage in US history courses, but merits much greater attention. The history of these conflicts is crucial for understanding US-Mexico relations today. In particular, reconsider the argument made by many in the current immigration debate that Mexicans entering California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas are "illegals."

The lesson begins by exploring the attempts of US citizens living in Texas to secede from Mexico, and the US government's later acquisition of Mexican territory. Students learn about the Mexican-American War and the concept of Manifest Destiny using a number of primary sources representing different perspectives. These documents will help students to examine their own and others' interpretations of and biases about important ideas and historical events. This period of history is important for understanding contemporary US-Mexico relations, the use of ideology to justify expansion, and an individual's responsibility to society.

*Many Faces of Mexico*

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This lesson plan is reprinted with permission from Octavio Madigan Ruiz, Amy Sanders, and Meredith Sommers, *Many Faces of Mexico* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Resource Center of The Americas, 1995). The authors adapted this lesson plan from the 1994 original by Patricia Kaufmann of Oxford, Ohio.

<b>Learner Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To explain the economic and racial roots of Manifest Destiny and analyze how the concept influenced the westward expansion of the country.</li><li>• To explain the causes of the Mexican-American War, the sequence of events leading to the outbreak of war, and the consequences of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.</li><li>• To analyze the Mexican-American War from different perspectives.</li></ul>
<b>Concepts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Annexation</li><li>• Manifest Destiny</li></ul>
<b>Major Questions to be Addressed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What arguments were used to justify US expansion and to oppose Mexico's loss of land?</li><li>• How did the Mexican-US relationship change in the mid-nineteenth century?</li></ul>
<b>Exploring the Connections</b>	<p>In Mexico the conflict with the United States is known as the American Intervention in Mexico, while in the US it is referred to as the Mexican-American War or the Mexican War. The war of 1846 was a conflict between two countries over land on which many Mexican people lived and whose descendants continue to live today.</p>
<b>Teaching Strategies</b>	Reading, writing, group discussion and image analysis
<b>Materials Provided</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mexico After Independence (Handout 1)</li><li>• Examining Perspectives (Handouts 2a, b &amp; c)</li><li>• Examining Perspectives Question Sheet (Handout 3)</li><li>• Map of Mexican Territory Acquired by US (Image)</li></ul>
<b>Time Required</b>	1 class session
<b>Preparation for Lesson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make one copy of each Handout for each student.</li><li>• Ask students to read Handout 1 before coming to class. Students should think about their responses to the reflection questions raised in the text and write their responses in their journals.</li><li>• Make an overhead of the map.</li></ul>

## Sequence of Lesson

<b>Anticipatory Set</b> <i>5 minutes</i>	1. Introduce the day's lesson by asking provocative questions about the reading, such as, "Was the Mexican-American War really nothing more than a border skirmish?" and "What was at stake for both Mexico and the US?"
<b>Body of Lesson</b> <i>45 minutes</i>	2. Ask students if they have any questions about the reading and try to clarify any questions. Place the overhead of the map

showing Mexico's loss of land to the US on the projector. Ask students to briefly summarize the various conflicts which led to Mexico's loss of land (the fight over Texas and the Mexican-American War).

For a more dramatic display of the vast amount of territory Mexico lost, make a photocopy of the map and cut apart the Texas annexations, the land acquired under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the contemporary map of Mexico. Then, place the pieces of territory lost over the contemporary map of Mexico and compare the size of the territories.

3. Distribute one copy of Handouts 2a-2c to each student to read individually during class.
4. Divide students into pairs or small groups. Students should reflect upon what they read in the handouts and discuss their responses to the questions on Handout 3. Students may write one group response or individual responses to the questions on Handout 3. (Students should finish as homework any questions not answered.) Alternatively, the instructor may wish to use the questions on the handout as discussion questions for a discussion with the entire class.

**Closure**

5. Ask students to imagine how they might have felt about Mexico's loss of land if they had lived in that era. Do a quick straw poll of those in support of, or in opposition to, the war. Ask students to briefly share their reasons for supporting their position.

**Evaluation**

Evaluate student responses on the *Question Sheet* (Handout 3).

**Assignment**

Think about the arguments both in support of, and in opposition to, US expansion. Write about how you think those arguments pertain to US foreign policy today (e.g., US actions in Panama, Iraq, Somalia, and Haiti).

**Extension Lesson**

A painting by John Gast expressed many Americans' feelings about westward expansion in the early to middle 1800s. The painting of "Manifest Destiny" helped to shape people's vision of a modern empire filling a continent. Obtain a reproduction or enlarged photocopy of the painting (included in many social studies textbooks, or in history books at the library). Ask students to analyze the painting and to answer the following:

- What images does John Gast use to depict the concept of Manifest Destiny?
- Does Gast's depiction of East and West reveal his biases?
- Based on this painting, how do you think Gast and others who believed in Manifest Destiny felt about Indians?

This lesson is adapted from "Opposition to the Mexican War of 1846," *OAH Magazine of History*, Spring 1994.

# Mexico After Independence

**I**n 1824, the Estados Unidos Mexicanos (United States of Mexico) was formed. The new country was a federal republic, consisting of 19 states and 4 territories. It had a constitution which called for the separation of legislative, judicial and executive powers, and which established both a senate and a chamber of deputies.

After the war of independence from Spain (1810-1821), the process of creating a new nation was difficult. People disagreed about which type of government to create. Some favored a centralist model with a strong national government, while others favored a federalist model with more independence for the regions. All were concerned that the model chosen should restore order and be respected by people both within and outside of Mexico. Mexicans had a long history of foreign domination, and wanted to establish a governmental system that would protect their land and people from domination by the United States and European countries.

The early years of the republic were turbulent ones. The leadership of the country changed hands several times. General Santa Anna, who had been a prominent military officer in the war with Spain, was President eleven different times between 1832 and 1855. While the Mexican people were focused on resolving internal issues, a new problem was developing in Mexico's northern territories from Texas to the Pacific Ocean.

## The Texas Territory

The US government's purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 nearly doubled the size of the United States. By 1819, the US had added eight new states in addition to the Missouri and Arkansas territories, which bordered Mexico. US citizens began to move into these territories, and from there, they began to enter the Mexican territories of California, New Mexico and Texas. Although officials from Spain and Mexico gave some US citizens the permission to settle on land in Texas, the majority of people settled on the land illegally, in part because the land in Texas cost only one-tenth as much as land in the United States.

Increasing numbers of US citizens entered the Texas territory and ignored Mexican laws and customs. For instance, slavery was illegal in Mexico—it had been outlawed since 1829. Mexican officials objected to settlers who brought slaves from the US. Many settlers ignored the decree and kept their slaves. Mexico also required those settling in Texas to convert to Catholicism, which many people resisted. Mexican leaders became increasingly frustrated by the people living in Texas, but the unstable government could do little to enforce its laws in the distant Texas territory.

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**Pause for Reflection: Why did people want to settle in the Texas territory?**

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## The Alamo

As the Mexican Republic became more established after gaining independence from Spain, Mexican leaders paid more attention to what was happening in Texas. The Mexican government was concerned the US government would use the settlements in Texas as an excuse to claim that territory. General Santa Anna came to power in 1832, reinforced the Mexican army in Texas, and ordered more strict law enforcement in the region. The Texans rebelled, and Santa Anna mobilized troops in Texas to put down the rebellion. His troops arrived outside of San Antonio in 1836, and the rebels abandoned the city and barricaded themselves in a mission fort called the Alamo outside of the town. Santa Anna was determined to crush the rebellion, and killed all but a few women.

What Santa Anna did not know was that other resisters met and declared Texas an independent state on March 2, 1836. The Texans organized reinforcements and eventually defeated Santa Anna's forces. Mexico continued to view Texas as a rebellious state, but its attempt to crush the rebellion failed.

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**Pause for Reflection: Why was Mexico concerned about settlements in Texas?**

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## Texas' Bid to US for Statehood

The US government recognized Texas as an independent government, nicknamed the Lone Star State. However, the US government refused its petition for admission as a state into the United States. From 1836 to 1845, the possible annexation of Texas was a controversial political issue in the US. At stake was Texas' admittance as a free or slave state. Many Northerners in the US objected to admitting another slave state, whereas many Southerners favored admitting a

slave state. If Texas had been admitted as a slave state, it would have changed the balance of power between slave and non-slave states.

The 1844 presidential election was pivotal in determining Texas' future. Henry Clay, who opposed Texas' annexation, ran against James Polk, an expansionist who favored annexing Texas. Polk won the election, and Congress passed the proposal for Texas' annexation on March 1, 1845. From the perspective of the US government, Texas had achieved statehood. The Mexicans, however, maintained the US had illegally acquired Mexican territory. Although Mexican leaders wanted to stop the US government from taking Texas, they did not want to enter into a costly and damaging war with the United States.

Polk sent a negotiator to Mexico with orders to offer the Mexicans \$5 million for New Mexico and \$25 million for California. In return, Mexico would agree to recognize the Rio Grande as the official border between the two countries. Polk hoped to almost double the size of the US. He especially wanted California, because its ports would give the US access to the Pacific Ocean and valuable trade routes to Asia. The Mexicans refused to even meet with Polk's negotiator, which made Polk furious. In retaliation, he began looking for a way to provoke the Mexicans into war. Polk knew that war with Mexico would be controversial, but he also believed many US citizens were eager to expand to the Pacific coast even if it meant war.

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**Pause for Reflection: Why did the US originally refuse to admit Texas as a state? What do you think US officials' motives were for annexing Texas? What was Mexico's response?**

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## Manifest Destiny

Although many US citizens rejected expansionism, a majority embraced the idea. In the summer of 1845, John O'Sullivan, editor of the newspaper *Democratic Review*, wrote that it was "Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." In other words, it was the "manifest destiny," or God-given right and ultimate fate, of the United States to gain control of the entire North American continent. The ideology of Manifest Destiny suggested that since God intended the US to control the continent, there must be something special about the white people who populated the country. Manifest Destiny provided the justification for invading lands already being used by Indians and Mexicans, whom many Whites considered to be lazy, inferior and unworthy.

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**Pause for Reflection: Using your own words, how would you explain the concept of Manifest Destiny to someone who didn't know what the term meant?**

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## War with Mexico

General Zachary Taylor led US troops to a piece of land between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers, which was claimed by both Mexico and the US. Although it is unclear who fired first, there were casualties on both sides. Taylor sent a message to Polk, telling him that the Mexicans had caused American blood to be shed on American soil. Polk drafted a declaration of war on May 11, 1846, which the House of Representatives passed 173 to 14. The Senate passed it the following day.

During the next two years, the US and Mexican armies battled one another. The US army, however, had superior firepower and advanced quickly toward

the Mexican interior. The US army captured Mexico City in the autumn of 1847, leaving the countryside in disarray and the government in shambles. Some members of the Mexican Congress wanted to stop the bloody war with the US, while others argued that Mexico should resist the US occupation.

Polk and other US leaders were reluctant to make Mexico a part of the US, in part because it would be difficult to control a group of people who spoke a different language and had a different culture. In 1848, US and Mexican officials signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It established the Rio Grande as the southern border of Texas and allowed the US to purchase the California and New Mexico territories for \$15 million. This vast territory included all or parts of the future states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and California. This vast region contained bountiful natural resources and strategic ports, which allowed the United States government and businesses to acquire important resources. The land acquisition was not complete, however. The US government also wanted the Mesilla Valley (today Southern New Mexico and Arizona) because it offered the best location for building a railroad to newly-acquired California. In 1853, the US government purchased a strip of land in the Gadsden Purchase. The US defeat of Mexico and the acquisition of Mexican territory was an important factor in the rise of the US to a world superpower.

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**Pause for Reflection: How do you think the Mexicans living in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Utah felt about living in US-controlled territories after the war with Mexico? What do you think some of the advantages and disadvantages were?**

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## Examining Perspectives: Mexican Perspective

*The following selection is excerpted from a Mexican textbook on the annexation of Texas and the US Intervention in Mexico, as presented in a book titled As Others See Us. This book gives students and teachers the opportunity to understand US history from a different perspective. Note: this is not the only perspective which Mexican people hold about the war.*

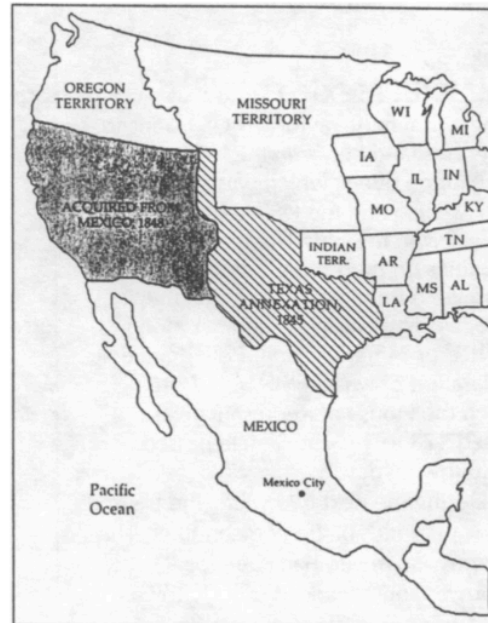
**T**exas was annexed to the United States by the treaty of April 12, 1844, despite the protests of our [the Mexican] government and even though the treaty was rejected by the American Congress. Thereupon the annexation of the territory [Texas] was proposed in the House and approved on March 1, 1845, which forced our Minister in Washington to withdraw. The Texans, backed by the American government, claimed that its boundaries extended to the Rio Bravo del Norte [Rio Grande], whereas in fact the true limits had never passed the Nueces River. From this [boundary dispute] a long controversy developed [during which negotiations were carried on] in bad faith by the Americans.

They ordered troops to invade places within our territory, operating with the greatest treachery, and pretended that it was Mexico which had invaded their territory, making [Mexico] appear as the aggressor. What they were really seeking was to provoke a war, a war in which the southern states of the Union were greatly interested, in order to acquire new territories which they could convert into states dominated by the slavery interests. But since the majority of the people of the United States were not pro-slavery nor favorable of a war of conquest, President Polk tried to give a defensive character to his first military moves, foreseeing the opposition which he would otherwise encounter. Once he obtained a declaration of war, Polk made it appear that he wanted nothing more than peaceful possession of the annexed territory. When at last the city of Mexico was

captured, he made his fellow countrymen understand that they would receive no other indemnity for the expenses of war and the blood spilled than a cession of territory. Thus Polk would achieve the goal he sought from the outset....

The Mexican War was a brilliant move astutely planned by the United States. The magnificent lands of Texas and California with their ports on both oceans, the gold deposits soon to be discovered in the latter state, and the increase in territory which made possible the growth of slave states compensated [the United States] many times over the costs in men and money of the unjust acquisition....

Mexican Territory Acquired  
by the United States, 1848



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## Examining Perspectives: Support for War

In 1845, the *Washington Union*, a newspaper that supported the position of President Polk, insisted that westward expansion into Mexican lands was inevitable. An editorial in the paper asked: *Let the great measure of annexation be accomplished, and with it the questions of boundary and claims. For who can arrest the torrent that will pour onward to the West? The road to California will be open to us. Who will stay the march of our western people?*

The influential *American Review* said that Mexico should bow before "a superior population, insensibly oozing into her territories, changing her customs, and out-living, out-trading, exterminating her weaker blood."

The New York *Herald* said in 1847, "The universal Yankee nation can regenerate and disenfranchise the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is a part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country."

The Reverend Theodore Parker of Boston criticized war with Mexico, arguing that the US should expand not by war but by the power of ideas. He referred to the Mexicans as "a wretched people; wretched in their origin, history and character." He viewed US expansion as the "steady advance of a superior race, with superior ideas and a better civilization."

An editorial in the *Congressional Globe* echoed this sentiment, stating, "We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific Ocean....It is the destiny of the white race."

Many leaders shared these attitudes. Ohio Congressman Delano described Mexicans as an inferior people who "embrace all shades of color...a sad compound of Spanish, English, Indian and Negro bloods...and resulting, it is said, in the production of a slothful, ignorant race of beings."

On May 9, even before Polk had received news of any battles between US and Mexican troops, Polk held a cabinet meeting. He recorded in his diary what he said at the meeting.

*I stated...that up to this time, as we knew, we had heard of no open act of aggression by the Mexican army, but that the danger was imminent that such acts would be committed. I said that in my opinion we had ample cause of war, and that it was impossible...that I could remain silent much longer...that the country was excited and impatient on the subject....*

When Polk heard the news of US casualties, he and his cabinet decided to declare war. The declaration of war contained the following text:

*After reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.... The cup of forbearance has been exhausted, even before the recent information from the frontier of the [Rio Grande]. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.*

*As war, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision and honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.*

The US House passed the war resolution by a vote of 174 to 14. Senators debated the measure, which was limited to one day, and approved the measure by a vote of 40 to 2. The poet Walt Whitman reacted to the declaration of war against Mexico by writing in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, "Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised!...Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!"

## Examining Perspectives: Opposition to War

Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, an aide to General Taylor, wrote the following in his diary:

*I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors....We have not one particle of right to be here... It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses, for, whatever becomes of this army, there is no doubt of a war between the United States and Mexico....My heart is not in this business...but, as a military man, I am bound to execute orders.*

Some newspapers protested the war from the very beginning. Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune* on May 12, 1846:

*We can easily defeat the armies of Mexico, slaughter them by the thousands, and pursue them perhaps to their capital; we can conquer and "annex" their territory; but what then? Who believes that a score of victories over Mexico... will give us more liberty, a purer Morality?*

Congressman Joshua Giddings, one of a small number of war dissenters in Washington, wrote:

*In the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil, or in robbing them of their country, I can take no part either now or hereafter. The guilt of these crimes must rest on others—I will not participate in them.*

Other political leaders shared Giddings' views. A Massachusetts Protest of the Mexican War, written in 1847, made the following claim:

*Resolved, That the present war with Mexico has its primary origin in the unconstitutional annexation to the United States of the foreign state of Texas while the same was still at war with Mexico; that it was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President, to General Taylor, to take military possession of territory in dispute between the United States and Mexico, and in the occupation of Mexico; and that it is now waged ingloriously—by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor—unnecessarily and without just cause, at the immense cost of treasure and life, for the*

*dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest, of a portion of her territory, from which slavery has already been excluded....*

Abraham Lincoln was a first term member of the US House of Representatives elected in 1846. On January 12, 1848, he delivered one of the few speeches he made while in Congress. He challenged President Polk's war against Mexico:

*The President sent the army into the midst of a settlement of Mexican people who had never submitted, by consent or by force, to the authority of Texas or of the United States, and...thereby the first blood of the war was shed....*

*[If] he can show that the soil was ours where the first blood of war was shed—that it was not within an inhabited country, or, if within such, that the inhabitants had submitted themselves to the civil authority of Texas or of the United States,... then I am with him....But if he can not or will not do this,...then I shall be fully convinced of what I more than suspect already—that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong; that he feels the blood of this war....As I have before said, he knows not where he is. He is a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man.*

The war had just begun when a writer named Henry David Thoreau refused to pay taxes to support the war. While he was in jail, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him. Emerson agreed with Thoreau's position against the war, but thought his protest was in vain. When Emerson visited Thoreau, he asked, "Henry David, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau reportedly replied, "Ralph Waldo, what are you doing out there?"

Two years later, Thoreau gave a lecture entitled "Resistance to Civil Government," later printed in an essay, "Civil Disobedience."

*It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right....Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.*

*Many Faces of Mexico*

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## Examining Perspectives: Question Sheet

1. What perspective did the Mexican textbook authors have on the war with the United States?
2. What are some of the arguments that political leaders, journalists and others made supporting US expansion?
3. What are some of the reasons that President Polk gave for asking Congress for a Declaration of War? Do you think he had the support of the majority of US citizens? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the arguments that political leaders, journalists and others made opposing US expansion and the Mexican-American War?

5. Why do you think there was so much opposition to the Mexican-American War?
6. Think about how Hitchcock, Lincoln, Thoreau and Emerson responded to government policies. How did their approaches differ? What role do you think individuals have in taking responsibility for government policies with which they disagree?
7. Do you think the war against Mexico was a "just" war? Explain.

## Mexican Territory Acquired by the United States, 1848

