

UNITED STATES HISTORIANS AND THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR

A Thesis

Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of History

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Michael T. Allen
January, 1967

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the Mexican War during President James K. Polk's administration led immediately to a domestic political controversy concerning the circumstances which led to that event, and historians of the United States still differ widely among themselves on the subject of responsibility for that conflict. Writings of contemporaries and historians alike have dealt with a variety of subjects that have been considered as underlying or immediate factors leading to the war of 1846: the annexation of Texas by the United States, the claims of American citizens against the Mexican government, the order to General Zachary Taylor to occupy the territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers, the alleged conspiracy of Southern politicians to acquire additional slave territory, Polk's designs on California, the chaotic political situation within the Mexican republic, and the American concepts of mission and manifest destiny. In many instances historians have merely echoed the arguments of contemporaries, but the passing of time has afforded new perspectives concerning the events leading to the hostilities between the United States and Mexico. This study deals with the changing interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War by historians of the United States in the one hundred and twenty years since the war began.

Historians who have written about the causes of the Mexican War have naturally been influenced by their own background and environment as well as the climate of opinion in which they wrote. The earliest prevailing interpretation of the war as the product of an insidious conspiracy by an aggressive slavocracy resulted from the abolitionist pro-Whig orientation

of the most influential scholars who first wrote on the subject. William Jay's pioneer study written in 1849, in which the slave conspiracy theory was fully developed, set the tone for the major historical works about the Mexican War written during the remainder of the nineteenth century.

During the era of the Spanish-American War, when many American intellectuals endorsed what Julius W. Pratt has called the "New Manifest Destiny," some historians sought to revise the prevailing unsympathetic interpretation of the motives and actions of the Polk administration in its dealing with Mexico. The personal diary of Polk, which was first consulted by historians during the 1890's, was thus made available to scholars at a time when many of them were disposed to re-examine the diplomacy of his administration. Publication of this invaluable four-volume diary in 1910 marks a significant turning point in the historiography of the Mexican War, for it gave wider circulation to the eleventh President's own day-by-day account of the events which led to the outbreak of that war.

With the passage of time many American historians who have written about the causes of the Mexican War have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the fact that the long-term consequences of the conflict proved highly beneficial to the United States. Since the publication of Polk's diary there has been no serious attempt to revive the slave conspiracy theory, but twentieth-century historians have nevertheless disagreed sharply among themselves in their treatment of the motives and actions of the Polk administration. The study of the causes of the Mexican War has continued to excite controversy among historians of the United States, and each scholar who has written on the subject has tended to be influenced to some degree by the nature of his own experience and knowledge, his attitudes and prejudices, and the climate of opinion in which he writes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR: CONTEMPORARY VIEWS IN THE UNITED STATES	6
III. UNITED STATES HISTORIANS AND THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR, 1849-1910	17
IV. UNITED STATES HISTORIANS AND THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR, 1910-1965	37
V. CONCLUSION	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States and Mexico collided in 1846 in a controversial and woefully one-sided war lasting two years and resulting in a loss to Mexico of a huge portion of her territory. Each country entered the war declaring that it had been the victim of insults and willful aggression. The various developments preceding this conflict and leading to its outbreak were, as with most wars, numerous and complex. The verdict regarding the responsibility for the war is far from unanimous among historians who have investigated and interpreted its background. In the one hundred and twenty years since the war began, the conduct of President James K. Polk's administration in the events preceding the war has been condemned by some as immoral and defended by others as patriotic.

That the controversy over the causes of the Mexican War is still a lively issue in the seventh decade of the twentieth century was clearly demonstrated by the reaction to a statement made by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in 1962. Visiting in Jakarta, Indonesia, a country far removed from either of the two nations involved in the war of 1846, Kennedy consented to answer questions posed by members of the student body of the national university. In reply to a question concerning American imperialism and the Mexican War, the Attorney General stated his belief that the United States had not been justified in becoming involved in the war and that the episode was not "a very bright page in American history."¹ This brief and seemingly insignificant statement touched off

¹Houston Post, February 17, 1962.

an explosion of rebuke and indignation, especially in Texas, where some people apparently felt that their proud heritage was being maligned. Although the Attorney General admitted when he made the statement that "there might be some from Texas who disagree," he undoubtedly was not prepared for the deluge of protests he received from the major political figures in the Lone Star State.² Governor Price Daniel stated that he could not believe Kennedy intended to give the impression that "he disapproved of the heroic fight for freedom and liberty which was made by Texans in 1836 and the subsequent annexation agreement and defense thereof by the United States."³ Republican Senator John Tower declared that the statement revealed a "glaring ignorance" of American history and that it must have come as "a shocking surprise to many Texans who voted for his big brother for President."⁴ President John F. Kennedy, obviously amused by the lively reaction caused by his brother's remarks, announced that in the future all comments on Texas should be cleared with Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson.⁵

Among the historians interviewed by the press concerning the controversy were Allan Nevins and David Donald. Although disagreeing with Kennedy's statement, Nevins pointed out that it was a defensible position and had once been the most generally accepted view. "Mr. Kennedy," said Nevins, "of course, is entitled to his opinion, which

²Ibid.

³Ibid., February 18, 1962.

⁴Ibid., February 17, 1962.

⁵New York Times, March 5, 1962.

is the old traditional one in Massachusetts."⁶ A specialist on Abraham Lincoln, Donald asserted that Lincoln would have endorsed Kennedy's viewpoint, but Donald himself agreed with Nevins. He maintained that the publication of President Polk's private diary and the more thorough study of Mexican internal affairs of the period had persuaded most historians to view the role of the United States government in the events leading up to the Mexican War in a more favorable light.⁷ The Attorney General's statement and the subsequent reaction displayed the wide gulf which still existed between different interpretations of the origin of the Mexican War.

In the following pages, my principal purpose is to analyze the major works written by historians of the United States concerning the background and causes of the Mexican War. The controversy over this subject has continued ever since President Polk enumerated his reasons for war in his message to Congress in May, 1846. In speeches on the floor of Congress and on the political hustings, in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, Whig opponents of the eleventh President accused him of intentionally provoking the war to expand the borders of the United States. With equal vehemence the supporters of the chief executive defended his actions as necessary in the defense of the national honor. Because such arguments used in Polk's own day to condemn or justify the President's actions were often repeated by later historians who wrote on the subject,

⁶Ibid., February 17, 1962.

⁷Ibid.

I shall also deal briefly with the controversy over the causes of the Mexican War as it was waged by contemporaries during and immediately following that conflict.

The story of the background of the war with Mexico is a complicated one. It involves a number of topics such as the annexation of Texas by the United States, the claims of American citizens against Mexico, the sectional controversy involving slavery, and Polk's desire to acquire California. Historians have differed greatly in emphasizing the importance of these and other considerations in their treatment of the causes of the Mexican War. A significant turning point in the historiography of the conflict occurred when the diary of President Polk became available to historians during the first decade of the twentieth century. The availability of this invaluable source was the most important reason for the more favorable treatment of Polk by twentieth-century historians. Certainly Hermann Eduard von Holst and James Schouler, two of Polk's most severe critics among late nineteenth-century historians, would have been shocked to learn that later historians would rank Polk among the "near great" presidents, as he was rated in two separate polls conducted by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. in 1948 and 1962.⁸ Because of its importance, the appearance of Polk's diary serves as the dividing point for my

⁸Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., Paths to the Present (New York, 1949), 93-111; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Our Presidents, A Rating by Seventy-five Historians," New York Times Magazine (July 29, 1962), 12-14. For a brief discussion of the changing views of historians concerning Polk see James J. Horn, "Trends in Historical Interpretation: James K. Polk," North Carolina Historical Review, XLII (Autumn, 1965), 454-464. See also Peter T. Harstad and Richard W. Resh, "The Causes of the Mexican War: A Note on Changing Interpretations," Arizona and the West, VI (Winter, 1964), 289-302.

discussion of the interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War by historians of the United States.

CHAPTER II

THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR:

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS IN THE UNITED STATES

Long before the Mexican War had ended, the controversy over how it had started and who was responsible for it was a popular and lively topic for debate among many Americans. Most opinions expressed were naturally influenced by political partisanship. The Whigs attacked the motives and policies of the Polk administration, while the Democrats stoutly defended its actions and motives in order to protect the prestige and popularity of their party.

In his war message to Congress on May 10, 1846, Polk enumerated what he felt were sufficient reasons for war with Mexico. The President discussed the history of the indemnity claims of United States citizens against Mexico for damages suffered during the Mexican revolt from Spain. He emphasized Mexico's failure to pay the installments agreed upon by both countries. Polk asserted that Texas was an independent nation by virtue of her ability to repel all Mexican attacks for a nine-year period; therefore she had the right to attach herself to any sovereign nation she wished. Polk defended his view that the Rio Grande was the legitimate southwestern boundary of Texas and maintained that it was his duty to defend all the territory claimed by the Texans once annexation had been consummated. The President censured Mexico for refusing to negotiate the boundary issue and rejecting a representative sent in good faith by the United States. Finally, President Polk declared that Mexican troops had entered what had become United States property and had "shed American

blood on American soil."⁹ Thus, Polk accused Mexico of willful aggression and of initiating the hostilities which led to the Mexican War.

Polk, as leader of his party, was solidly supported in his views by loyal Democrats. One of the defenders of the President and his administration was the Democratic Review, the official party journal. Edited by Thomas Prentice Kettell, the Review naturally exonerated Polk from any unethical or unstatesmanlike motives. In an 1847 article it stated, "No nation on earth would have so long refrained from exacting justice from Mexico."¹⁰ The article attributed all responsibility for the war to Mexico, declaring that Texas was an independent republic, recognized as such by the leading powers of Europe as well as the United States, with a perfect right to attach herself to another nation.¹¹ In 1848, the same journal attacked the actions of the Mexican government concerning Texas. It maintained that the United States could have and, indeed, should have declared war on Mexico much sooner than she did.¹² The journal cited Mexico's inability to regulate the settlement of Texas by Americans as evidence that she never had effective control of her northern province.¹³

⁹James D. Richardson, comp., Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 10 vols. (Washington, 1909), IV, 442-443.

¹⁰"The Mexican War: Its Origins and Conduct," Democratic Review, XX (April, 1847), 291. Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1957), I, 145-151.

¹¹"The Mexican War," Democratic Review, XX, 292.

¹²"The Mexican War: Its Origin, Its Justice and Its Consequences," Democratic Review, XXII (January, 1848), 6.

¹³Ibid., 3.

Another journal that supported the Democratic administration was the Southern Quarterly Review edited from 1849 to 1855 by William Gilmore Simms, the South Carolina author and advocate of slavery. An article in the April, 1849, issue presented a scathing attack on the people of Mexico, describing them as "a mongrel race of Spaniards and Indians."¹⁴ The journal vindicated the government's Texas policy by upholding Texas' independence, thus making annexation strictly legal and proper. Mexico was charged with responsibility for the war because she failed to admit the obvious fact that Texas was free, and she actively promoted anti-American feelings while the United States always tried to soothe public opinion.¹⁵ In an article in 1850, Major Marcus Claudius Marcellus Hammond asserted that Mexico condemned herself by offering to recognize the Texas republic on the condition that Texas would remain independent. According to Hammond, this offer proved that Texas was in reality a free nation.¹⁶ The authority of Texas to join any nation, said Hammond, was never questioned by any country other than Mexico. Some European nations were not pleased with her decision to become an American state, but there was no doubt about her legal right to do so.

In the Senate one of the President's staunch supporters was General Sam Houston of Texas. He declared in 1846 that Mexico by its own action

¹⁴"Origins of the War with Mexico," Southern Quarterly Review, XV (April, 1849), 89; Mott, History of American Magazines, I, 721-727.

¹⁵"Origins of the War with Mexico," Southern Quarterly Review, XV, 101.

¹⁶Major Marcus C. M. Hammond, "Battles of the Rio Grande," Southern Quarterly Review, XVII (November, 1850), 431.

extended the war with Texas to include the United States. He charged Mexico with acts of violence on American soil when her troops crossed the Rio Grande because "the Mexicans knew full well that the river [Rio Grande] had been assumed as the boundary."¹⁷ For that reason, argued the general, Mexico had never established any military encampments in that area, and she realized the land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande Rivers was not in Mexico except on the claim that all Texas was still a Mexican province.

Despite these attempts to justify the war, Polk and the Democrats were viciously denounced by the Whigs and abolitionists. The assault on the administration appeared in different forms. Most common were speeches in Congress and articles in unsympathetic journals such as the American Whig Review, DeBow's Review, and the Massachusetts Quarterly Review. However, the most famous vehicle for popularizing the aggressive slavocracy interpretation was the Biglow Papers by James Russell Lowell. This member of the New England intellectual set, writing during the course of the war, accused Polk of championing the cause of the southern slaveholders in their quest for "bigger pens to cram with slaves."¹⁸ Lowell's use of the New England backwoods dialect was amusing, but his attacks on the administration and the war were nevertheless sharp, exhibiting his extreme abolitionist sympathies.

¹⁷Niles' Weekly Register, LXX (May 23, 1846), 185.

¹⁸James Russell Lowell, The Biglow Papers (Boston, 1890), 48. First printed in 1848.

Ez fer Mexico, 't aint no great glory to lick it,
 But 't would be a darned shame to go pullin' o' triggers
 To extend the aree of abusin' the niggers.¹⁹

Lowell accused the "overreachin', nigger-drivin'" southern states of provoking a war of expansion "so's to lug new slave states in" and dominate the government and the North.²⁰

Congressman J. Roman Dixon of Maryland was unequivocal in his charge that Polk overstepped his authority in the Mexican affair and "usurped the place of the Constitution and the law."²¹ Dixon rejected the President's contention that Mexico started the war because of the annexation of Texas. He admitted Mexico recalled her minister and talked of war, "yet when first applied to, she consented to receive a 'commissioner' to adjust that difficulty by treaty."²² Dixon therefore concluded that there was no war immediately after annexation. He discounted the claims issue as a just cause because Mexico was willing to pay her obligations, although she was unable to do so immediately because of her unfortunate financial situation. According to Dixon, "the true cause is found in the celebrated order of January 13, 1846, by which the President directed the army to march to the Rio Grande."²³

¹⁹Ibid., 80.

²⁰Ibid., 45-46.

²¹J. Roman Dixon, Speech of Mr. J. Roman Dixon, of Maryland, on the Mexican War (Washington, 1848), 3.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 5.

Another Whig representative, James Van Dyke of New Jersey, declared in Congress that in the Mexican affair ". . . the administration of my own country has been in the wrong."²⁴ He attacked the administration just as Dixon had, but for different reasons. Van Dyke maintained that the United States government had precipitated war with Mexico by annexing Texas. "But for this," he asserted, "we certainly should have had no war; and this act, it is equally certain, was done by us. We, then were guilty of the first offensive act towards Mexico, from which all the others in this horrid tragedy of bloodshed, death, and desolation, have naturally and regularly flowed."²⁵ Van Dyke reasoned that since the United States annexed Texas while she was at war with Mexico, then the United States was at war with Mexico when annexation was completed. He blamed Polk for allowing annexation without Mexico's consent and indeed in defiance of her warnings. In addition, the congressman avowed that if annexation were legal, the Nueces River was the true boundary of Texas according to all maps "on which a hand can be laid."²⁶

A speech by Congressman Garrett Davis of Kentucky in 1846 also illustrated the vituperative nature of the Whig attacks on Polk following the outbreak of the war. "It is our own president who began this war," proclaimed Davis.²⁷ According to the Kentuckian, the President conducted

²⁴James Van Dyke, Speech of Mr. J. Van Dyke of New Jersey on the Causes, Management, Objects, and Advantages of the War with Mexico (Washington, 1848), 2.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 3.

²⁷Niles' Weekly Register, LXX (May 16, 1846), 164.

a series of acts by which he arrogated the war-making power of Congress. Once war had begun, so Davis maintained, the President's friends in Congress were obligated to charge Mexico with responsibility for the war in order to excuse the loss of American lives caused by Polk's "mistakes and incompetency."²⁸ Speeches making such charges were common during and immediately following the war.

Among the first journal articles dealing with the Mexican War and its causes was one by Joel R. Poinsett, the former South Carolina congressman and secretary of war, who had been minister to Mexico under Presidents John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson from 1825 to 1830. His article in Debow's Review, written less than three months after actual hostilities had begun, claimed that Mexico had been fully prepared to abandon her claim to Texas and to discuss the boundary question. The Mexican people, as well as the government, however, were firmly against compromising their national honor in any way. Therefore, they regarded the presence of American troops in the disputed territory of Texas as an invasion of their soil. Poinsett asserted that the Mexicans entered a hopeless contest rather than suffer an insult to their Republic.²⁹ He praised the Mexican people for their "noble and chivalrous" attitude toward the honor of their country.³⁰ In the writer's opinion, the United States forced the hostile situation by encroaching upon disputed

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Joel R. Poinsett, "The Mexican War," Debow's Review, II (July, 1846), 21; Who Was Who in America, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1963), Historical volume, 424.

³⁰Poinsett, "The Mexican War," Debow's Review, II, 424.

territory and impatiently pressuring the Mexican government in diplomatic relations.³¹

Theodore Parker, the New England anti-slavery theologian, was much harsher in his judgment of those who provoked and those who permitted the Mexican War. Writing in the December, 1848, issue of the Massachusetts Quarterly Review, he blamed "the machinations of the great southern politicians, the tameness, the servility or the stupidity of many of the northern members of Congress" for the annexation of Texas and the subsequent war.³² Parker implied that the United States was taking advantage of a weaker country and would never have attempted such a course of action with a strong, established nation. He took issue with President Polk's reasons for accepting the Rio Grande as the true boundary of Texas by pointing out that the 1845 annexation act provided for a later adjustment of the border.³³ He also questioned the United States' right to occupy the disputed area while trying to negotiate for a settlement. Mexico should have had the same right to enter the territory, he argued, but the war started when Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande, the extreme western edge of the American claim. Parker attacked Polk for failing to send Slidell to Mexico as a special commissioner as agreed by Mexico. He endeavored to prove that it was well known a war would follow annexation

³¹Ibid.

³²Theodore Parker, "The Mexican War," Massachusetts Quarterly Review, I (December, 1847), 16; Mott, A History of American Magazines, I, 775-779.

³³Parker, "The Mexican War," Massachusetts Quarterly Review, I, 23.

and that there was a concerted scheme to saddle Mexico with the responsibility by maneuvering her into starting the hostilities.³⁴ In summing up his arguments, he attributed the Mexican War to the lust of the slaveowners for more slave territory to improve their political advantage and protect the value of their slave property.³⁵

Albert Gallatin, the venerable statesman in the twilight of a long career in public service, published a pamphlet in 1847 called Peace with Mexico. In it he upheld the Mexican position that the annexation of Texas was actually a clear declaration of war because Mexico and Texas were officially at war. He denounced the American assertion that the delinquent indemnity claims against Mexico were a sufficient cause of the declaration of war.³⁶ Gallatin believed that the United States resorted to annexation after twice defeating similar proposals because of the fear that Texas might align herself with some foreign power. Regarding annexation, he said, "It was a most clear act of unprovoked aggression; a deep and most offensive injury."³⁷ Gallatin condemned the administration for deliberately forcing Mexico into war. He claimed that if it had been France or Great Britain involved rather than weak and chaotic Mexico, the policy of the United States would have been decidedly different.³⁸

³⁴Ibid., 24.

³⁵Ibid., 53.

³⁶Albert Gallatin, Peace with Mexico (New York, 1847), 3; David S. Muzzey, "Albert Gallatin," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, (eds.), Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1928-1936), VII, 103-109.

³⁷Gallatin, Peace with Mexico, 11.

³⁸Ibid.

An obviously partisan article by a Massachusetts congressman and diplomat, D. D. Barnard, was published in the American Whig Review in May, 1848. This particular journal, of course, was the official Whig organ and sought to attack the position of Polk and the Democrats. Barnard condemned Polk for assuming the power to annex Texas and causing the subsequent war with Mexico.³⁹ According to the author, the war sprang directly from annexation. The article was an impassioned plea to the people for a repudiation of the Democratic Party in the approaching election. In the pages of the Congressional Globe and in numerous additional publications, other Whig partisans in analyzing the causes of the Mexican War depicted Polk as an irresponsible and devious executive who involved the United States in a war so he might satisfy his party's craving for fresh slave land.

Although prompted by political partisanship and influenced to a considerable degree by the growing slavery controversy, the discussion by contemporaries concerning the causes of the Mexican War has made a lasting impact upon the historiography of that subject. Some writers, particularly twentieth-century scholars who have had access to the eleventh President's diary, have accepted with modifications Polk's own explanation of the causes of the war. But during the half century following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, most American historians accepted the Whig or abolitionist interpretation of the origins of the war. William Jay's pioneer study written in 1849, in which the slave conspiracy theory was fully

³⁹D. D. Barnard, "The President and His Administration," American Whig Review, VII (May, 1848), 439; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 41.

developed, set the tone for the major historical works about the Mexican War written during the remainder of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER III

UNITED STATES HISTORIANS AND THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR, 1849 - 1910

The controversy surrounding the causes of the Mexican War dominated the serious historical studies of the war during the remainder of the nineteenth century just as it had influenced contemporary opinions. Until the 1890's President Polk's private diary was not available to historians; indeed few writers used it until after its publication in 1910.⁴⁰ Therefore, nineteenth-century historians who wrote about the Mexican War did not have access to this important day-by-day account of the Polk administration written by the President himself. In spite of this deficiency or because of it, they built a strong case condemning the policy of the United States government in the Mexican dispute. Of course, there were some publications which attempted to vindicate the United States but the prevailing trend was to label Polk an aggressive expansionist and to deplore the Mexican War as a struggle initiated by a strong nation to wrest valuable territory from a weak neighbor. Slavery provided the impetus for the American policy according to most historians, and the annexation of Texas, allegedly the product of the slaveholding lobby, led directly to the war.

Several full-length books on the Mexican War supported this so-called Whig interpretation of the government's policy. One that notably

⁴⁰Milo Milton Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1910), I, iv.

influenced later historians was William Jay's A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War, published in 1849. The author, a jurist and the son of John Jay, was a strong advocate of the abolition of slavery and had been one of the founders of the New York Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. His volume, the classic statement of the conspiracy thesis, greatly emphasized the influence of slavery and the aggressiveness of American expansionists. Jay claimed that although the United States had carefully professed responsibility for upholding the neutrality laws on her books, the Jackson administration willingly and openly violated her responsibility by aiding Texas in the 1835 revolt against Mexico.⁴¹ He condemned the United States government for overlooking the desertion of her soldiers to enlist in the fight for Texas independence. Although the administration assured Texas of independence, the southern states received no political advantage; so actual annexation became their ultimate aim. According to Jay, Polk and his administration realized that war would certainly follow annexation and that Congress would not accept war unless Mexico could be tricked into opening hostilities.⁴² To accomplish this desired result, Polk sent American troops to Texas under the pretext of protecting her soil from hostile Indians and refused to comply with Mexican demands to remove them. As a result of annexation, the Mexican minister had left Washington, a move which, in Jay's words, "was a great point gained by the administration . . .

⁴¹William Jay, A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War (Boston, 1849), 19-20; Who Was Who in America, Historical volume (Chicago, 1963), 251.

⁴²Jay, Review of the Mexican War, 31.

[and] if properly managed, might result in war."⁴³ Jay argued that the claims of American individuals against the Mexican government were improper for international discussion because the United States government was not directly involved, nor were any of the claims against the government of Mexico itself. In addition, Jay asserted that the claims were not legitimate causes for war because of their extreme pettiness and doubtful authenticity.⁴⁴ The author minimized the effects of party politics in the agitation for annexation and stressed sectional divisions. Jay conceded that Polk wanted part of Mexico's territory peacefully if possible, but when the President realized war was the only hope, he employed devious and ruthless methods to force Mexico into war. Jay's interpretation which aligned the southern slaveholders with the Polk administration in a conspiracy for war was later reflected in other major histories of the period.

Abiel Abbot Livermore, writing in 1850, in The War with Mexico concurred with Jay on virtually all points, although his condemnation of the attitude and policy of the United States was even more vehement. Livermore's work was written as a sweeping denunciation of all wars, but he particularly deplored the lust for land and ambition for power of the American nation in the 1840's. The author, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and an ordained Unitarian minister in New Hampshire, used the Mexican War as a point of departure in his efforts to exhibit the "incalculable evils" of war.⁴⁵ Livermore mentioned many possible causes for

⁴³Ibid., 33.

⁴⁴Ibid., 40.

⁴⁵Abiel A. Livermore, The War with Mexico Reviewed (Boston, 1850), 3; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 317.

the war including such underlying factors as the American heritage of frequent wars, the pride of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the general passion for more land shared by so many Americans.

Livermore felt the Mexican War resulted in part from the peaceful settlement of the Oregon question, which channeled the war spirit of the day toward the difficulties with Mexico. Other factors, declared the author, were Polk's desire to start his administration with an outstanding achievement, the clamor of the dissatisfied American citizens holding indemnity claims against the Mexican government, and the fear of possible European interference in the western hemisphere.⁴⁶ But, asserted Livermore, "the mainspring to the war with Mexico," was undoubtedly slavery. The southern slaveholders coveted Mexico's vast land resources and set out to provoke a war so that they might extend the peculiar institution farther west.⁴⁷ After discussing the true causes as he discerned them, the author assailed the "windy pretences" by which the administration justified its policy.⁴⁸ The value of Livermore's volume lies not in historical insight nor quality of research but in its aid to understanding the different views of the war as seen by nineteenth-century observers. Another attribute which adds to its value and uniqueness is the lack of political overtones and personality assaults characteristic of works of the period.

⁴⁶Livermore, War with Mexico, 4-12.

⁴⁷Ibid., 14.

⁴⁸Ibid., 32.

In 1851, Edward Deering Mansfield wrote a history of the origins of the Mexican War. Mansfield graduated from West Point and the College of New Jersey, now Princeton; and after two years of study at Litchfield Law School, he was admitted to the Connecticut Bar in 1825. Most of his career was spent as a newspaper editor in Ohio, but he also taught constitutional law and history at Cincinnati College and produced several books on varied subjects. Such credentials give his volume authority although his view was influenced somewhat by his military education and his actual participation in the war. Very much in agreement with Jay and Livermore in his harsh criticism of Polk and the Democrats, Mansfield formulated a well-organized and logical presentation of his thesis. Citing Lord Aberdeen's declaration that Great Britain would not interfere in the Texas situation, he questioned the administration's basis for using fear of British interference as a justification for annexation.⁴⁹ The author noted that the joint resolution for annexation made provision for boundary adjustment with other countries, thus admitting doubt as to the legal boundary of Texas. Mansfield castigated Polk for failing to ask Congress for advice or for appropriations to prepare for war. The President's failure to notify Congress of troop movements was attributed to his reluctance to enumerate the reasons behind his military measures.⁵⁰ The author blamed Slidell's personality and his questionable credentials for allowing the war-hungry

⁴⁹Edward Deering Mansfield, The Mexican War: A History of its Origin (New York, 1851), 17-18; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 389.

⁵⁰Mansfield, Mexican War, 21.

Mariano Paredes to seize control of Mexico. But the real culprit, in Mansfield's opinion, was Polk who provoked the Mexicans by sending troops into the disputed area between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers.⁵¹ As a military man, the author could not in any way condone the President's failure to secure from Congress the necessary means to prosecute the war. He was perplexed by Polk's lack of concern for the essential physical necessities for waging war, even against a country so weak and helpless as Mexico. In Mansfield's opinion Polk's shortcomings as a military leader overshadowed all of his actions as president.

John S. Jenkins, also a lawyer and editor, published in 1850 his History of the War between the United States and Mexico. As the first complete history of the war, Jenkins' study dealt almost exclusively with the military aspect of the Mexican War, for he limited his discussion of the causes to a small part of the first chapter. The author was a Democrat from New York who rejected the Whig assertions that the desire for territorial expansion was a war aim. Believing that the annexation of Texas was the original, driving factor that caused the war, he exonerated the United States from any guilt on the ground that Texas had proven herself to be an independent nation.⁵² Taylor's advance, according to Jenkins, was the immediate cause of hostilities, but it was the only way for the United States to assert her title to the disputed area so long as Mexico refused to receive a minister.

⁵¹Ibid., 29-30.

⁵²John S. Jenkins, History of the War between the United States and Mexico (Auburn, New York, 1850), 41; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 271.

Brantz Mayer, a widely-travelled Baltimore lawyer who had served as a member of the United States legation to Mexico during the Tyler administration, presented a surprising interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War in his three-volume history of Mexico, published in 1849. Mayer condemned as ridiculous the Mexican claim of sovereignty over Texas after the rebellious province had maintained her autonomy for nine years and had been recognized by most European nations.⁵³ Ignoring the situation existing in the United States, he excluded all discussions of slavery, Polk, and American politics; and asserted that the militant policy of General Paredes aroused the people of Mexico to a frenzy of anti-Americanism.⁵⁴ Mayer was exceedingly sympathetic toward the American policy preceding the war. He believed that the United States government was "sincerely anxious to preserve peace, or at least willing to try every effort to soothe the irritated Mexicans and keep the discussion in the cabinet rather than transfer it to the battlefield."⁵⁵ Mayer's view of the causes of the Mexican War, however, made little impact upon subsequent nineteenth-century historians who wrote on the subject.

Another volume published in 1849 was Roswell S. Ripley's factual and useful The War with Mexico. A West Point graduate and career officer from Ohio who served in the Mexican War under General Taylor, Ripley indulged in little interpretation, but his orderly account would be

⁵³Brantz Mayer, Mexico: Aztec, Spanish, and Republican, 3 vols. (Hartford, 1849), III, 332; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 398.

⁵⁴Mayer, Mexico, III, 332.

⁵⁵Ibid., 331.

frequently quoted by later historians. He believed that the confidence of the American people instilled by thirty years of peaceful prosperity made them hungry for excitement and willing to risk any peril in defense of national dignity.⁵⁶ Ripley did not attempt to interpret the controversial background of the Mexican War, but he produced a worthy reference volume on the subject.

In the 1850's as slavery and states' rights became dominant political issues, the Mexican War slid further into the background. Americans no longer were concerned with how they had acquired their new territory. The paramount issue was the status of the slavery in these new areas. The Mexican War was mentioned only in its connection with this more pertinent controversy. For instance, Horace Greeley in his History of the Struggle for Slavery Extension or Restriction published in 1856, professed the opinion that the slavery question attracted little attention during actual Senate debates on annexation of Texas. However, he noted that because of slavery, the annexation movement had gained much ardent support in the Southwest.⁵⁷ Shortly before the Civil War an unsigned article in Debow's Review on "The Territorial Status of the North and the South" reaffirmed the theory that Tyler and Polk were expansionists for slavery, and forced Mexico into an unpopular and dishonorable conflict.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Roswell S. Ripley, The War with Mexico (New York, 1849), 52-53; Who Was Who, Historical volume, 874.

⁵⁷Horace Greeley, The History of the Struggle for Slavery Extension or Restriction (New York, 1856), 32.

⁵⁸Debow's Review, XXVII (September, 1859), 247-248.

The next period which produced significant interpretations of the Mexican War was the decade of the 1880's. The German historian Hermann Eduard von Holst began publication of his multivolume Constitutional and Political History of the United States. Volume three, published in 1881, included a discussion of the causes and events of the Mexican War. The author explained Mexico's difficult position in the Texas affair. It was difficult for her to acknowledge that a handful of Texans had successfully rebelled, but even more difficult "to allow the United States, a country even more hated than feared, to carry off the booty."⁵⁹ Von Holst implied that many Americans looked forward to war with defenseless Mexico as an opportunity for adventure, heroism, and personal gain. However, the consensus of Americans, estimated von Holst, was that Mexico would do nothing more than make verbal protestations.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Mexico actually tried to tear Texas from the United States even though in nine years she had been unable to subdue the newborn republic itself.

The German historian's opinion of President Polk's policy during this period was less than favorable. He censured Polk for occupying parts of Texas on the feeble authority of an act by the Texas Congress of 1836 and for continuing his aggressive policy even though he knew his justification was baseless.⁶¹ In support of his contention that Polk coveted Mexican territory, von Holst cited his order to Taylor for the invasion

⁵⁹Hermann Eduard von Holst, The Political and Constitutional History of the United States, 8 vols. (Chicago, 1881-1892), 67.

⁶⁰Ibid., 81.

⁶¹Ibid., 89.

of Mexico if hostilities occurred. If Polk had not planned to invade Mexico, von Holst argued, there would certainly have been no need for an American army to protect Texas because the Texans were obviously capable of repelling Mexican attacks. Therefore, von Holst reiterated the basic tenets of the conspiracy theory as formulated by Jay and others in the years immediately following the Mexican War.

Beyond doubt, the most vicious and intransigent anti-American interpretation of responsibility for the Mexican War was by Hubert Howe Bancroft. This famous historian started out as a bookstore proprietor in Buffalo, New York in 1848, managed a business in San Francisco in 1856, and began collecting a library on western Americana which he donated to the University of California in 1905. Six volumes on the history of Mexico, published from 1883 to 1888, are attributed to Bancroft although he employed a huge staff including several able historians who did much of the writing for him. In volume five of the History of Mexico, Bancroft pronounced the United States a perpetrator of a "deliberately calculated scheme of robbery" which humiliated and further impoverished the Republic of Mexico.⁶² The author claimed that the United States exhausted all legal means in trying to satisfy the slaveholding interests of the South and then resorted to aggressive and coercive methods. Bancroft dismissed the delinquent debt claims as fraudulent as well as an improper matter for international discussion just as Jay had done in 1849.⁶³

⁶²Hubert H. Bancroft, History of Mexico, 6 vols. (San Francisco, 1883-1888), V, 307; Who Was Who, I, 53.

⁶³Bancroft, Mexico, V, 309-310.

Bancroft accused Polk and his administration of deliberately causing all attempts at negotiation to fail because of their unacknowledged desire to secure California for the Union and extend the area available for slavery.⁶⁴ Obviously sympathetic toward the Mexican position, the author refused to accept any justification for American policy. Thus, he formulated the most extreme and one-sided "conspiracy" interpretation.

The History of the United States under the Constitution by James Schouler was an outstanding general history which strongly influenced later studies of the Mexican War. Schouler, a Republican lawyer from Massachusetts who wrote history as a hobby, observed the causes of the Mexican War from a strong pro-Whig point of view. A Union veteran, he blamed the southern slaveholders for the war with Mexico as well as the Civil War. Schouler believed that under no circumstances would Great Britain have dared risk a war over Texas; therefore he maintained that the annexationists used this fear merely as a pretext because they could wait no longer, regardless of the certainty of war.⁶⁵ The author took issue with the validity of the term "reannexation" but pointed out that it aroused Americans, because it suggested that they had been robbed or swindled. Schouler also argued that peace could have been preserved if Texas had been the only area involved. He maintained that Polk's ambitious designs toward New Mexico and California led him to keep the boundary negotiations open for possible advancement of American

⁶⁴Ibid., 344.

⁶⁵James Schouler, History of the United States of America under the Constitution, 7 vols. (New York, 1881-1892), IV, 482.

demands.⁶⁶ Schouler also assailed the President for his high-handed military maneuvers in Texas without even notifying Congress which was in session at the time.⁶⁷ The interpretation of this author definitely revealed his Whig orientation and background in its condemnation of the Democratic policy and of Polk, its guiding force. However, Schouler exhibited none of the bitterness and vindictiveness seen in Bancroft's writing. He presented his case distinctly and his avowed purpose was to interpret both men and their parties "by the atmosphere of their times."⁶⁸

An interpretation which differed from the prevailing trend was Susan Hale's The Story of Mexico, published in 1889. As Brantz Mayer had done forty years earlier, the author conceded the United States' legal right to annex Texas. Admitting that Mexico deserved to be taught a lesson for her constant internal chaos and belligerent attitude, she felt it was regrettable that the punishment should be administered by a country which ought to have counselled the young republic in its infancy.⁶⁹ She recognized the total independence of Texas in 1845, but questioned the American action according to the basic concepts of honor and international good faith.⁷⁰ The author gave the impression that she wanted to exculpate Mexico in the affair but failed to satisfy herself with the evidence she encountered.

⁶⁶Ibid., 519.

⁶⁷Ibid., 525.

⁶⁸Ibid., iv.

⁶⁹Susan Hale, The Story of Mexico, (New York, 1889), 304.

⁷⁰Ibid., 306.

James Ford Rhodes, the most widely acclaimed historian of his day, set forth his interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War in The History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850. He was from a New England family but had strong Democratic ties. Successful in business, he became financially independent early in life; as a result, he had ample time and means to write history and collect books as hobbies. In spite of his Democratic background, Rhodes' views were similar to those propounded by Schouler. He displayed sympathy for the Whig interpretation that there was an organized conspiracy for the purpose of promoting a war with Mexico for the extension of slavery. He said that due to the violent internal problems of Mexico, the war could have been avoided if the Polk administration had functioned in an honorable manner.⁷¹ Charles Owen, a contemporary of Rhodes, criticized his reliance on the personal opinions of others rather than on substantiated fact. Owen claimed that Rhodes used the analyses of General Ulysses S. Grant, Sir Charles Lyell, and James Russell Lowell, none of whom were as worthy or well-trained as Rhodes himself.⁷² The Mexican War period did not fall within the actual scope of Rhodes' work and his discussion of it was general and sketchy. As a result, he added no new concepts or interpretations but drew upon the work of earlier historians.

In 1897, John W. Burgess wrote a history of the United States

⁷¹James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850, 8 vols. (New York, 1892-1919), I, 87; Dumas Malone, "James Ford Rhodes," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, (eds.), Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1928-1936), XV, 531-533.

⁷²Charles Owen, The Justice of the Mexican War (New York, 1908), 11-14.

dealing with the years 1817 to 1858. Burgess, a scholarly historian born in the South but educated at Amherst, Princeton, and several German universities, was a lawyer and teacher and for several years the dean of Columbia University. In The Middle Period he rejected the conspiracy theory and put most of the responsibility for the war on the policy of Mexico. Burgess avowed that the conflict "was a defensive war at the outset," and if the Mexicans were provoked into crossing the Rio Grande by the United States troops on the Texas bank, "they had only to thank themselves for bringing them there by previously massing their troops on the south bank."⁷³ The author minimized the influence which slavery exerted on the American policy. He assailed the abolitionists for imagining there was a scheme to acquire slave territory. He said their attitude was "too narrow and bigoted" to attract much public support.⁷⁴ Burgess sustained Polk's authority and duty to defend the boundary claimed by Texas at the time of annexation. Burgess particularly noted that John C. Calhoun was in opposition to the Mexican War because he feared the extinction of slavery in the old areas if allowed to spread to the southwest.⁷⁵ Burgess readily supported the administration in its policies and motives.

Julius W. Pratt in his Expansionists of 1898 pointed out that Burgess revealed certain convictions in the 1890's, which would influence his

⁷³John W. Burgess, The Middle Period 1817-1858 (New York, 1897), 331; Who Was Who, I, 167.

⁷⁴Burgess, Middle Period, 331.

⁷⁵Ibid., 330.

judgments of imperialism of any era.⁷⁶ In his three-volume work Political Science and Constitutional Law, Burgess declared that the Teutonic peoples were destined to rule the world because of their superior political ability. According to Burgess, the Teutonic nations were "called to carry the political civilization of the modern world into those parts of the world inhabited by unpolitical and barbaric races; i. e., they must have a colonial policy."⁷⁷ As Pratt illustrated, Burgess' belief in the superiority of the Teutonic races resulted in a sweeping justification of the imperialism of his day. Although Burgess did not exhibit these beliefs in The Middle Period, they perhaps had some influence on his interpretation regarding the actions of the United States government toward Mexico in the 1840's.

E. W. Sikes and William M. Keener combined talents in 1905 to produce The Growth of the Nation, volume eight of The History of North America series, which dealt with United States history from 1837 to 1860. The authors flatly stated that the admission of Texas as a state in the Union directly caused the Mexican War.⁷⁸ Sikes and Keener discussed at length the merits of the Slidell mission. They said that the minister traveled to Mexico in quite a different capacity from that which the Mexican government had specified. Mexico was not prepared to recognize a normal minister because it would imply a resumption of ordinary

⁷⁶Julius W. Pratt, Expansionists of 1898 (New York, 1951), 7-10.

⁷⁷John W. Burgess, Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law, 3 vols. (Boston, 1893), I, 45.

⁷⁸E. W. Sikes and William M. Keener, The Growth of the Nation (Philadelphia, 1905), 155.

diplomatic relations. The misunderstanding was caused by Polk's extremely broad interpretation of Mexico's message. Also lessening the chances for successful negotiation, said the authors, was Slidell's arrival in Mexico before he was expected.⁷⁹ The Mexican authorities had not anticipated American action until after the next United States Congress had convened, which would have allowed them additional time to soothe the aroused feelings of the people and to build more solid support for the existing regime. According to Sikes and Keener, the pressure put on the Mexican government by Polk and Slidell caused the peaceful ministry of Herrera to be overthrown by Paredes, ending all hope of a peaceful settlement.⁸⁰ The authors condemned President Polk for his impatience, which caused the explosive situation to erupt in war.

An outstanding study called The Justice of the Mexican War by Charles H. Owen was published in 1908. Although the manuscript of Polk's diary was available at this time, there was no indication that Owen had access to that valuable source. This work was commendable for its open-minded approach to the often prejudged subject of the Mexican War. Owen claimed to have no political prejudices which would influence his interpretation; however he professed in his introduction a definite and pronounced patriotic loyalty to the United States. Owen felt that it should be the "very dear wish of the historian to make apparent, if true, the right of the American citizen to say to his boy: 'Your country never fought an unjust nor an inglorious war.'" ⁸¹ The author, educated at Yale and Harvard, was a practicing lawyer, a former employee of the "underground railroad," the

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Owen, Justice of the Mexican War, 8-9.

son of a Free-Soiler, and a supporter of Lincoln and Grant.⁸² His background also included a lengthy tour of duty in the Union army, which was perhaps reflected in his statement that "Only when anything said against him [Uncle Sam] is proved, can it be received in silence -- and with sadness."⁸³

Owen avoided a black-and-white comparison of the two countries' actions, but his overall analysis vindicated the treatment of Mexico by the United States. The causes of the Mexican War were, in Owen's words, "numerous and interlaced, interdependent, and yet contradictory of each other."⁸⁴ The author cautioned against accepting the verdict of earlier historians who labeled slavery as the basic cause of the 1846 hostilities. He admitted the presence of a large slaveholding interest working earnestly for the protection and extension of slavery, but he pointed out that these groups were attempting to control existing conditions; they were not creating the conditions.⁸⁵ Owen also maintained that there was some sympathy for expansion from the "gradual emancipationists" of the South who sought to eradicate slavery by dilution rather than by constriction, as favored by the "free soilers."⁸⁶

Owen also investigated additional points which had been offered as causes of the war. He recognized the limited influence exerted by the land speculation lobby headed by the New York and Rio Grande land companies. The author said that these lobbyists were neither wealthy nor

⁸²Ibid., 17-19.

⁸³Ibid., 19.

⁸⁴Ibid., 143.

⁸⁵Ibid., 143-144.

⁸⁶Ibid., 146.

especially talented, but they did their part in helping Polk carry the election.⁸⁷ The desirability of controlling the Texas ports was an added enticement for the expansionists, especially those who envisioned a monopoly of the cotton industry by the United States.⁸⁸ Owen discounted the charge of some writers that American people were prepared to encroach on Mexico's rights in the name of "manifest destiny."⁸⁹

According to Owen, very important in America's decision to annex Texas and face a war with Mexico was the fear that Texas might become entangled with Great Britain. He claimed that such an alignment was not just a propaganda device invented by the annexationists, because Great Britain had exhibited imperialistic tendencies in China and the Sandwich Islands, and she had a squadron anchored near Monterey. In addition, Texas was in debt to Great Britain, giving the latter nation appreciable bargaining power.⁹⁰ Owen praised the patience of the United States for twice refusing annexation to avoid a conflict, for extending grace on the payment of delinquent claims, and for overlooking repeated insults to the American flag. However, when faced with the possibility of a British suzerainty on her immediate border, the United States could no longer refrain from action.⁹¹

⁸⁷Ibid., 147-148

⁸⁸Ibid., 151.

⁸⁹Ibid., 148.

⁹⁰Ibid., 239.

⁹¹Ibid., 252-253.

In direct conflict with most historians working without the aid of Polk's diary, Owen upheld the government's action concerning the boundary claims in Texas, the Slidell mission, and the advancement of troops under General Taylor. Although Owen built his argument on the same facts as earlier writers, his logic and insight led him to independent and refreshing conclusions. His interpretation was a harbinger of later Mexican War studies after the publication of the diary. He warned future historians "not to be blinded by the glamour of great names and the opinions of great and noble men," and not to mold the facts of research "into conformity with somebody else's preconceived theory."⁹²

The development of the dominant nineteenth-century interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War was built too often upon the opinions of partisans and inferences which lacked proper evidence. The majority of writers joined in a uniform denunciation of the war and America's part in it. Many writers allowed their personal or political involvements to affect their better judgment, robbing their work of considerable value. Most historians were sympathetic to the general Whig philosophy of politics and economics; therefore, they could never be completely fair in their judgment of Polk and the Democratic administration. These authors were too close to the event to enjoy an objective view of the circumstances. The majority of them were born before the Mexican War, and they, or their families, had been affected by it. William Jay and Abiel Livermore were crusaders for the abolition of slavery. Mansfield wrote with obvious affection for General Taylor and dealt harshly with Polk's military

⁹²Ibid., 276.

competence. Jenkins was a loyal Democrat and Schouler was a loyal Republican. Any writer is influenced by his background, his preconceptions, and the world around him; and these men were certainly not exceptions to the rule. The same would be true of historians of the twentieth century, but they would have the advantage of examining important new sources, particularly Polk's diary. They would also be writing of a period which they did not feel the same sense of personal involvement that most nineteenth-century writers experienced when discussing the causes of the Mexican War.

CHAPTER IV

UNITED STATES HISTORIANS AND THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR, 1910 - 1965

A milestone in the historiography of the Mexican War was the release and subsequent publication of James K. Polk's diary shortly after the opening of the twentieth century.⁹³ Even before this remarkable day-by-day account of the Polk administration was acquired by the Chicago Historical Society in 1901, a few historians had examined a typewritten copy of the eleventh President's diary, which had been in the possession of George Bancroft, last surviving member of the Polk cabinet, until his death in 1891. It was subsequently placed in New York City's Lenox Library. One of the first historians to study this copy was James Schouler who used it as the subject for an article in the Atlantic Monthly in August, 1895, just six years after he had written the volume in his History of the United States in which he had condemned Polk for his diplomacy preceding the war with Mexico.⁹⁴ After his investigation of the diary, Schouler failed to alter his earlier expressed opinion of the actions and motives of the Polk administration, but he did revise his former judgment of the President himself. In spite of Polk's official course, wrote Schouler, "one cannot read this Diary carefully without an

⁹³Milo Milton Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1910).

⁹⁴James Schouler, "Polk's Diary," Atlantic Monthly, LXXVI (August, 1895), 235-243.

increased respect for his simple and sturdy traits of character."⁹⁵ In spite of his more favorable view of the President as a man, Schouler still maintained that what "he could not obtain by fair means [he] set himself to acquiring by foul."⁹⁶ He described Polk as "one of those to whom the end justifies the means," and regretted that the President "could see nothing wrong in his despicable treatment of Mexico in the crime he perpetrated against liberty and the sacred rights of property."⁹⁷ Another historian who used the Bancroft copy of Polk's diary was Edward G. Bourne, who studied and taught at Yale for many years. In an article on the "United States and Mexico, 1847-1848," published in the American Historical Review in 1900, Bourne benefited greatly from his perusal of the diary and was impressed by the striking similarity between the expansionism of the 1840's and the imperialism of his own day. Noting that after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the United States had relinquished control of vast areas of Mexican territory and had been contented to acquire only "some undeveloped territory" in New Mexico and California, Bourne doubted that such a policy could have been carried out in his day, when intellectuals as well as politicians stressed the responsibility of the United States to retain control over the Philippines. "That a policy so alien to our present ideas should have prevailed only a half-century ago," he said, "invites some explanation in addition to the obvious one that expansion and the extension of human slavery were bound together,"⁹⁸

⁹⁵Ibid., 236.

⁹⁶Ibid., 373.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Edward G. Bourne, "The United States and Mexico, 1847-1848," American Historical Review, V (April, 1900), 491-492.

As a consequence of the growing opposition to slavery, Bourne wrote, "the idealist element which to-day leads the movement for expansion under the banner of political altruism shrank back fifty years ago from having anything to do with it."⁹⁹ Bourne maintained that although many Americans connected slavery with expansion, the two concepts were definitely not so closely entwined. Polk was no agent of expansion for the slavery interests of the South; he was an expansionist for the cause itself. Bourne declared that Polk wanted expansion peacefully, and therefore did not provoke war, but when it came, he welcomed it.

Sometime after the Polk family gave the original manuscript of the diary to the Chicago Historical Society in 1901, the task of editing it for publication was begun by Charles W. Mann. Unfortunately, Mann died when he had finished only one third of the work. A fellow professor at the Lewis Institute of Technology, Milo Milton Quaife, completed the task which Mann had begun. When the diary was published in 1910, Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin of the University of Chicago predicted that "these printed pages will bring in a new and juster estimate of Polk himself and a fairer view of the four years which, judged by results, are second in importance to few periods in our history."¹⁰⁰ The accessibility of the diary indeed caused many historians to question the established Whig interpretation so critical of the motives and actions of the Polk administration, but twentieth-century scholars who wrote about the causes of the Mexican War were no nearer unanimity of opinion than were those who

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Quaife (ed.), The Diary of James K. Polk, I, xiv.

had preceded them in writing about that controversial subject.

Two historians who used the Polk diary after it was acquired by the Chicago Historical Society but before its publication were George Pierce Garrison and Jesse S. Reeves. Garrison, a University of Texas professor born in Georgia and educated at the University of Chicago, discussed in 1906 several phases of the Mexican War in his Westward Extension: 1841-1850, one of the volumes of the American Nation series.¹⁰¹ Garrison devoted several pages to his analysis of President Polk and his role in the Mexican War. He had a sympathetic understanding of Polk's weaknesses and claimed that an examination of the eleventh President's diary revealed the inappropriateness of Alexander H. Stephens' characterization of him as "Polk the mendacious." "Polk seems, indeed," Garrison wrote, "to have had that cast of mind in which political dogma finds too easy lodgment, and from which it receives the fiercest and most uncompromising support; but there can be no doubt of his sincere faith in the righteousness of his own purposes and of the means used to attain them."¹⁰² Although Garrison questioned Polk's reasoning on the boundary issue, he commended the President's stern integrity, the strength of his character, and praised the accomplishments of the administration.¹⁰³

Garrison furthermore discounted the old Whig thesis which depicted a conspiracy by southern slaveholders to acquire more land for their

¹⁰¹Who Was Who in America, 4 vols., (Chicago, 1943-1963), I, 442.

¹⁰²George Pierce Garrison, Westward Extension: 1841-50 (New York, 1906), 207.

¹⁰³Ibid.

plantations. "No theory of conspiracy is needed to explain the war with Mexico," he said. "While it was strongly opposed and condemned by a bold and outspoken minority, the votes in Congress and the utterances of the contemporaneous journals show that it was essentially a popular movement, both in Mexico and in the United States."¹⁰⁴ As the true causes of the war Garrison listed the American claims on the Mexican government, the aid given by United States citizens to the Texas revolutionaries, the encroachment into Mexican territory by General Zachary Taylor's troops, and the annexation of Texas.¹⁰⁵

Although Jesse S. Reeves, a professor of political science at Dartmouth College, also had access to Polk's diary, he reached conclusions vastly different from Garrison in his American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk, published in 1907. He rejected the contention that the annexation of Texas led to the Mexican War. According to Reeves, the war was waged for the purpose of conquest only and "with Polk belongs the glory, if glory it be, of the Mexican War and of the conquest of California."¹⁰⁶ Reeves, who emphasized the importance of the William S. Parrott mission and the instructions given to John Slidell, argued that the annexation of Texas was only an isolated event used by Polk to provoke Mexico to start a war. "It is commonly said that the Mexican War was the result of annexation," averred Reeves, "but the two were separate episodes which had no necessary connection." Reeves dealt harshly with

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 201.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁶Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore, 1907), 189.

Polk, blaming his ulterior designs on Mexico for causing the war.¹⁰⁷

Many historians who wrote about the causes of the Mexican War during the second decade of the twentieth century were influenced consciously or unconsciously by the troubled nature of United States-Mexican relations during that period. Some writers, noting the demands for intervention by the United States to protect American investments in Mexico following the overthrow of the Porfirio Diaz regime in 1911, thought that there were ominous parallels between the events which preceded the Mexican War and the developments of their own time. "Our very critical relations with Mexico at the present time," William E. Dodd of the University of Chicago wrote in 1912, "may lend some interest and timeliness to a study of the West and the War with Mexico." In an article devoted to that topic, he warned the leaders of the nation not to be led into the trap of imperialism into which earlier American statesmen had fallen. "Thoughtful men everywhere feel," he said, "that the next four years may bring upon us a repetition of the imperialism of 1898 or even of 1848."¹⁰⁸ Dodd feared that "the present conflicts in the republic to the south of us may give an American president the opportunity to avoid pressing difficulties at home by involving the country in a policy of aggrandizement abroad."¹⁰⁹ Although himself a staunch Democrat, Dodd criticized Polk for his "simple-minded loyalty to party pledges" in spite of the danger with Great Britain

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸William E. Dodd, "The West and the War with Mexico," Journal of Illinois State Historical Society, V (July, 1912), 159.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

and Mexico.¹¹⁰ He also accused Polk of maneuvering purposely to provoke Mexico to an attack so that he could ask Congress for a declaration of war. Dodd hoped that contemporary American politicians would not repeat the mistakes that Polk had made. "We are in the midst of most pressing internal difficulties," he maintained, "and public men of today, who cannot control the economic forces around them or grapple with imperious tariff problems, are but human, and they are not above following in the footsteps of Polk or McKinley."¹¹¹

While sharply critical of Polk for his handling of diplomatic relations with Mexico, Dodd, himself a native Southerner, did not consider the eleventh President as an agent of the slaveholding South in bringing about the Mexican War. Obviously influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's views on the importance of the frontier in shaping American history, Dodd maintained that the West, not the South, was the region which most enthusiastically supported the hostilities against Mexico.

Several other historians, including George Lockhart Rives, Louis Martin Sears, and Robert M. McElroy wrote studies concerning the Mexican War during the period of strained United States-Mexican relations during the Wilson era. Rives, a New York Jeffersonian Democrat educated at Columbia University, revealed in his account of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico a genuine sympathy for the Mexican people but still refrained from an indictment of Polk. Rives, who served as Assistant Secretary of State in charge of Latin American affairs during

¹¹⁰Ibid., 161.

¹¹¹Ibid., 159.

the first Grover Cleveland administration, declared that Polk advanced troops to the Rio Grande only for the purpose of expressing the determination of the United States to defend the area.¹¹² Rives pointed out that there was "no direct contemporaneous evidence" that the administration was secretly attempting to provoke war. "All the public utterances of the party in power," he said, "were in favor of peace."¹¹³ Rives gave this appraisal of Polk as an executive:

The President himself was a man without wide culture or knowledge, wholly devoid of imagination, untravelled, unacquainted with either Spanish or Mexican character, and with little experience in the conduct of foreign affairs. To a strong intelligence he added a dogged strength of will, such as few of his contemporaries possessed; and with all the obstinacy and persistence of his nature he desired to acquire California. But he then hoped, and probably believed, that it might be got by negotiation.¹¹⁴

Rives suggested that the major cause of the war was the lack of understanding and communication between the Latin and Anglo-American cultures. He felt that if the problems could have been calmly discussed and evaluated there would have been a peaceful settlement.

Based largely upon his examination of Polk's diary, Robert M. McElroy revised in 1914 the Whig interpretation of "Young Hickory." The author, a Princeton scholar who also studied at the universities of Leipzig, Berlin, and Oxford, approved of the President's policies and asserted that Polk wanted peace if it could be kept without sacrificing "our just

¹¹²George Lockhart Rives, "Mexican Diplomacy on the Eve of the War with the United States," American Historical Review, XVIII (December, 1913), 119; Who Was Who, I, 1038.

¹¹³Rives, "Mexican Diplomacy," American Historical Review, XVIII, 130.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

demands" or endangering the Monroe Doctrine.¹¹⁵ In Polk's eyes, these "just demands" were all of Texas to the Rio Grande and payment in some form of the claims. McElroy defended Polk's actions in attempting to reopen relations with Mexico through William S. Parrott and John Slidell. Mexico violated her promise to receive a minister, charged McElroy; therefore Polk had no choice but to ask Congress for a declaration of war.¹¹⁶

Louis Martin Sears, writing in 1913, produced an article on the Slidell mission in which he acquitted Polk of any malicious desire for war. Although the paper was done at the University of Chicago under the direction of William E. Dodd, the conclusions Sears reached were drastically different from those of his mentor.¹¹⁷ Sears maintained that "historical fairness forbids us to read into Polk's policy a deliberate intention to provoke a war with a weaker power under the hypocritical mask of desire for peace."¹¹⁸ The President was an outspoken imperialist who wanted Texas and as much more land as he could buy, but Sears maintained that Polk hoped and expected to accomplish his objectives peacefully through payment of the claims in land. Polk's offer of large sums of money for the new land, according to Sears, attested to the President's sincerity. The author praised Polk for his "clearness of vision" and

¹¹⁵Robert M. McElroy, The Winning of the Far West (New York, 1914), 134; Albert Nelson Marquis, ed., Who's Who in America (Chicago, 1915), VIII, 1503.

¹¹⁶McElroy, Winning the Far West, 140-141.

¹¹⁷Louis Martin Sears, "Slidell's Mission," South Atlantic Quarterly, XII (January, 1913), 12.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 15.

attributed to him "a precision of action rare in diplomacy" in his discussion of the Parrott and Slidell missions.¹¹⁹

After the publication of Polk's diary, many authors sharply criticized the popular nineteenth-century interpretation developed by such writers as William Jay and James Ford Rhodes that the Mexican War was precipitated by an aggressive, slaveholding South. The works of Garrison and Rives, for example, tended to discredit the conspiracy thesis. Garrison declared that there was no need for any conspiracy to provoke a war because public feeling in both countries favored war. Rives reasoned that the South undoubtedly wanted Texas, but it did not want war. Annexation had been accomplished peacefully more than seven months before Polk sent Slidell, and Mexico's inability to recover Texas was obvious since her previous attempts in the 1840's had failed to subdue the new weak Republic of Texas. Rives also doubted that Polk, a Southerner, wanted a war for conquest; but even if he had, no such motive existed in the minds of his Secretaries of State, War, and Navy, who were Northern men.¹²⁰

The most definitive attack upon the conspiracy theory was Chauncey S. Boucher's "In Re That Aggressive Slavocracy," published in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review in 1921. Boucher denied the basic tenets of the popular textbook account that the South led an organized campaign for new territory. "Instead of a united, aggressive slavocracy," he wrote, "one finds evidence at almost every turn that the true picture is quite the reverse, and that keen students of public affairs realized full well that

¹¹⁹Ibid., 15-16.

¹²⁰Rives, "Mexican Diplomacy," American Historical Review, XVIII, 131-132.

cross purposes and disorganization prevailed."¹²¹ The South, according to Boucher, was an unwieldy mixture of private interests incapable of uniting for self-defense and much less so for any aggressive program. He attributed the persistence of the earlier view to the influence of abolitionist-minded historians. In reality, the South was not the aggressor at all, said Boucher, but was forced to be on the defensive.¹²² Therefore, the charges of aggression against the South preceding the annexation of Texas prior to the Mexican War had no valid basis. Boucher declared that Polk was a national expansionist rather than the leader of the proslavery forces. A desire for expansion, he said, was a national phenomenon favored by Northerners and Southerners alike.

John D. P. Fuller, writing some thirteen years later, used Boucher's thesis as a point of departure in expounding his view that the slaveholders actually opposed the conquest of Mexico. The author, a Southern scholar from Virginia Military Institute, maintained that a definite proslavery movement existed to prevent the acquisition of any part of Mexico as well as an antislavery campaign to take all of Mexico.¹²³ Both proslavery and antislavery adherents were convinced that slavery would never be established in the new regions.¹²⁴ Fuller argued that these movements occurred after the war had started; therefore, they had

¹²¹Chauncey S. Boucher, "In Re that Aggressive Slavocracy," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, VIII (June-September, 1921), 19.

¹²²Ibid., 30.

¹²³Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, ed., The Mexican War (Chicago, 1963), 29.

¹²⁴John D. P. Fuller, "Slavery Question and the Movement to Acquire Mexico, 1846-1848," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXI (June, 1934), 32.

no impact upon the outbreak of the conflict. His study was a thorough revision of the standard Whig interpretation. As a substitute for Southern aggressiveness as the cause of the Mexican War, Fuller suggested the natural "acquisitive tendencies" of all human beings.¹²⁵

Justin H. Smith wrote in 1919 a two-volume study which still remains the most thorough and comprehensive work covering the Mexican War. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning work, The War with Mexico, Smith presented the results of years of dedicated research and energetic personal effort in order to accomplish his avowed purpose of explaining the true and complete story of the Mexican War. Smith prefaced his volume with the statement that he "had no purpose or even thought of reaching" the result that he did. He disclosed that his view at the outset of his research "coincided substantially with that prevailing in New England," and that he chose the subject only because he felt it had not been fully treated.¹²⁶ In preparation for his work, Smith examined more than 100,000 manuscripts, 1200 books and pamphlets, and 200 periodicals. He also spent a year in Mexico in order to learn the character of the people, but the Dartmouth professor's account was regrettably tarnished by an obvious scorn for the Mexicans. The first chapters of his book, in which he pictured the people of Mexico as a degenerate, untrustworthy, and backward race, foreshadowed the nature of his conclusions. Smith discussed and attacked virtually every aspect of Mexican life, including the church, the army, the class

¹²⁵John D. P. Fuller, Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico (Baltimore, 1936), 160.

¹²⁶Justin H. Smith, The War with Mexico, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1963), I, ix. First published in 1919.

system, the government, the educational system, and the personal character of the people. According to Smith, "little in the natural, mental, and moral spheres was really sound in the Mexico of 1845."¹²⁷ Regarding the state of the Mexican government, a topic of considerable interest to Smith, he conceded that the habit of unstable government was an unfortunate inheritance from Spain, but, he asserted, "there had been time enough to recover from it; and instead of improving, the Mexicans had even degenerated."¹²⁸ In view of Smith's attitude toward the Mexicans, it was natural that he exhibited a definite bias in favor of the Anglo-Americans.

Illustrating the extremes of the author's views is this statement:

Finally, the duty always enjoined upon the troops was "blind obedience," not the use of what little intelligence they possessed; and their bravery . . . was mainly of the impulsive, passionate and therefore, transient sort, whereas Anglo-Saxon courage is cool, calculating, resolute and comparatively unexhaustible.¹²⁹

Smith's work reflects his view that war between the United States and Mexico was unavoidable. According to him, the Mexican people "were unlikely to handle in the best manner a grave and complicated question requiring all possible sanity of judgment and perfect self-control; and in particular, misunderstandings between them and a nation like the United States were not only sure to arise but sure to prove troublesome."¹³⁰ Smith thus emphasized the deceitfulness of the Mexicans and their incapacity to

¹²⁷Ibid., 28.

¹²⁸Ibid., 57.

¹²⁹Ibid., 11.

¹³⁰Ibid., 28.

govern. In accepting the idea that the war was inevitable, the author, of course, absolved Polk and the United States government from the charge of purposely provoking the hostilities. He excused the activities of Americans in Texas which led the revolt against Mexico. The annexation of Texas to the United States, said Smith, was completely proper on moral, legal, and political grounds, and a natural step in the destined growth of the United States.¹³¹

Smith devoted considerable time to the discussion of President Polk's personality and his role in the Mexican affair. He denied that Polk deliberately antagonized Mexico in the hope she would initiate hostilities. The author readily admitted that Polk was determined to acquire California, but he found this no reason for censure. In addition, he cited the official instructions to Slidell as evidence that Polk was not prepared to go to war to add this territory.¹³² Smith staunchly maintained that Polk and his administration were pacific in profession and action throughout the period. The President tried all rational methods for peace and refused to take advantage of the claims issue or Mexican belligerency as an excuse to prepare for war.¹³³ Smith provided this concise statement of Polk's position in the problem with Mexico:

In short, then, we find that Polk had the gravest reasons for desiring friendly intercourse with Mexico, and probably felt none for plotting war; that a variety of personal and political circumstances naturally inclined him toward peace; that his declarations, both public and private, pointed consistently in that direction as long as any hope of amicable

¹³¹Ibid., 82.

¹³²Ibid., 127.

¹³³Ibid., 131.

settlement remained; and that what he did in repeated and most significant ways, as well as what he refrained from doing, had the same meaning.¹³⁴

Smith found it impossible to accept the idea that Polk was capable of plotting and directing a scheme of such magnitude and ambition which earlier historians had attributed to him. "It was not in him," Smith wrote. "Neither intellect, conscience, nor imagination permitted it."¹³⁵ Polk was too conservative, he believed, to start a war during critical negotiations with Great Britain concerning Oregon. Also, Polk realized that General Winfield Scott, a possible Whig presidential candidate, would benefit from a war. In addition, Smith asserted that the President was aware that war taxes and the likelihood of a demand for a higher tariff would injure the Democratic Party.¹³⁶ Polk, declared Smith, was justified in his encroachment on disputed land by Mexican actions and never exceeded his constitutional authority. Not only was Polk justified, but he was also obligated to remedy the situation brought about by Mexican ignorance and obstinacy. "In truth no other course would have been patriotic or even rational."¹³⁷

Smith concluded that frictional incidents between the two countries, such as the annexation of Texas and the ill-fated missions of Parrott and Slidell, actually caused the Mexican War. He also acknowledged the influence of the concept of manifest destiny on the people, directed attention to the suspicion that Great Britain was making advances in Texas and

¹³⁴Ibid., 134.

¹³⁵Ibid., 130.

¹³⁶Ibid.

¹³⁷Ibid., 137.

California, and remarked on the vigor and energy of a nation of young men looking for action and glory. Smith felt that the confidence of an easy victory and the prodding of the nation's press further pushed the country toward war.¹³⁸ In spite of its weaknesses, Smith's study was exceptionally well received when it was published, as evidenced by the award of the Pulitzer Prize, and it is still the most comprehensive and authoritative work on the subject.

Three years after Smith's volumes were published, Eugene I. McCormac produced his outstanding biography of Polk in which he also defended the President and his administration. McCormac was generally sympathetic toward his subject, but certainly no more so than Smith. The author explained Polk's attitude concerning relations with Mexico by illustrating the President's conviction that the United States had a natural and inevitable right to Texas and even to California. Once annexation was achieved, Polk never considered it to be a question for discussion and proposed to defend all the land claimed by Texas.¹³⁹ McCormac emphasized Polk's obligation to defend the boundaries of the new state. In the eyes of the Mexicans, who still claimed all of Texas, it was no more an act of aggression to dispatch troops beyond the Nueces than to send them across the Sabine. The author supported the view that Polk sent Taylor and his troops to the Rio Grande for the purpose of helping Slidell, not to provide an attack. McCormac refuted Reeves' argument that Slidell's instructions

¹³⁸Ibid., 121-127.

¹³⁹Eugene I. McCormac, James K. Polk: A Political Biography, (Berkeley, California, 1922), 363.

showed that Polk wanted a war for conquest. McCormac maintained that the instructions demonstrated Polk's willingness to release Mexico from her claims obligation for only a part of New Mexico.¹⁴⁰ The author admitted that Polk desperately wanted California but firmly asserted that he found "not the slightest hint that the President had any intention of resorting to force . . . should Mexico refuse her consent to the sale."¹⁴¹ Regarding the actual outbreak of hostilities near the Rio Grande, McCormac maintained that Taylor's advance probably did not cause Mexico to refuse to reopen diplomatic relations, but it did provide her with an excuse. Although she had stated that annexation was casus belli, Mexico had hinted she might be willing to discuss the matter. When Taylor advanced across the Nueces River, however, Mexican troops attacked. This fact, conceded McCormac, provided some justification for the Whig contention that Polk precipitated war by ordering Taylor to the Rio Grande.¹⁴²

McCormac, a member of the faculty of the University of California, was a scholarly historian who accorded Polk much respect previously denied him. He portrayed Polk as an unusually able executive and constructive statesman who enjoyed great success as President even though his role in the Mexican War had been long condemned.

Nathaniel W. Stephenson, writing in 1926, took a somewhat different view of President Polk than McCormac in his Texas and the Mexican War, a

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 391.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 392.

¹⁴²Ibid., 414.

volume in the Chronicles of America series. While declining to attack Polk's character or motives, he asserted that the President did not understand the Mexican character and failed to consider their point of view. Public opinion in Mexico did not allow the government to treat with the representatives of the United States.¹⁴³ Stephenson criticized the Polk administration for belaboring the claims issue when it needed a diplomatic bargaining point and for forcing Mexico to settle the claims through payment in land. The author accused Polk of underhanded negotiation. "Though Polk had entered on his Mexican negotiations hopeful of a peaceful solution," Stephenson wrote, "he did not intend to be caught napping. He had kept a hand behind his back, and in it he held his weapons."¹⁴⁴

Most historians have considered the annexation of Texas by the United States as one of the more significant causes of the Mexican War. Justin Smith accepted this view, although he emphasized other causes as well. Another such author was Eugene C. Barker of the University of Texas who published an essay in 1930 on "The Historiography of Expansion." He believed that the United States had a just grievance against Mexico on the claims issue. However, he also indicated that Mexico had a more recent grievance because of annexation.¹⁴⁵ The Mexican government of

¹⁴³Nathaniel W. Stephenson, Texas and the Mexican War, (New Haven, 1927), 178-179.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 414.

¹⁴⁵Eugene C. Barker, "The Historiography of Expansion," in James Williard and Colin Goodykoontz, (eds.), The Trans-Mississippi West (Boulder, Colorado, 1930), 241. Barker revealed similar views in "California as the Cause of the Mexican War," Texas Review, II (January, 1917), 213-218.

José Joaquín Herrera was weak and was willing to negotiate the Texas question, but Polk misunderstood and sent a minister, John Slidell, empowered to discuss all matters in dispute. The fury of public opinion forbade Herrera to receive the minister. In support of Polk, Barker maintained that the President did not send troops to the Rio Grande in order to provoke war, but to aid the Slidell mission. He hoped a show of power would convince the Mexicans that the United States had no intention of backing down.¹⁴⁶ According to Barker, the war erupted because Mexico refused to settle the claims question and continued to reject all efforts at negotiation on the Texas matter. Polk and his administration had shown patience and an honest desire for peace, but had been rebuffed. Barker asserted that the President had no choice but to act as he did.

In 1935 Albert K. Weinberg published a volume entitled Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History. Weinberg, educated at Johns Hopkins University where he taught political science when this study was produced, later pursued a career in government service as a social science analyst, information coordinator for the Office of Strategic Services, and a member of the United States War Department.¹⁴⁷ In Manifest Destiny, Weinberg, who was concerned with the relationship between expansion and American thought, defended the concept of manifest destiny and its influence on America's westward march and the Mexican War. He maintained that the intensity of expansionism was motivated

¹⁴⁶Barker, "Historiography of Expansion," 244.

¹⁴⁷Jacques Cattell, ed., Directory of American Scholars, Second edition (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1951), I - History, 431.

"primarily by nationalistic attitudes resting not merely upon practical interests but also upon the 'emotion' of manifest destiny and its correlate, the 'idealism' of the spirit of democracy."¹⁴⁸ He pointed out that the expansionists declared that territorial extension was necessary to the complete liberty of the individual.¹⁴⁹ Weinberg finally concluded, with some inconsistency, that the primary end of expansion was not the elevation of the Latin American heathen, but rather the uncrowded development of the United States' multiplying population. Such a summation would seem to weaken the concept of manifest destiny with its overtones of providential guidance and the special mission.

In a 1936 study for Johns Hopkins University, John D. P. Fuller maintained that such idealistic catchwords and phrases as manifest destiny, extension of religious and political freedom, and the blocking of European designs in the New World were merely disguises used by propagandists to obscure the actual motive, greed. The author acknowledged it was difficult to judge the sincerity of the expansionists but concluded that the professed ideals probably were not very important.¹⁵⁰ Finally, Fuller challenged the validity of the manifest destiny concept by claiming that the desire for new territory "created the ideal [manifest destiny] and the created soon became as great as the creator."¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸Albert K. Weinberg, Manifest Destiny (Baltimore, 1935), 101.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 116.

¹⁵⁰Fuller, Acquisition of All Mexico, 160.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 161.

In an article in The Pacific Historical Review in 1935, Richard R. Stenberg challenged the prevailing trend in interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War. He began by stating that many historians had not accepted the thesis that Polk was "peaceable," as described by G. L. Rives and Justin Smith. Stenberg also questioned the honesty of Polk's diary on the grounds that it did not start early enough to give a true picture of the situation before Slidell's mission. Stenberg believed that the diary's value was doubtful because it left "for the preceding period no comparable purported record of his mind ('purported' is advisable, for the Diary, which on first sight and to those unconsciously biased in Polk's favor seems full and candid, appears on inspection of other sources to be incomplete and lacking in some very material respects.)"¹⁵² Without an account of the early half of 1845, Stenberg deemed it "impossible to view Polk as scrupulous and peaceable."¹⁵³ The author, a Texas scholar, declared Polk wholly responsible for the conflict with Mexico. He concluded that Mexico acquiesced in annexation but protested for "appearances" and to protect her land west of the Nueces to which Texas had no claim, either legally or by conquest.¹⁵⁴ Belittling Polk's claim that annexation started the hostilities as "a convenient fiction," Stenberg charged that the President neither intended the Slidell mission to be successful nor supposed that it would be. He labeled the mission

¹⁵²Richard R. Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigue of 1845," Pacific Historical Review, IV (1935), 40.

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 41.

as a maneuver to make Mexico appear the villain.¹⁵⁵ Stenberg claimed Polk's actions were characterized by "cunning, deviousness, and underhandedness" and that the war was motivated entirely by a desire to secure valuable territory for the United States under his administration.¹⁵⁶ Although Stenberg used Polk's diary, he arrived at vastly different conclusions from the majority of his contemporaries.

In 1947, Alfred Hoyt Bill of Princeton University published his Rehearsal for Conflict: The War with Mexico 1846-1848. This author completely exonerated President Polk from any desire to expand the borders of the United States by war. He claimed that there were many people in 1845 who believed that the movement of troops to the Rio Grande was unjust and an overt provocation of war. Rejecting this belief, he wrote:

It seems not to have occurred to them that, having offered Texas annexation and the offer having been accepted, the government of the United States was in honor bound both to do all in its power to protect its new citizens and to support their territorial claims until these should be brought to a final settlement They could hardly have been persuaded that President Polk did not wish for war, had no intention of fighting unless he should be forced to do so, and was convinced that he could get everything he aimed at by negotiation and purchase.¹⁵⁷

Bill cited the fact that Polk did nothing to improve the inadequate size and condition of the army and navy as proof that he expected and wanted peace. Mexico was responsible for the outbreak of hostilities, said Bill, because, even after European recognition of the Texas Republic, she

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁷Alfred Hoyt Bill, Rehearsal for Conflict: The War with Mexico (New York, 1947), 58.

continued to reject the fact and to assault the Texas border.¹⁵⁸ Bill's volume echoed the conclusions of Justin Smith but was written in a style designed to appeal to the general reader rather than the professional historian.

Another popular account, as the title indicated, was Robert Selph Henry's The Story of the Mexican War. Like Bill, Henry shared the views of Smith on the causes of the war, and he endorsed McCormac's interpretation of Polk. A Southern historian educated at Vanderbilt, Henry agreed that Polk wanted expansion through peaceful channels and that the annexation of Texas, not the occupation of the disputed territory, was the immediate cause of the Mexican War.¹⁵⁹ He maintained that the opening shot of the war could have been fired anywhere southwest of the Sabine River.¹⁶⁰

In 1955 Norman Graebner, educated at the University of Chicago, produced an outstanding work entitled Empire on the Pacific. Graebner enumerated several factors which led the United States into the war with Mexico, including a series of explosive diplomatic encounters, a widespread desire to annex California, and the annexation of Texas. "In reality," he wrote, "Texas annexation was only the most serious in a long succession of diplomatic crises. In a sense, the causes of the Mexican War resided deeply in the web of diplomatic and commercial relations

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 77.

¹⁵⁹Cattell, American Scholars, I - History, 135.

¹⁶⁰Robert Selph Henry, The Story of the Mexican War (New York, 1950), 32-3.

covering fully two decades."¹⁶¹ To Graebner the war was avoidable: "It came basically because neither nation made a sincere effort to avoid it."¹⁶² He added that some "magnanimity" by the Polk administration could have averted war. Even though the Mexican attitude understandably caused frustration, American security had not been endangered. "But the balance against peace," he argued, "was the pressure of American public sentiment and a measured acquisitiveness toward California."¹⁶³ Emphasizing the economic factors involved, Graebner stressed that many Americans of the 1840's considered control of the west coast and access to the rich trade of the Far East to be of vital importance to America's future greatness.¹⁶⁴ Admitting that Polk wanted California from the start, the author denied that Polk deliberately provoked the conflict and declared that the Whigs' partisan attacks on the war made it "the most extensively criticized war in American history."¹⁶⁵

The most recent study dealing exclusively with the Mexican War was by Otis A. Singletary, a Southern historian born in Mississippi, educated at the Louisiana State University, and a member of the faculty of the University of Texas when this volume was published in 1960.¹⁶⁶ Although Singletary dealt primarily with the military aspects of the war rather

¹⁶¹Norman Graebner, Empire on the Pacific (New York, 1955), 153.

¹⁶²Ibid.

¹⁶³Ibid., 154.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 150.

¹⁶⁶Cattell, American Scholars, I - History, 277.

than with the causes and the events leading to the conflict, he declared that "the glib assertion that the event resulted from the annexation of Texas" was a "gross oversimplification." He continued:

Annexation was merely the immediate cause of hostilities, the spark that touched off the explosion. Deeper, older, more fundamental causes can be seen in the Mexican resentment which had been created by an aggressive American expansionism, in the hatred engendered in the American heart as a result of Mexican atrocities committed in the barbarous border warfare that had been waged intermittently since the revolt of the Texans, in the almost incredible political instability of the Mexican government, and the utter failure of diplomacy.¹⁶⁷

Singletary stressed the influence of the concept of manifest destiny in preparing the people of the United States for war, maintaining that "the penchant of the Yankee for acquiring contiguous territory far antedated the annexation of Texas."¹⁶⁸ Mexico was the inevitable target for American expansionists, said Singletary, and the constant political chaos of the Mexican government prevented an orderly and peaceful conclusion to negotiations.¹⁶⁹

An examination of recent textbooks dealing with United States history in general and diplomatic history in particular reveals that the subject of the causes of the Mexican War remains a controversial subject. In recent decades, no serious scholar has attempted to revive the full-blown conspiracy thesis so popular during the late nineteenth century, but Polk's role in bringing about the war and the validity of the various

¹⁶⁷Otis A. Singletary, The Mexican War (Chicago, 1960), 14.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 199.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 14.

purported causes have been subject to conflicting interpretations. Two recent historians who have been sharply critical of Polk's conduct are Richard W. Leopold of Northwestern University and Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard. Leopold, in his history of American foreign affairs written in 1962, charged that the contentions for war which were enumerated by Polk "have been dismissed as misleading and untrue."¹⁷⁰ The allegation that Mexico was a menace to the Texans "was sheer fabrication," believed Leopold. The author challenged Polk's claim to the disputed land, the advisability of advancing troops, and the contention that the claims were a just cause of war. Leopold thus indicted Polk:

Most of these accusations against the Polk administration are unanswerable. Even if we acquit the President, . . . the conclusion is inescapable that he made fewer concessions to the preservation of peace than any occupant of the White House, before or since. He was prepared to recommend war over unpaid debts, yet less than a decade earlier two American states had repudiated their obligations to European bondholders. He was willing to take up arms over Mexico's refusal to resume normal diplomatic relations, yet he had given Slidell higher rank and broader instructions than the Mexicans had stipulated when they agreed to accept him. The threat to Texas was illusory, yet Polk ordered Taylor into a contested area, when there was no American citizen to protect. . . . Technically correct on almost every point, Polk manifested little patience and no sympathy for a blustering but weaker neighbor.¹⁷¹

Morrison, writing in 1965, was critical of those apologists for Polk who contended that hostilities were inevitable, because from the Mexican point of view General Taylor was invading Mexican territory as

¹⁷⁰Richard W. Leopold, The Growth of American Foreign Policy (New York, 1962), 64..

¹⁷¹Ibid., 64-65.

soon as he crossed the Sabine River. This argument, said Morison, "makes no allowance for Latin disinclination to acknowledge a disagreeable fait accompli."¹⁷² According to him, Polk's lust for western land precipitated the war because "if Polk had been content with Texas and had not reached for California, there is no reason to suppose that Mexico would have initiated hostilities."¹⁷³

Alexander DeConde held views similar to the two authors above, although he was not so harsh on the eleventh President. Writing in 1963, DeConde maintained that Polk offered Mexico a way to settle the difficulty with a payment of land. He was willing to do this because he realized the Texas claim was weak.¹⁷⁴ The author agreed with Morison that if Polk had not been a dedicated expansionist he would probably have worked much harder for peace than he did. "Polk's policy toward Mexico had been a combination of sabre-rattling, intrigue, and unpalatable, but not fundamentally unreasonable, peace offers."¹⁷⁵

In 1955, the Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis stressed as causes of the war Mexico's poor control of her northern provinces and the annexation of Texas by the United States. The annexation was not only desired by both peoples involved, but it was also legal and proper, he maintained, because Texas had successfully established her independence and was at complete liberty to join any nation she chose. Bemis justified Polk's

¹⁷²Samuel Eliot Morison, The Oxford History of the American People (New York, 1965), 559.

¹⁷³Ibid.

¹⁷⁴Alexander DeConde, A History of American Foreign Policy (New York, 1963), 195.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 199.

order of Taylor to the Rio Grande due to the threat of war.¹⁷⁶ In addition, Bemis declared that Slidell's instructions bore evidence of Polk's willingness to be reasonable.

He [Folk] would have welcomed a war and the conquest of coveted territory, and he was determined to have California, but he certainly gave Mexico every chance for a peaceful settlement, and on terms which stopped short of taking a single square mile of indisputable Mexican territory¹⁷⁷

Bemis felt that the President tried to be fair with Mexico but feared British activity in California, and Mexico rejected all his efforts at negotiation. Defending Polk, Bemis challenged all of his critics to find one citizen in the United States today who would want to undo the eleventh President's diplomacy or the results of the war.¹⁷⁸

In their diplomatic history textbooks, Julius W. Pratt and Thomas A. Bailey displayed a more tolerant attitude toward President Polk than Leopold or Morison, but they too exhibited a belief that Polk was dominated by his desire to add California to the possessions of the United States. They intimated that Polk wanted to keep peace but he wanted even more to acquire California. Bailey said that it seems clear that Polk did not really want war, provided he could get California without it.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶Samuel Flagg Bemis, A Diplomatic History of the United States, Fourth edition (New York, 1955), 232.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 235.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 244.

¹⁷⁹Thomas A. Bailey, A Diplomatic History of the American People, Fifth edition (New York, 1964), 258; Julius W. Pratt, A History of United States Foreign Policy, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965).

The impact of Polk's diary on the interpretation of the Mexican War and its causes by twentieth-century historians has evidently been very substantial. Historians were forced to re-evaluate the old theories which had been earlier accepted and to reconsider the United States' policy in the light of Polk's personal account. To some the United States remained the guilty aggressor, just as Polk was still the scheming landgrabber. Polk's side of the controversy, however, was now finally available, and many historians discovered in it the justification of the President's actions. Obviously, the Polk diary did not solve the controversy surrounding the causes of the Mexican War. It made available an interesting and vital viewpoint which contributed a great deal to the understanding of the period. But the subject of the causes of the Mexican war still remained a controversial subject for American historians to ponder.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of the Mexican War during President James K. Polk's administration led immediately to a domestic political controversy concerning the circumstances which led to that event, and historians of the United States still differ widely among themselves on the subject of the responsibility for that conflict. Writings of contemporaries and historians alike have dealt with a variety of subjects that have been considered as underlying or immediate factors leading to the war of 1846: the annexation of Texas by the United States, the claims of American citizens against the Mexican government, Polk's alleged designs on California, the mission of John Slidell to the Mexican government, the controversial order to General Zachary Taylor, the so-called conspiracy of Southern politicians to acquire additional slave territory, the chaotic political situation within the Mexican republic, and the American concepts of mission and manifest destiny. In many instances historians have merely echoed the arguments of contemporaries, but the passing of time has afforded new perspectives concerning the events leading to the hostilities between the United States and Mexico.

The annexation of Texas by the United States has been accepted by most authors as having some impact on the outbreak of the war between the two countries. The controversy among contemporary and nineteenth-century writers centered around the question of whether or not the United States was justified in annexing Texas, while in the twentieth century this aspect has commanded less attention. Polk, of course, upheld the independence of the young republic and, therefore, her right to attach

herself to any nation she chose. The President was supported in this contention by Major Marcus C. M. Hammond who claimed that Mexico actually conceded de facto independence of Texas by offering to recognize her sovereignty on the condition that the Texans would agree not to join the United States. John Jenkins and Susan Hale also upheld Polk's opinion that Texas was independent of Mexican control. However, Whig Congressman James Van Dyke and Albert Gallatin charged the Democratic administration with precipitating hostilities by annexing a republic which was at war with Mexico. To them, the annexation of Texas was in effect a declaration of war upon Mexico. William Jay maintained that Polk knew that war would follow annexation and completed it for that purpose.

In the twentieth century George L. Rives, Justin H. Smith, Eugene I. McCormac, and Eugene C. Barker all emphasized the influence of annexation in causing hostilities, but they supported the position taken by Polk that Texas was independent and could do as she pleased. They also argued that absorption of Texas by the United States was a natural and proper step in the country's growth. More recently, Otis Singletary has minimized the importance of annexation, describing it as the immediate cause, but assigning more significance to "deeper, older, more fundamental causes."¹⁸⁰ Another twentieth-century historian who went even further in dismissing the acquisition of Texas as a major cause of the war was Jesse S. Reeves who asserted that annexation was merely an isolated event which President Polk used to provoke Mexico into initiating hostilities. Reeves believed that Polk prevented a peaceful settlement of the Texas issue

¹⁸⁰Otis A. Singletary, The Mexican War (Chicago, 1960), 14.

because of his desire to acquire California. Twentieth-century writers like Barker, Smith, and Samuel Flagg Bemis who contended annexation was a cause of war have been generally sympathetic to Polk, while Reeves, who claimed annexation was not an important factor, was sharply critical of his actions.

Another factor interwoven with the Texas annexation issue was the possibility of Texas' entanglement with Great Britain. Edward D. Mansfield and James Schouler challenged the validity of this fear and maintained that it was a device of the propagandists who desired annexation. Charles Owen, however, emphasized that the United States was justified in its fear of British interference, pointing to previous British activities in the Sandwich Islands and China, and to the Texas debt to British bondholders, which allegedly gave that nation a hold on the new republic.

One of the earliest interpretations of the causes of the Mexican War concerned the supposed influence of the Southern slaveholders and their desire for new territory. James Russell Lowell's famous Biglow Papers written during the war contributed to the popularity of the view that Polk was an agent of a powerful slaveholding lobby and that the war was being fought to obtain fresh slave land. Writing in the same vein, Theodore Parker in the Massachusetts Quarterly Review, Abiel A. Livermore in The War With Mexico Reviewed, and William Jay in A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War labeled the war a campaign to satisfy the lust of the slaveholders. Among historians during the remainder of the nineteenth century who generally upheld this view were Hubert Howe Bancroft, James Schouler, and James Ford Rhodes. One notable exception was John Burgess, who pointed out that some Southerners, including John

C. Calhoun, were against expansion because they feared that slavery would die in the old areas if it were allowed to spread to the southwest.

In the twentieth century Charles Owen continued the attack on the conspiracy theory. Possibly influenced by the widening acceptance of imperialism which followed the Spanish-American War, Owen discounted slavery as a cause of the Mexican War. The arguments of Edward G. Bourne, George Pierce Garrison, Chauncey S. Boucher, and John D. P. Fuller on the slavery issue were similar to those advanced by Burgess and Owen. Bourne declared that there was no necessary connection between slavery and expansion. He felt that expansion was a worthy cause in itself. Garrison held the view that there was no need for a conspiracy to explain the war because it commanded popular approval in both countries. Boucher maintained that the South was incapable of an organized movement of any kind, and that, in truth, Southerners were on the defensive in the slavery question. Fuller went even farther than Burgess in emphasizing the opposition of many Southerners to expansion.

The question of President Polk's responsibility in the Mexican affair has been a hotly debated topic since he wrote his war message in 1846. Whig leaders immediately condemned his actions and his explanations for them. In Congress, J. Roman Dixon, James Van Dyke, and Garrett Davis assailed the President and his administration for leading the United States into war. Dixon accused Polk of overstepping his authority when he ordered General Taylor to commence warfare if he were attacked. Davis charged Polk with directing a series of acts calculated to end in war. Van Dyke maintained that the Nueces River was the legal boundary of Texas, and that therefore United States troops had no right to cross it.

Theodore Parker's attack of Polk's acceptance of the entire Texas claim foreshadowed later conclusions by Hermann E. von Holst, Richard Stenberg, and more recently, Richard W. Leopold. Jay, Livermore, and Mansfield indicted the President for intentionally provoking hostilities. Livermore believed that Polk's desire to begin his administration with an outstanding achievement dominated the President's action. On the other hand John Jenkins, the loyal Democrat, writing shortly after the war maintained that Taylor's advance to the Rio Grande was the only way Polk could assert United States ownership of the land so long as Mexico refused to accept a minister to discuss the matter. His interpretation, however, met with little favor among nineteenth-century historians. Years later, James Schouler asserted that Polk's ambitious designs on New Mexico and California prevented a peaceful settlement. Perhaps the most vicious attack on Polk in an historical study during the late nineteenth century was by Hubert H. Bancroft in his History of Mexico. He charged Polk with intentionally causing all peace efforts to fail so that he might satisfy his desire for California. E. W. Sikes and William Keener also indicted the President, declaring that his impatience doomed the Slidell mission to failure.

President Polk's defenders near the turn of the century included John W. Burgess, Edward G. Bourne, and Charles Owen. Burgess sustained Polk's authority and his duty to defend the boundary claimed by Texas and declared that the Mexicans had made it imperative that troops be sent to Texas by amassing their troops on the south side of the Rio Grande. Bourne acquitted Polk of any charge that he deliberately provoked a conflict, but admitted that he probably welcomed war when it came because he favored

expansion. Owen upheld the administration in its acceptance of the Texas boundary claim, the Slidell mission, and the advancement of troops.

Polk has generally been viewed in a more favorable light in the twentieth century, especially after the appearance of the writings of Justin H. Smith and Eugene I. McCormac. Both authors agreed that Polk desperately wanted to acquire California, but they maintained that he honestly tried to do so peacefully through negotiation. Smith supported the President's diplomacy preceding the conflict, declaring that he tried all rational methods for peace. He judged Polk incapable of directing such an ambitious scheme as earlier historians had attributed to him. McCormac likewise upheld the Polk administration, although he conceded that Taylor's advance provided Mexico with an excuse not to reopen diplomatic relations. The fact that hostilities did not commence until troops were sent to the Rio Grande, according to McCormac, did give some justification to the Whig argument that this move precipitated war.

Although twentieth-century historians have generally rejected the view that Polk provoked war in the interest of a slave conspiracy, some of them nevertheless have charged the President with purposely guiding the United States into the war. Both Jesse S. Reeves and Richard R. Stenberg depicted the President as a landgrabbing warmonger who led the country into war to satisfy his own expansionist designs. Stenberg challenged the honesty of Polk's diary, claiming it to be an attempt by Polk to justify his devious and underhanded diplomacy. Another historian critical of Polk was Nathaniel W. Stephenson, who asserted that Polk ignored the viewpoint of the Mexican people in the affair. More recently Richard Leopold and Samuel Eliot Morison have found fault with the actions

and motives of the President. Leopold declared that the reasons which Polk enumerated for declaring war were misleading and untrue. In his judgment Polk "made fewer concessions to the preservation of peace than any occupant of the White House."¹⁸¹ Morison blamed Polk's insistence upon more territory than Texas as the reason for Mexico's initiation of hostilities.

With the aid of Polk's diary, however, the President's apologists during the twentieth century have formulated an interpretation which reflects more favorably upon the administration of the eleventh President. In addition to Smith and McCormac, George L. Rives, Louis M. Sears, Eugene C. Barker, and more recently, Norman Graebner, Alfred H. Bill, and Samuel Flagg Bemis have treated Polk sympathetically. These historians generally agree that Polk desired expansion, but that he sought to accomplish his goals through diplomatic means.

While most United States historians have directed their attention to developments in Washington preceding the Mexican War, some writers have emphasized the conditions existing within Mexico prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Joel R. Poinsett, regarding the beginning of hostilities from the perspective of a former diplomat in Mexico City, contended that while Mexico might have been willing to abandon her claim to Texas, she could not bear to compromise her national honor by allowing foreign troops to invade her borders unopposed. Hermann von Holst also emphasized that the Mexicans could not bear to be shown up by the United States. Both Susan Hale and James Ford Rhodes discussed the vexing

¹⁸¹Richard W. Leopold, The Growth of American Foreign Policy (Chicago, 1962), 65.

internal problems of Mexico which made difficult a diplomatic settlement with the United States, but they maintained that the Polk administration could have avoided war if the President had followed a more honorable course.

In the twentieth century, as David Donald noted in 1962, there has been a growing tendency among United States historians to emphasize the complex political situation within Mexico as contributing to the failure of peaceful negotiations in 1845 and 1846. Echoing the sentiments of George P. Garrison, Norman Graebner writing in 1955 declared that the conflict occurred because neither country, Mexico as well as the United States, desired peace enough to avoid war. Many writers, including McCormac, Barker, Singletary, and Bemis, stressed the mistakes or weaknesses of the Mexican government; but it was Justin H. Smith who made the most comprehensive indictment not only of the Herrera and Paredes governments, but also of the Mexican people as well. Smith's view of the Mexican people was hardly more favorable than the description of them as "a mongrel race of Spaniards and Indians" recorded in the Southern Quarterly Review in 1849.¹⁸² Regarding them as degenerate, untrustworthy, and backward, Smith attacked virtually every aspect of Mexican life and declared that the Mexicans were incapable of self government.

Another factor which has received mention from most historians who have studied the causes of the Mexican War is the issue of the indemnity claims of American citizens against the Mexican government. Polk

¹⁸²"Origins of the War with Mexico," Southern Quarterly Review, XV, (April, 1849), 89.

emphasized the claims issue in his war message to Congress as a grievance which could no longer be tolerated. Many historians, however, have consistently denied the validity of the claims as a justification for the war. William Jay and Hubert H. Bancroft discounted them as fraudulent and petty. Nathaniel W. Stephenson criticized Polk for belaboring the claims issue whenever he needed a diplomatic weapon. Richard Leopold also rejected the claims as a just cause for war, considering them as ridiculous in view of the fact that several American states during the 1840's had repudiated their debts to Great Britain. Several authors, including Charles Owen, Eugene C. Barker, and Clayton C. Kohl have defended the administration on the claims issue; but Polk's critics have generally devoted more attention to the subject.¹⁸³

Some historians have regarded the Mexican War as the product of certain intangible influences such as the character and mood of the American people, the idea of America's mission in the West, and the concept of manifest destiny. As early as 1850, A. A. Livermore maintained that the war resulted in part from the United States' heritage of frequent wars, the pride of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the general desire of most Americans for additional land. Roswell S. Ripley later pointed to the long period of peace prior to 1846 as preparing the American people psychologically for war. Hermann E. von Holst stressed the desire for adventure, heroism, and personal gain shared by many Americans as an influence contributing to a warlike atmosphere.

¹⁸³Clayton C. Kohl, Claims as a Cause of the Mexican War (New York, 1914).

Several twentieth-century historians have directed their attention to the concept of manifest destiny as a cause of the war of 1846. Justin H. Smith emphasized the importance of this widespread idea on the attitude of Americans regarding expansion. McCormac contended that Polk considered that the United States had a natural and inevitable right to acquire New Mexico and California. Devoting an entire book to the development of the concept of manifest destiny in American history, Albert K. Weinberg maintained that the prevalent feeling in the United States in 1846 was to move westward. He considered that this intangible influence was more vital and forceful in precipitating the war than the more commonplace tangible causes usually listed by historians. On the other hand, John D. P. Fuller dismissed as shibboleths such expressions as manifest destiny and the extension of religious and political freedom. He maintained that these were mere catchwords used by propagandists to disguise the dominant motive of greed. Otis Singletary, while emphasizing the importance of the idea of manifest destiny in preparing the American people for war, has pointed out that the propensity of Americans for the acquisition of new land was widespread long before the era of the Mexican War.

Historians who have written about the causes of the Mexican War have naturally been influenced by their own background and environment as well as the climate of opinion in which they wrote. The earliest prevailing interpretation of the war as the product of an insidious conspiracy by an aggressive slavocracy resulted from the abolitionist orientation of the most influential scholars who first wrote of the subject. The conspiracy theory continued to hold its own during the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction; indeed, it remained the dominant point of view among

historians throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

During the era of the Spanish-American War, when many American intellectuals endorsed what Julius W. Pratt has called the "New Manifest Destiny," some historians sought to revise the prevailing interpretation of the causes of the Mexican War. Edward G. Bourne, noting many similarities between the expansionism of the 1840's and his own time, maintained that Polk desired expansion for its own sake rather than for the protection of slavery. John W. Burgess, a vigorous champion of American imperialism and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority in the days of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, also viewed the diplomacy of the Polk administration in a more favorable light. Likewise, Charles Owen, writing in 1908, was certainly influenced by his strong support of contemporary American foreign policy in his efforts to justify United States diplomacy during the 1840's. "Only when anything said against him [Uncle Sam] is proved," said Owen in the preface of Justice of the Mexican War, "can it be received in silence--and with sadness."¹⁸⁴

Thus the personal diary of President Polk, which a few historians consulted during the 1890's and 1900's, was made available at a time when many scholars were disposed to re-evaluate the causes of the Mexican War. After the publication of this valuable source in 1910, it afforded powerful arguments for historians like Justin H. Smith and Eugene I. McCormac who were inclined to treat the eleventh President in a more sympathetic manner.

¹⁸⁴ Charles H. Owen, The Justice of the Mexican War (New York, 1908), 89.

Although many scholars have been greatly influenced by their background and environment in reaching their conclusions about the causes of the Mexican War, there are numerous individual cases that do not conform to the pattern that one might have expected. Schouler and Owen, for example, were both men with strong anti-slavery, pro-Union sentiments, but their judgments concerning the Mexican War were diametrically opposed. One might have supposed that Justin H. Smith's New England background would have induced him to accept the traditional abolitionist explanation of the causes of the Mexican War. Indeed, he later said that he had no intention of altering the accepted interpretation when he undertook his study.¹⁸⁵ William E. Dodd, and his student Louis M. Sears, both writing during the period of strained United States-Mexican relations in the Taft-Wilson era, did not share the same opinion about Polk's handling of diplomatic relations with Mexico. Richard R. Stenberg studied with Eugene C. Barker at the University of Texas; yet while Barker treated Polk sympathetically, Stenberg produced perhaps the most thoroughgoing twentieth-century indictment of the eleventh President's diplomacy.

One additional point remains to be made. Many twentieth-century American historians who have written about the causes of the Mexican War have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the fact that the long-term consequences of the conflict proved highly beneficial to the United States. Whereas nineteenth-century abolitionist-minded historians deplored the loss of lives in a war which in their opinion

¹⁸⁵ Justin H. Smith, The Mexican War, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1963), I, 28. First published in 1919.

tended to strengthen the slave power, twentieth-century scholars (Samuel Flagg Bemis is one of the few to make the point explicit.) have been influenced in their value judgments on Polk's diplomacy by a recognition of the valuable fruits of that war--the acquisition of the so-called "Mexican Cession" of 1848.

The study of the causes of the Mexican War will undoubtedly continue to command attention from historians of the United States, because that conflict was a major step in the country's expansion to the Pacific and played an important role in contributing to the sectional controversy which led to the Civil War. It will likely remain a controversial subject as it has for over one hundred and twenty years. Each historian who undertakes the study will undoubtedly be influenced to some degree by the nature of his own experience and knowledge, his attitudes and prejudices, and the climate of opinion in which he writes.

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