



## THE WAR WITH MEXICO



*War News from Mexico: Richard Caton Woodville, 1848*

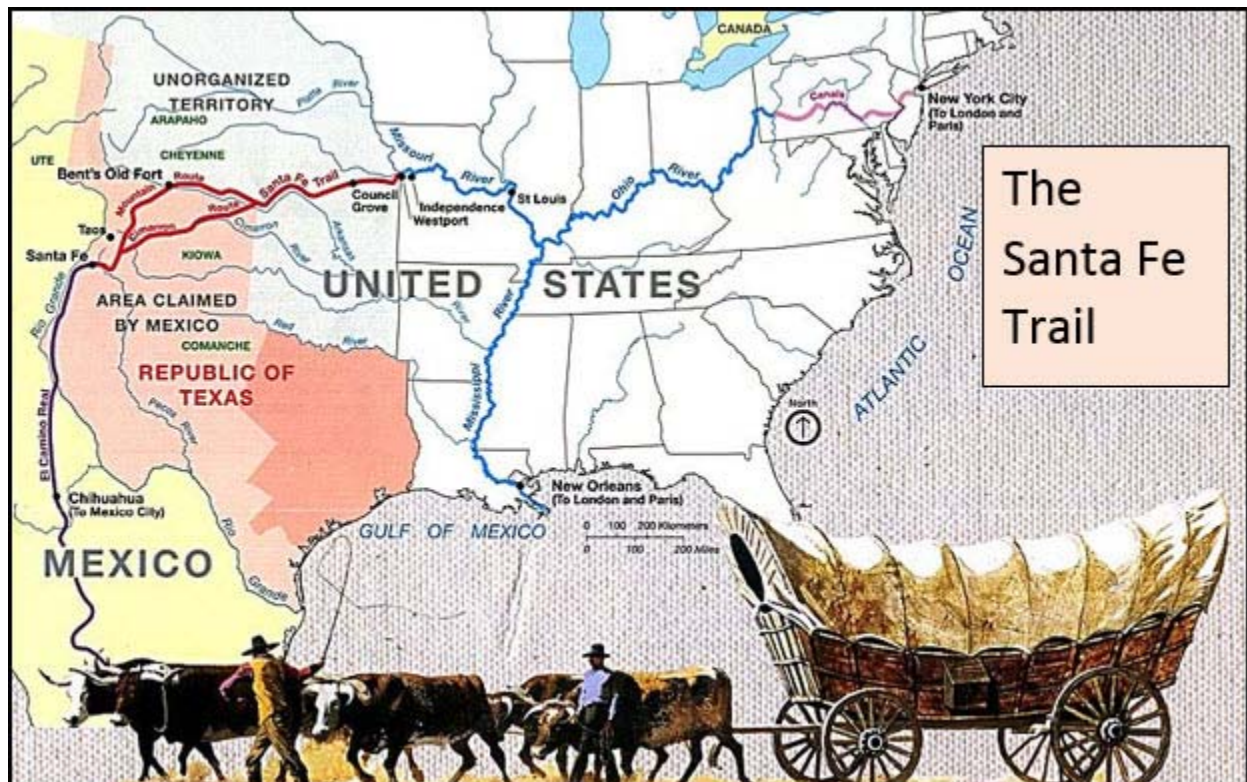
### Unit Overview

While Americans congratulated themselves on the annexation of Texas in 1845, Mexican resentment and distrust of the U.S. government grew. By 1846, the two

countries engaged in a war that ultimately added a half-million miles of land to the United States. It became the first conflict covered by the press on a daily basis and provided military experience to a group of young officers who would emerge as commanders in the American Civil War. Let's see how it all happened.

## The New Mexico Territory

In the early 1800s, the area between Texas and California was called the **New Mexico Territory**. It included all of present-day New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and Arizona along with parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Spanish conquistadors explored the region in the late 1500s and founded the town of Santa Fe in 1610. After winning independence from Spain, Mexico took possession of the New Mexico Territory in 1821. Because the Mexican capital was far away, New Mexicans generally governed themselves.



Map Showing the Santa Fe Trail

Although the Spanish had worked to prevent an American presence in the New Mexico Territory, Mexico changed this policy. It hoped to improve the economy

of the region through trade with the United States. The first American trader to take advantage of the new law was **William Becknell**. He arrived in Santa Fe in 1821 with a pack of mules loaded with manufactured products and sold them for a large profit. Becknell traveled from the Midwest along a route known as the Santa Fe Trail. Other traders soon followed, and the **Santa Fe Trail** developed into a busy trade route. Cloth, firearms and other manufactured goods went west, while silver and furs made their way to customers in the east. Although it was eventually replaced by the railroad, the trail remained an important link in the exchange of goods between east and west. The increase in trade drew American settlers to New Mexico, and thoughts of Manifest Destiny encouraged the United States to consider the acquisition of the region.



Go to Questions 1 through 4.

## California

When Mexico won its independence from Spain, California became part of the new nation. Settlers arrived from Mexico, and some, called **rancheros**, established large cattle ranches. In exchange for food and shelter, the rancheros persuaded many Native Americans to work for them. The California ranches operated much like the plantations of the South, and the rancheros treated the Native American workers almost like slaves.



*Portrait of John Fremont: William Smith Jewett, 1852*

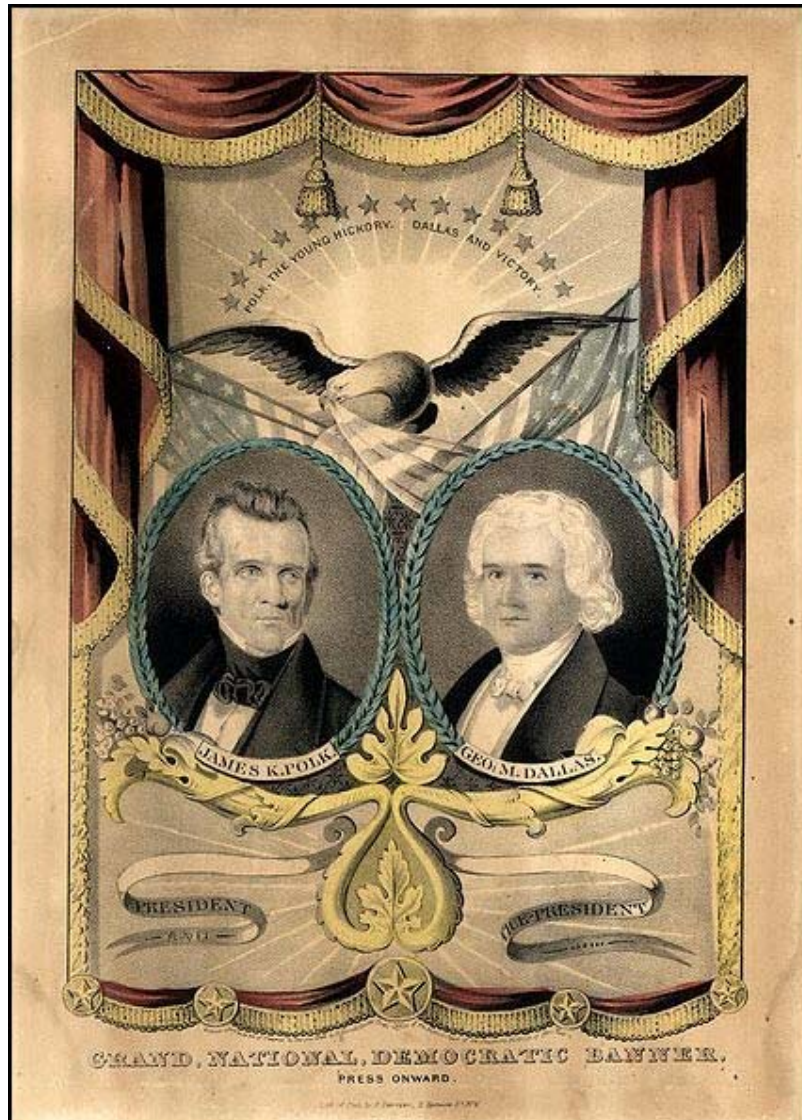
U.S. travelers, such as shipping agents and fur traders, spread numerous stories about the beauty of California. For example, **John Fremont**, an army officer who made several trips there, published descriptions of the region's mild climate and abundant resources. By the 1840s, large numbers of American families began to arrive in California. At first, most of them settled in the **Sacramento River Valley**. Soon many Americans were discussing the advantages of extending the border of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. Manufacturing and shipping companies wanted to establish ports on the Pacific coast to simplify trade with China and Japan. This had the potential to improve the nation's economy. For some political leaders, the issue of national security was at stake. They argued that it was easier to defend a border along the sea as opposed to one shared with a hostile country. After winning the presidential election of 1844, **James K. Polk**, a firm believer in Manifest Destiny, made two offers to buy California and New Mexico, but Mexico refused to sell.



Go to Questions 5 through 7.

## **Strained Relations with Mexico**

American pioneers, who were at first welcomed by the Mexican government into the New Mexico and California Territories, became a source of controversy by 1830. The strained relationship between the United States and Mexico deteriorated further when Texas sent a delegation to Washington D.C. and requested annexation in 1837. Mexico warned that it would view a positive response as a declaration of war and denied any recognition of Texas' independence. The Mexican government also failed in two attempts to reconquer Texas in 1842. When Congress agreed to annex Texas in 1845, Mexico did not declare war. Instead, it expelled the American ambassador, cut off diplomatic relations with the United States and declared that the U.S. action was illegal. President Polk met with America's military commanders and ordered them to prepare for an armed conflict. He also dispatched U.S. ships into positions near Mexican ports.



*Campaign Poster Featuring James K. Polk and Running Mate George Dallas: 1844*

At the same time, Mexico and the United States disagreed on the location of the Texas-Mexico border. The United States claimed that the **Rio Grande River** was the official boundary. Mexico, on the other hand, insisted that the **Nueces River** was the actual border. Although Mexico had agreed to reimburse American citizens for the losses that they had suffered during that country's war for independence, the Mexican government stopped all payments until the dispute was resolved. In hopes of negotiating a deal, President Polk sent **John Slidell** to Mexico City and instructed him to offer \$30 million for California and New Mexico. In return, Mexico had to agree to accept the Rio Grande River as the

boundary of Texas. The United States also planned to take responsibility for Mexico's debts to U.S. citizens.



Go to Questions 8 through 11.

## President Polk's War Plan

The Mexican government had no interest in discussing John Slidell's offer and announced its plans to reclaim Texas. In response, President Polk ordered U.S. Army **General Zachary Taylor** to lead his forces into the area between the Rio Grande and Nueces Rivers. His troops established their position and built a fort. The Polk administration insisted that these acts were necessary to defend the U.S. border. Mexican leaders, however, viewed them as an invasion of their country. On April 24, 1846, Mexican soldiers attacked a small group of Taylor's men. When the news reached Washington D.C., President Polk called an emergency meeting of his Cabinet. All the members agreed that the attack was grounds for a war with Mexico. On May 11, Congress, at the request of President Polk, passed a declaration of war.

President Polk wanted to achieve three goals in the war with Mexico. First, he wanted American troops to secure the Texas border at the Rio Grande River. The second part of the plan involved the seizure of New Mexico and California for the United States. U.S. forces would then advance to Mexico City and capture the enemy's capital. With victories at Matamoros, Monterrey and Buena Vista, General Zachary Taylor secured the border and accomplished the first goal of the war by February of 1847. In the meantime, **General Stephen Watts Kearney** captured Santa Fe, a maneuver that gave the United States possession of the New Mexico Territory.



*State Flag of California based on the Bear Flag*

In June of 1846, a few Americans took over the town of Sonoma and proclaimed California an independent republic. Because the flag of the new country pictured a star and a bear on a white background, they named the new country the **Bear Flag Republic**. One month later, a U.S. Navy squadron, commanded by Commodore **John Sloat**, captured the port of San Francisco. Sloat replaced the Bear Flag with the American flag and announced that California had been annexed by the United States. Many Californios, as Mexicans living in California were called, joined the fight against American control, but General Kearny and his forces arrived to end the rebellion. By January of 1847, California was firmly in U.S. hands.



*U.S. Army Occupation of Mexico: Carl Nebel, 1851*

With the accomplishment of the first two goals of the war, President Polk prepared to launch the third part of his plan. He appointed **General Winfield Scott** as commander of the American forces and ordered an attack on **Mexico City**. In the spring of 1847, Scott and his army came ashore near the Mexican port of Veracruz. After a three-week siege, General Scott captured the coastal city and moved his forces 300 miles inland to Mexico City. During the march, he encountered the Mexican army and bands of armed citizens. Scott's army reached the capital in late August, and the city fell to the Americans in mid-September. The Mexican government was forced to surrender.



Go to Questions 12 through 15.

## **Opposition to the War**

Following the official declaration of war, support for the American cause spread. The army, which consisted of 8000 men before the war, added 60,000 volunteers to its ranks within a few days. Polk's party, the Democratic Party, backed the war and their president's war plan. Most newspapers cheered on the conflict and wrote

about the efforts of the U.S. military in glowing terms. In spite of the success of U.S. forces on the battlefield, however, an increasing number of Americans disagreed with the war. In Congress, Senator **Henry Clay** and Representative **Abraham Lincoln** criticized President Polk's conduct of the military campaign and condemned the war as unconstitutional. Those opposed to slavery feared that new slave states would be carved from the territory gained from Mexico. When reports describing the deaths of Mexican civilians surfaced, even more Americans questioned the military actions in the Southwest. **Henry David Thoreau**, a writer from New England, refused to pay his taxes because he knew that a portion of them would be used to fund the war. After he was sentenced to jail for his protest, Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience*, an essay which antiwar activists often quote today. An excerpt from his work is quoted below.



Henry David Thoreau:  
*Civil Disobedience*  
1849

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and God-speed, to the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man. But it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.



Go to Questions 16 through 18.

## The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

Following the surrender of Mexico, President Polk sent **Nicholas Trist** to negotiate peace. His efforts resulted in the completion of the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** in February of 1848. In the agreement, Mexico recognized the Rio Grande River as its border and gave up all claims to Texas. A section of the treaty known as the Mexican Cession turned the California and New Mexico Territories over to the United States in exchange for \$15 million. The United States offered American citizenship to the 80,000 Mexicans living in these regions. Through the **Gadsden Purchase** in 1853, the American mainland reached its present size, as indicated by the map pictured in the graphic. The Congress authorized a payment to Mexico of an additional \$10 million for a strip of land along the southern edge of New Mexico and Arizona. Although the United States experienced fewer casualties than their Mexican counterparts during the Mexican-American War, 1,721 U.S. soldiers died in battle, and another 11,000 were lost to disease and war-related injuries. Review the key events of the Mexican-American War and its outcomes by watching the video listed below.



Map Showing the U.S. Mainland by 1853



The Mexican Cession and the Mexican-American War



Go to Questions 19 and 20.

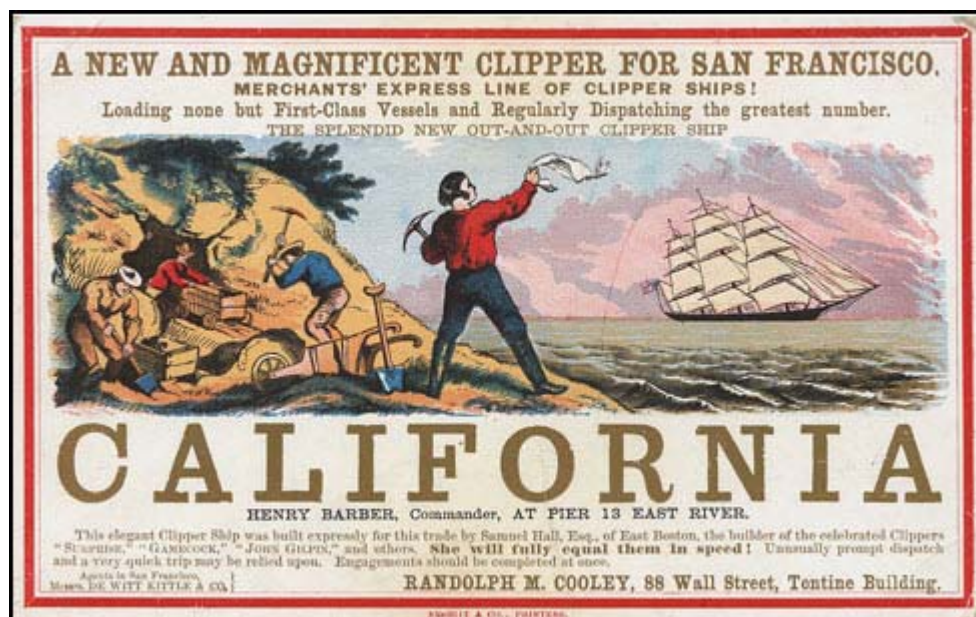
## Gold in California!

In January of 1848, **James Marshall** was building a saw mill for **John Sutter** a few miles outside of present-day Sacramento, California. Marshall noticed sparkling pieces of rock in a ditch. When he showed them to Sutter, the property owner confirmed that they were indeed gold. Sutter planned to keep the discovery a secret, but the news leaked out. The Great California Gold Rush began!



## The California Gold Rush

Gold seekers from all over the world hurried to California. Some journeyed by sea while others traveled the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. In 1849, over 80,000 people, called forty-niners, hurried to the West to mine for gold. Americans made up three-fourths of the influx, but large numbers also came from South America, Europe, Australia and Mexico. Three hundred Chinese immigrants also crossed the Pacific and established California's Chinese-American community. In four years, the population of California grew from 20,000 to 220,000. Although the California Gold Rush more than doubled the global supply of gold, very few forty-niners acquired long-term wealth. Merchants, on the other hand, earned profits furnishing supplies for the miners. For example, **Levi Strauss**, a Jewish immigrant, made his fortune by selling work pants made from sturdy denim.



*Sailing for the California: 1850*

Because of its sharp increase in population, California qualified for statehood in 1850. Californians wrote a constitution, elected a state legislature and chose a governor. Its formal request for statehood, however, set off a firestorm in Congress. The southern senators and representatives objected to California's admission to the Union because the territory's constitution outlawed slavery. With a ban on slavery, California would upset the balance between slave states and free

states. Some southern radicals, referred to as **Fire-eaters**, threatened to leave the Union over the issue. It was up to Congress to find a compromise that would permit California's admission as a state and would calm the anxieties of southerners.

California's gold fever began to fade by 1860, but strikes in other parts of the West, such as Colorado, South Dakota, Arizona and Montana drew large numbers of people. Many of these lands, however, belonged to Native Americans through agreements negotiated with the U.S. government. Gold seekers thought nothing of violating these treaties. Native Americans soon found themselves confined to smaller and smaller areas. Learn how they responded to these events by watching the video listed below.



The Gold Rush and Native Americans



Go to Questions 21 and 22.

## What's next?

Between 1820 and 1860, Americans continued to develop a national spirit and pride in their country. At the same time, strong, sectional rivalries grew because the North and the South were determined to further their own economic and political interests. Advancements in technology led to improvements in transportation and communication that linked the North and the Midwest. These developments linked the Northeast and the Midwest economically. It also made the differences between these regions and the South more apparent. Before examining the industrialized economy of the North in the next unit, review the names and terms found in Unit 28; then, answer Questions 23 through 32.



Go to Questions 23 through 32.