

Conquest West

DOCUMENT 10.1

JAMES K. POLK, War Message

1846

James K. Polk (1795–1849) ran for the nomination of the Democratic Party in 1844 on a ticket that promised to annex the independent Republic of Texas (even though it was still claimed by Mexico) and to rival Great Britain for control of the Oregon Territory. After the Mexican army attacked American forces in the Republic of Texas, President Polk made the following war address to the US Senate.

... The Mexican Government . . . , after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory, and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil. . . .

In my message at the commencement of the present session, I informed you that, upon the earnest appeal, both of the congress and convention of Texas, I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position “between the Nueces and the Del Norte [two rivers in southeastern Texas].” This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

This force was concentrated at Corpus Christi, and remained there until after I had received such information from Mexico as rendered it probable, if not certain, that the Mexican government would refuse to receive our envoy. . . .

. . . It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defence of that portion of our country. Accordingly, on the 13th of January last, instructions were issued to the general in command of these troops to occupy the left bank of the Del Norte. This river which is the southwestern boundary of the state of Texas, is an exposed frontier. . . .

The movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made by the commanding general, under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens, and to regard the relations between that republic and the United States as peaceful, unless she should declare war, or commit acts of hostility indicative of a state of war. He was specially directed to protect private property and respect personal rights. . . .

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude, and, on the 12th of April, General Ampudia, then in command, notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours, and to retire beyond the Nueces river; and, in the event of his failure to comply with these demands, announced that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question. But no open act of hostility was committed until the 24th of April. On that day, General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated to General Taylor that "he considered hostilities commenced, and should prosecute them." A party of dragoons, of sixty-three men and officers, were on the same day despatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, "became engaged with a large body of these troops, and after a short affair, in which some sixteen were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender."

The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens throughout a long period of years remain unredressed; and solemn treaties, pledging her public faith for this redress, have been disregarded. A government either unable or unwilling to enforce the execution of such treaties, fails to perform one of its plainest duties.

Robert Tomes and John Laird Wilson, *Battles of America by Sea and Land* (New York: James S. Virtue, 1878), 585, 587–588.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: Identify the chief reasons that Polk provides for engaging in hostilities with Mexico.

Analyze: Infer what Texans' motivations might be for annexing themselves to the United States.

Evaluate: To what extent is Polk's argument based on the Jeffersonian ideals of inalienable rights?