**A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States**

**by Jesús Velasco-Márquez
Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México**

The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. U.S. historians refer to this event as "The Mexican War," while in Mexico we prefer to use the term "The U.S. Invasion." These contrasting conceptualizations are not based on mere whims, but on different perceptions of the conflict. When the U.S. Congress authorized a declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, [President Polk's](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/biographies/james_polk.html) viewpoint was officially accepted. It held that the posture of the Mexican government —or better said, the Mexican governments — had left the United States with no other alternative for defending its national security and interests, and that Mexico was to blame for causing the war. That argument has been the object of debate in Mexican and U.S. historiographies, with those who have defended it and criticized it trying to explain the conduct of Mexican political leaders and opinion makers. U.S. historians have found it difficult to explain the attitude adopted by the Mexican governments and the national press in those years. Their interpretations have been biased, taking some official declarations and newspaper articles out of context and using them as supposed evidence of Mexico's exaggerated belligerency. If these very documents are studied in the context of Mexico's internal situation at that time, however, we can see the other side of the coin. Indeed, in order to understand Mexico's viewpoint with regard to the war with the United States, it is necessary to consider three important issues: first, Mexico's internal state of affairs during the 1840s; second, the problem of Texas; and third, the U.S. invasion of Mexican territory.

The federal republican government was finally restored in 1847, after six presidents had succeeded one another from June 1844 to September 1847. With the exception of Manuel de la Peña y Peña, the rest came to power as a result of popular or military uprisings against their predecessors. Thus, all confronted opposition forces that questioned their legitimacy and were eager to overthrow them. As a result of these conditions, the problems of the separation of Texas and its annexation to the United States, as well as [John Slidell's](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/biographies/john_slidell.html) mission, became part of the debate among political parties and factions and a pretext for one faction or another to downplay the legitimacy of its opponents.

As pointed out in an article in the daily "EI Siglo XIX," the issue of Texas separation and the attempts to bring it back under Mexican sovereignty were used to justify, enhance, tear down or revive the reputations of important figures and political parties, and above all, as an excuse to justify any type of "revolutionary" movement.[1](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#1) In the same way, efforts during 1845 and 1846 to seek negotiated solutions for avoiding the annexation of Texas to the United States and later, for the war, were denounced by the opposition press as acts of weakness and even treason.

The fragile state of authority was therefore an obstacle to any attempt at negotiated solutions…

It is also worth emphasizing here that constitutional changes made during this period imposed restrictions on the actions of those in power. Some examples include: an article added to the constitution prohibiting the transfer of control over territory;[3](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#3) and amendments to the 1824 Federal Constitution which were approved in 1847 and which disqualified "the Executive from signing a peace agreement and concluding negotiations with foreign nations." [4](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#4)

From the Mexican perspective, there were two facets to the problem of Texas: one was related to its separation from Mexico and the other to its annexation to the United States. With regard to the first, Mexico asserted from 1836 to 1845, perhaps a bit inflexibly that the secession of Texas was illegitimate, and it reaffirmed its right to reincorporate this part of its territory by any means necessary, including the use of force. Furthermore, it considered that despite the recognition Texans had gained in other countries, the conflict was an internal problem. Let it be said in passing that Mexico's position was very similar to that adopted by the U.S. government when it faced the problem of the succession of its southern states years later. But in addition, the potential emancipation of Texas forewarned of the vulnerability of the New Mexico and California territories, due to both the intentions of Texas to define its border along the Río Grande and those of the United States to expand its territory to the Pacific Ocean.

The impossibility of reincorporating Texas through military submission of the rebels was already clear in 1843 when the Santa Anna government agreed to sign an armistice. In that year, the option of negotiations leaning toward recognition of Texan independence began to take shape. By that time, however, the United States had already revived its old project of annexing the region.

From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it reaffirmed the posture it had expressed a year before that Mexico would consider such an act "a declaration of war." And later, when the Congress approved the joint resolution inviting Texas to join the United States, Mexico suspended diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Mexico asserted that the annexation of Texas—whether by treaty or in a U.S. Congressional resolution—was a violation of the 1828 border treaty, which had acknowledged Mexico's sovereignty over that territory.[5](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#5) Consequently, such acts were a violation of the fundamental principles of international law, and furthermore, they established a dangerous precedent threatening Mexico's territorial security, since the same formulas could be used to annex other areas along the border.

Faced with this situation, the José Joaquín de Herrera administration attempted a double-edged diplomacy by, first, denouncing the U.S. Congressional resolution as illegal,[6](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#6) and secondly, establishing negotiations with Texas with two objectives in mind: to avoid the annexation of Texas and elude an armed conflict with the United States. The option of negotiations leaning toward recognizing Texas independence was accepted under the condition that it would reject annexation. To this end, the good offices of British representatives in Mexico and Texas were used but this attempt turned out to be too long overdue and unfruitful…

Once the Texas government had agreed to the annexation, on July 4, 1845, the Herrera administration ordered the mobilization of federal troops to protect the northern border. The order was in accordance with a decree approved by Congress exactly one month earlier, authorizing the government "within its full rights. To use all available resources to resist such an annexation to the very end."[9](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#9)

The posture in favor of seeking a negotiated solution was, however, maintained. One month earlier the Mexican government's position had been communicated by U.S. agent William Parrot to Secretary of State Buchanan in the following terms:

I have satisfactorily ascertained through the indirect channel of communication ...that the present government will not declare war against the United States, even if Texas be annexed.[12](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#12)

Mexico's anti-belligerent posture in favor of negotiations was confirmed October 15, 1845, when its foreign relations minister, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, notified U.S. consul John Black

...that although the Mexican nation was gravely offended by the United States due to its actions in Texas — belonging to Mexico — the government was willing to receive a commissioner who would arrive in this capital from the United States possessing full faculties to settle the current dispute in a peaceful, reasonable and respectable way.[13](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#13)

Any possibilities for entering into negotiations, however, faced serious obstacles. First opposition from public opinion and certain political interests to an agreement signifying a recognition of Texas' annexation had increased.14 Thus, the government lacked the internal consensus necessary for negotiations. Secondly, the U.S. proposal included in the instructions given to envoy John Slidell did not have much to offer in terms of negotiations. Those instructions not only included the demand that the Río Grande serve as the Texas border when, in fact, the Nueces River had always been defined as such, but also a demand for the cession of the territories of New Mexico and California linked to claims which had been resolved since the signing of the Convention of 1843.[15](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#15)

Furthermore, the Polk administration had accredited Slidell as a plenipotentiary secretary and not as an ad hoc commissioner with faculties only for initiating negotiations, as the Mexican government had agreed to. The Slidell mission was, therefore, used to force the Mexican government into tacitly recognizing the annexation of Texas and the cession of the disputed territory. This last point was the initial obstacle for beginning negotiations and was a recurrent issue in the correspondence between the U.S. envoy and Ministers Manuel de la Peña y Peña and Joaquin Maria del Castillo y Lanzas between December 8, 1845 and March 21, 1846.[16](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#16)

The demands made by John Slidell and the U.S. government's refusal to modify the terms of his accreditation, accompanied by the formalization of the admission of Texas to the United States and the order given to [General Taylor](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/biographies/zachary_taylor.html) to occupy the territory between the Río Grande and the Nueces River, were the factors that confirmed to Mexicans that the objective of the mission was none other than to lay out

...a crude trap...with an outrageous Machiavellian objective. The dilemma was after all quite simple: either the Mexican government admitted a regular government secretary, which would be equivalent to reestablishing friendly relations between the two countries without the dispute being resolved, thus approving the usurpation of Texas and proving to the world that despite any matter of offense and divestment, Mexico would always be dependent on. And a slave to the United States or — the more likely possibility- the Mexican government would not agree to such an excessive humiliation and a pretext would thus exist for resorting to war and for more cases of usurpation.[18](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#18)

Scarcely a week after Slidell received his credentials and began his trip back to the United States, the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Río Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation. This provocation by President Polk would be acknowledged even by John C. Calhoun, who had been the main promoter of the annexation of Texas.[19](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#19) In the eyes of the Mariano Paredes government, the mobilization of the U.S. army was an outright attack on Mexico's territorial integrity and clearly demonstrated that the United States had no intention of subjecting itself to the terms of the 1828 border treaty. As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Río Grande and the Nueces River—an order which led to the battles of [Palo Alto](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/war/palo_alto.html) and Resaca de la Palma.

Even before these incidents, President Polk had already decided to ask the U.S. Congress to declare war against Mexico, but the battles provided a pretext to mobilize the opinions of both U.S. legislators and the public in favor of such a measure. He held that

Mexico had crossed over the U.S. border, had invaded our territory and had cawed the shedding of U.S. blood in U.S. territory.[20](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#20)

This declaration not only implied a unilateral definition of the U.S. border with Mexico. but also clearly defined the reason for the war as the defense of U.S. territorial security. Nevertheless, Polk immediately ordered the occupation of the territory south of the Río Grande, as well as the New Mexico and California territories and the blocking of Mexican ports. The question was and continues to be: were these actions in defense of U.S. territorial security or the flagrant invasion of Mexican territory? From the viewpoint of Mexicans, the answer was clear: the U.S. government was not seeking to protect its territorial security, nor did it have other supposed demands. but rather it was determined to take over a territory legitimately belonging to Mexico.

Most people in Mexico believed the use of arms was the only option available to defend their rights and territorial integrity.

The events of the following months dramatically prevented Mexicans from pursuing the stubborn, however just, defense of their territory. and they finally had to accept a negotiation that was difficult, painful and undignified for negotiators on both sides. This is revealed by comments made by Nicholas Trist to his wife regarding the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the attitude assumed by Mexicans with regard to the U.S. invasion:

Just as they were about to sign the treaty...one of the Mexicans, Don Bernardo Couto, remarked to him, "this must be a proud moment for you; no less proud for you than it is humiliating for us." To this Mr. Trist replied "we are making peace, let that be our only thought." But, said he to us in relating it, "Could those Mexicans have seen into my heart at that moment, they would have known that my feeling of shame as an American was far stronger than theirs could be as Mexicans. For though it would not have done for me to say so there, that was a thing for every right minded American to be ashamed of, and I was ashamed of it, most cordially and intensely ashamed of it."[28](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_a_mexican_viewpoint.html#28)

Indeed, during the entire conflict, from the separation of Texas to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico defended its territory and if at any time its position was belligerent, it was belligerent in the defense of national security and for the preservation of international legal order. Therefore, it was not a result of arrogance, nor of irresponsibility, but rather the only possible response to the arguments and the actions of the U.S. government. In conclusion, the armed conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the product of deliberate aggression and should therefore be referred to as "The U.S. War Against Mexico."