**Document H: The Power of an Idea**

by Miguel Ángel González Quiroga

It is said that wars usually begin many years before the first shot is fired. I believe this to be so, and most especially in the case of this war. But how far back do we go? Ten years to the separation of Texas? Twenty-five years to the founding of the Mexican State? I would agree with those who hold that the die was cast when the United States was born as a nation and began its slow but inexorable expansion to the West.

The westward movement is one of several factors attributed to this war. You've heard them all: the slave interests of the South, the commercial interests of the Northeast, the land hunger of the West, Manifest Destiny, the Warhawks, [James K. Polk](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/biographies/james_polk.html). For those who blame Mexico: her internal divisions, her inability to colonize and govern the Northern lands, her rampant militarism, her unbounded arrogance.

American expansion, or growth, to use a less belligerent term, was, in my estimation, the principal cause of this great conflict. Without it, the war is simply incomprehensible. We could almost say the expansion was an irreducible brute fact.

… I wish to include a few words on the concept of Manifest Destiny. It is dangerous to underestimate the power of an idea. Especially one which captures the imagination of a people. Manifest Destiny was such an idea. To extend American democracy to the rest of the continent was to place a mantle of legitimacy on what was essentially an insatiable ambition for land. Some have argued that it was villainy clad in the armor of a righteous cause, to use an expression by Lippman. It is difficult to argue against democracy and its extension to the farthest reaches of the continent although historians have pointed out that, at least in this case, extending the area of freedom also signified extending the area of slavery.

The assertion of the superiority of the American race and the concomitant denigration of Mexico is another element of Manifest Destiny. It was Walt Whitman who stated: "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the new world with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission!"

Manifest Destiny was a graceful way to justify something unjustifiable. It has not escaped our attention that [Ulysses S. Grant](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/biographies/ulysses_grant.html), one of the most prominent of American military men, and himself a participant in the war, wrote in his memoirs, "I do not think there ever was a more wicked war than that waged by the United States in Mexico. I thought so at the time, when I was a youngster, only I had not moral courage enough to resign."

But as a historian I do not wish to judge or to censure. Let me state my own views on the matter: expansion was a historical process that, like a westward wind, swept all before it. Not Mexico, not any force on this continent or any continent could have prevented it. This is not a question of good demographics. European immigration led to an explosive growth of the population of the United States and this inevitably led to expansion. Expansion led to war.

**Document I: The Mexican War**

Author:   Persifor Smith   
Date:1847

**Annotation:**

Persifor Smith (1798-1858), General Winfield Scott's second in command, provides a first-hand account of the capture of Mexico City. On April 18, 1847

This people have been conceived in sin & born in iniquity for ages the millions have been degraded by oppression and the few corrupted by unbridled power. Their whole moral character is debased, they have no self respect & are therefore incapable of self government; having no test within, they are guilty of any vice they think they can screen from punishment, and now all being alike base they naturally encourage each other's degradation. The best people in the country look on any reform as hopeless without the restraint & example of others and so actually seek to prolong the war with the view of benefiting by the example we give them even as conquerors. The immense crowd of office holders civil as well as military who have hitherto lived on the revenues & exactions of the government, are struggling to perpetuate the abuses by which they exist, and now then their very nationality is at stake the Congress which was to have met...is not yet a quorum. If two weeks more go by without the government being organized I do not think a peace can be made for years, and I believe indeed that they will cease to exist except as little quarrelsome, disorderly States....

Don't let any of my letter get into the paper.

**Textbook Accounts**

*Document J: Excerpt #1: 1911*  
Henry William Elson and Cornelia Eliza MacMullan, *The Story of Our Country* (New York: Thompson Brown Company; Johnson, Blagen & Co., 1911), 132–133.

*Texas had now come into the Union, but there was still trouble with Mexico. That country seemed bent on a quarrel. President Polk did not desire it, he made an effort to settle the question by treaty; and this might have been done had Mexico been willing to yield certain points. "Texas has no right as an independent state to seek and receive admission into the United States," she said. And then she insisted that the dividing line should be the Nueces River, while Texas laid claim to the Rio Grande.*

*President Polk, fearing an attack, sent General Zachary Taylor to the disputed territory. And not many days passed before General Taylor received a letter from the Mexican general, Ampudia. "Your Government has not only insulted but has provoked the Mexican nation," he wrote, "and in this case, by orders of my Government, I require you to break up your camp and retire to the other bank of the Nueces River. If you insist upon remaining upon the soil, it will clearly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question."*

*What was General Taylor's answer? "The instruction under which I am acting will not permit me to go back from the position I now occupy. I regret the alternative which you offer, but, at the same time, wish it understood that I shall by no means avoid such an alternative, leaving the responsibility with those who rashly commence hostilities."*

*It was not long after this that war was declared. General Taylor did not wait for more soldiers to arrive, but marched on and defeated the Mexicans near the mouth of the Rio Grande, although they outnumbered him. The enemy fled across the river, but Taylor pursued them and captured Matamoros. He then moved up the Rio Grande to besiege Monterey, one of the most strongly fortified cities of Mexico.*

*In 1995, a history textbook shows disagreement and division over the war with Mexico.*

*Document K: Example #2: 1995*  
James W. Davidson and Michael B. Stoff, *The American Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 366.

*In January 1846, Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to cross the Nueces River and set up posts along the Rio Grande. Polk knew that Mexico claimed this land and that the move might spark a war. In April 1846, Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and fought briefly with the Americans. Soldiers on both sides were killed.*

*President Polk claimed that Mexico had "shed American blood upon the American soil." At his urging, Congress declared war on Mexico. Americans were divided over the war. Many people in the South and West wanted more land and so were eager to fight. Northerners, however, opposed the war. They saw it as a southern plot to add slave states to the Union.*