

The Mexican-American War: Arguments for and against Going to War



Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Méjico, 1847 (Library of Congress)

The Mexican-American War: Arguments for and against Going to War

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2023)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVEL(S): 9–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Three or four 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

The three lessons in this unit explore a debate about US entry into the Mexican-American War. In the first lesson, the students will analyze President James Polk's message to Congress requesting a declaration of war against Mexico in 1846. In the second lesson, the students will analyze a speech made by Representative Joshua Giddings, in which he challenges Polk and raises new questions about slaveholders' interests. You will assess students' understanding by reviewing their participation in a mock debate.

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate comprehension by identifying the authors' keywords and summarizing the original text in their own words
- Analyze arguments presented in a historical text (e.g., justifications for declaring or opposing the Mexican-American War, the relationship between slavery and war)
- Use evidence from documents to prepare and take part in a related activity (e.g., a mock debate)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did political leaders explain why they favored or opposed a US declaration of war upon Mexico?
- How did ongoing debates about slavery shape the question of war with Mexico?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; summarize complex information presented in a text by paraphrasing them in simpler but still accurate terms.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1.a: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

MATERIALS

- Activity Sheet 1: James K. Polk, excerpts from “Hostilities by Mexico: A Message from the President of the United States of America,” *Congressional Globe*, May 11, 1946. Document number 196, 29th Congress, 1st session, Library of Congress, James K. Polk Papers: Series 5: Messages and Speeches, 1833–1849, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/mss365090072/](https://www.loc.gov/item/mss365090072/).
- Activity Sheet 2: Rep. Joshua Giddings, excerpts from his statement before the House of Representatives, *Congressional Globe*, May 12, 1846, Library of Congress, [memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage](https://www.memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A Narrative of the Mexican-American War

by Pedro Santoni, California State University, San Bernardino

On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces clashed with United States troops in a large farm field near present-day Rancho de Carricitos, some twenty-eight miles northwest of Fort Texas, the US military outpost on the north bank of the Rio Grande. The skirmish brought to a boil the tensions that had wracked the relationship between the United States and Mexico since the early nineteenth century and enabled President James K. Polk of the United States to declare war on May 11, 1846.

Mexico found itself ill-prepared to meet the challenge of aggressive US expansionism. Following a destructive war (1810–1821) to win independence from Spain, many public-spirited Mexicans looked to the future with unbridled optimism as the new nation attempted to build a strong, viable nation-state. The former strong and stable Viceroyalty of New Spain instead found itself plagued by economic decline, political turmoil, regional divisions, and class hatreds. Consequently, by the time the specter of war loomed over Mexico in the spring of 1846, Mexican patriots were increasingly concerned about the young republic’s ability to protect its territorial integrity from the drive westward of its northern neighbor.

The idea that Providence had ordained the spread of Anglo-American civilization found a home in the northern Mexican province of Texas, which had been sparsely populated since the late 1600s. After independence, Mexican leaders confirmed a number of land grants issued by Spanish authorities (and dispensed others as well) in an attempt to colonize the territory. Thousands of US citizens, many of whom favored separating the province from Mexico, then settled in Texas. When in 1835 Mexican politicians moved to tighten the central government’s control over public affairs, colonists in Texas, arguing that their rights under the 1824 federal constitution had been violated, rebelled and won their independence the following year.

Between 1836 and 1845 authorities in Mexico refused to recognize this arrangement, but they could not bring the former province back into the Mexican union. Meanwhile, the question of whether the US would annex Texas remained unresolved. By 1845, however, surging popular sentiment for expansion in the US—evidenced by the refrain “Manifest Destiny”—prompted US leaders to move ahead with annexation. The US admitted Texas to the Union late that February, and Texas announced its decision to join the US in mid-July. Given that Mexico had already made it clear that it would sever diplomatic relations if the US annexed Texas, these events put both nations on a collision course to war.

Late in 1845 US and Mexican officials tried to negotiate a settlement to avoid conflict, but such efforts proved unsuccessful. Mexicans fought bravely during the war to defend national honor and safeguard the country’s territorial integrity, but the 1848 treaty that brought the struggle to an end deprived Mexico of almost half its territory and left its leaders with grave anxieties regarding the country’s survival. On the other hand, the seizure of Mexican land—particularly California, where gold was discovered in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada—did more than help the US fulfill its “Manifest Destiny.” The spoils of war, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, poisoned the United States. They helped shatter the nation’s fragile sectional balance, paving the way for the devastating Civil War less than fifteen years later.

Pedro Santoni is a professor of history at California State University San Bernardino. He is the author of Mexicans at Arms: Puro Federalists and the Politics of War, 1845–1848 *(1996)* and co-editor of Mexico, 1848–1853: Los Años Olvidados *(2019)*.

LESSON 1

JAMES POLK AND THE PRO-WAR ARGUMENT

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2023)

OVERVIEW

Students will “read like a detective” to gain a clear understanding of President James K. Polk’s Special Message to Congress on Mexican Relations on May 11, 1846. They will demonstrate their comprehension by identifying keywords in the message and then summarizing the content in their own words. They will then analyze Polk’s central arguments and engage in a class discussion of those arguments.

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate comprehension by identifying the authors’ keywords and summarizing the original text in their own words
- Analyze arguments presented in a historical text (e.g., justifications for declaring or opposing the Mexican-American War, the relationship between slavery and war)

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GRADE LEVELS: 9–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. The three lessons in this unit explore a debate about US entry into the Mexican-American War.

MATERIALS

- Activity Sheet 1: James K. Polk, excerpts from “Hostilities by Mexico: A Message from the President of the United States of America,” *Congressional Globe*, May 11, 1846. Document number 196, 29th Congress, 1st session, Library of Congress, James K. Polk Papers: Series 5: Messages and Speeches, 1833–1849, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/mss365090072/.

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.
2. You may prepare for student questions by reading the Historical Background on page 4 and reviewing these facts:
 - a. After the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty defined the US-Mexico boundary, Spain encouraged Americans—largely those of European ancestry—to settle in the province of Texas. Spain anticipated that this would create a sufficient population of farmers and ranchers to challenge Native American attacks on Mexico.
 - b. Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821.
 - c. The Americans who migrated to Texas (which was still part of Mexico) were largely southerners and often forced enslaved people to move with them. These Americans resented Mexico’s 1829 abolition of slavery. They refused to obey the law. In 1836 they declared that Texas was a new republic—a claim that Mexico disputed.
 - d. Slaveholders in Texas aspired to join the US and form state governments protecting slavery. If they got their way, it would potentially upset the status quo balance of slave states and free states in the US Senate. This, in turn, would pave the way for creating federal policies protecting slavery.

- e. Ultimately, the annexation of new states and the distribution of states supporting or opposing slavery would be temporarily resolved by Congress with the Compromise of 1850.
3. You may choose to briefly touch on some of this context while introducing President Polk's message to Congress, but do not provide extensive historical background at this time. The goal is for the students to develop ideas, draw conclusions, and explain and defend their statements based solely on the evidence in the document.
 4. Distribute Activity Sheet 1 with the excerpts from President Polk's message to Congress. The link in the Materials section goes to the full text if you or your students would like to view the entire text.
 - a. "Share read" the document with the students by having them follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences. Continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
 - b. Ask students or student groups to close read the document selections in the activity sheet and pick out the most important words (keywords) used by the author to convey his meaning in each section of text. The number of keywords depends on the length of the text; for these excerpts, the students should select 8–10 keywords. Then ask them to summarize the text in their own words. Students can brainstorm as partners or small groups but must complete their own organizer.
 5. Class discussion: What is Polk's central argument? Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare with other groups.

LESSON 2

JOSHUA GIDDINGS AND THE ANTI-WAR ARGUMENT

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2023)

OVERVIEW

Students will again “read like a detective” to gain a clear understanding of the arguments presented by Congressman Joshua Reed Giddings of Ohio, who opposed Polk’s call for war with Mexico. They will demonstrate their comprehension by identifying keywords and phrases in the message and summarizing the content in their own words. They will then analyze Giddings’s central arguments and engage in a class discussion of those arguments.

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate comprehension by identifying the authors’ keywords and phrases and summarizing the original text in their own words
- Analyze arguments presented in a historical text (e.g., justifications for declaring or opposing the Mexican-American War, the relationship between slavery and war)

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GRADE LEVELS: 9–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute period

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MATERIALS

- Activity Sheet 2: Rep. Joshua Giddings, excerpts from his statement before the House of Representatives, *Congressional Globe*, May 12, 1846, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage.

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.
2. You may prepare for student questions by reviewing the Historical Background on page 4 as well as the following information about Joshua Giddings:
 - a. Joshua Reed Giddings served in the House of Representatives representing Ohio from 1837 to 1859.
 - b. Giddings was adamantly, publicly, and passionately anti-slavery. In 1842, he became an abolitionist icon when he introduced a motion in defense of the enslaved people who revolted on board the *Creole*, was censured by the House, resigned his seat in protest, and then won re-election in a special election. He was at various points a Whig, Free Soiler, and Republican—joining whatever political party was most aggressively anti-slavery.
3. You may choose to briefly touch on the context of Giddings’s speech, but do not provide extensive historical background. The goal is for the students to develop ideas, draw conclusions, and explain and defend their statements based solely on the evidence in the document.
4. Distribute Activity Sheet 2 with excerpts from Giddings’s speech in the House of Representatives and share read the text with the class as described in Lesson 1. The link in the Materials section goes to the full text if you or your

students would like to view the entire text.

- a. The students or student groups will close read the text and fill out the activity sheet as they did in Lesson 1, first selecting the author's keywords (8–10 keywords) in each section of text and then summarizing the meaning of the text in their own words.
5. Class discussion: What is Giddings's central argument? Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare with other groups.
6. Tell students to bring both the Polk and Giddings documents to the next class.

LESSON 3

DEBATING THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2023)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will work in groups to assemble evidence from the Polk and Giddings documents that will enable them to compose questions and answers for a scripted debate.

Students will be able to

- Analyze arguments presented in a historical text (e.g., justifications for declaring or opposing the Mexican-American War, the relationship between slavery and war)
- Use evidence from documents to prepare and take part in a related activity (e.g., a mock debate)

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GRADE LEVELS: 9–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One or two 45-minute periods, depending on whether you choose to have all the groups present their mock debates in class

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. The three lessons in this unit explore a debate about US entry into the Mexican-American War.

MATERIALS

- Activity Sheet 1: James K. Polk, excerpts from “Hostilities by Mexico: A Message from the President of the United States of America,” *Congressional Globe*, May 11, 1846. Document number 196, 29th Congress, 1st session, Library of Congress, James K. Polk Papers: Series 5: Messages and Speeches, 1833–1849, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/mss365090072/.
- Activity Sheet 2: Rep. Joshua Giddings, excerpts from his statement before the House of Representatives, *Congressional Globe*, May 12, 1846, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage.

PROCEDURE

1. Organize students into groups of three or five. All students should have copies of both documents.
2. Tell the students that they are going to have a mock debate based on the arguments given in the two texts they studied in the previous two lessons.
 - a. They need to choose one person in their group to be a debate moderator. Half of the remaining students will argue in favor of war and half will argue against it.
 - b. The students will write the script (questions and answers and rebuttals) for a debate based on the issues raised in the primary sources that they have been studying. The script is to be written as a team effort, and everyone in the group will have a copy of the final script. This will be similar to a short reader's-theater piece rather than an actual debate. You may want to show them a video of an actual debate as a model.
 - c. Give the students the following question to be asked by the moderator and addressed by both sides: What do you believe is your opponent's weakest argument in favor of (or against) declaring war on Mexico? (Make sure to base the answer on evidence from the texts.)

- d. Students should then write two to four questions of their own to be answered by either side with the opportunity for rebuttal. Emphasize that the answers must be drawn directly from the primary source material.
 - e. Remind the students that everyone in the group needs to work on all the questions, answers, and rebuttals and that the responses need to be supported by statements in the original documents.
 - f. Students will role-play the part of a proponent or opponent of war with Mexico and will present their debates to the rest of the class. The debate moderator asks the scripted questions and directs the flow of the debate.
3. Class discussion: After all of the debate presentations are concluded, discuss the best arguments made by the groups and the best text-based evidence used.

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Activity Sheet 1: James K. Polk, “Hostilities by Mexico: A Message from the President of the United States of America,” May 11, 1846 (Excerpts)

The existing state of the relations between the United States and Mexico renders it proper that I should bring the subject to the consideration of Congress. In my message at the commencement of your present session the state of these relations, the causes which led to the suspension of diplomatic intercourse between the two countries in March, 1845, and the long-continued and unredressed wrongs and injuries committed by the Mexican Government on citizens of the United States in their persons and property were briefly set forth.

. . . The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico on liberal and honorable terms, and the readiness of this Government to regulate and adjust our boundary and other causes of difference with that power on such fair and equitable principles as would lead to permanent relations of the most friendly nature, induced me in September last to seek the reopening of diplomatic relations between the two countries. . . . An envoy of the United States repaired to Mexico with full powers to adjust every existing difference. . . .

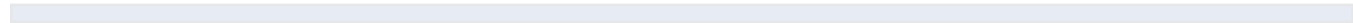
Keywords:

What does it mean to you?

NAME _____ PERIOD _____ DATE _____

<p>The Mexican Government not only refused to receive him [a diplomatic envoy] or listen to his propositions, but 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. . . .</p> <p>. . . 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 Del Norte.” 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.</p> <p>. . . 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. [The commanding general] was specially directed to protect private property and respect personal rights.</p>	<p>Keywords:</p> <p>What does it mean to you?</p>
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NAME	PERIOD	DATE
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<p>Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war. As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.</p> <p>. . . War actually existing and our territory having been invaded, General Taylor, pursuant to authority vested in him by my direction, has called on the governor of Texas for four regiments of State troops, two to be mounted and two to serve on foot, and on the governor of Louisiana for four regiments of infantry to be sent to him as soon as practicable. In further vindication of our rights and defense of our territory, I invoke the prompt action of Congress to recognize the existence of the war, and to place at the disposition of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace.</p>	<p>Keywords:</p> <p>What does it mean to you?</p>
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Source: *Congressional Globe*, May 11, 1946. Document number 196, 29th Congress, 1st session, Library of Congress, James K. Polk Papers: Series 5: Messages and Speeches, 1833–1849, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/mss365090072/

