

those who denounced it as unjust, though with the exception of Joshua R. Giddings (Ohio) they were willing to support the army now that hostilities had begun, were Giddings, Columbus Delano (Ohio), John W. Houston (Delaware), John Quincy Adams (Massachusetts) and Robert Toombs (Georgia).

“MY COUNTRY, RIGHT OR WRONG”

DEBATE ON THE MEXICAN WAR, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
MAY 13-19, 1846

MR. GIDDINGS.—The President in his message, as a pretext for sending our army to invade and conquer the country upon the Rio Grande, says:

“Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic.”

This mere declaration on paper by the legislature of Texas could not change or alter the *facts*. *They* were entered upon the page of history, as well as upon the records of eternal truth; and no flagrant falsehood by that body, indorsed by a dignitary of this Government, can change or alter them. The truth is that Texas had agreed upon the Nueces as her boundary.

Were Mexico to declare, by a legislative act, that her eastern boundary is the “Hudson River,” and, on paper, attach the whole of our States south and west of that stream to her congressional districts, and then, on paper, divide our seaboard into collection districts, without being able to enforce her laws in any way whatever, her president may, at the next meeting of her congress, adopt this portion of President Polk’s message, and urge, with equal propriety, that Pennsylvania and Ohio are Mexican territory. But if Mexico possessed the power and disposition to enforce such views, we should regard the carrying them out to be an outrage unparalleled among civilized and Christian nations; and were a Mexican army to invade our country, in order to compel us to unite with their government, we should meet them sword in hand and would yield our country only with our lives.

I apprehend that much blood and much treasure will be expended before the people of New Mexico will be compelled to unite with slave-holding Texas. Those Mexicans love freedom. They have abolished slavery, for which they entertain an uncon-

querable detestation. If I had time, I should like to inquire of gentlemen from New England and from our free States what benefit our nation or the world are to receive from a conquest of that country and the extension of slavery over it?

But the President says this Mexican country "is now included in one of our congressional districts." These thirty thousand people who, so soon as the bill which passed this House yesterday shall receive the sanction of the Senate, and shall be approved by the President, will be in a state of war with this nation, are to be represented on this floor because Texas has *on paper* attached them to one of her congressional districts. If this act of the Texan legislature has any binding force whatever, it will render every Mexican who opposes our army a *traitor against this Government*, and will subject him to the punishment of death.

Yes, the men who burned their dwellings at Point Isabel and with their wives and little ones fled before our invading army are to be represented in this body. Should their representative, according to the democratic doctrine, carry out the views of his constituents, the President himself may, in an unguarded moment, find a "lasso" about his own neck, and the members of our body be assassinated agreeably to the hearty wishes of the people of that district.

I regard the message as having been put forth to divert public attention from the outrage committed by the President upon our own Constitution, and the exercise of usurped powers, of which he has been guilty in ordering our army to invade a country with which we are at peace, and of provoking and bringing on this war. I am led to this inevitable conclusion from the fact that he dare not rest his justification upon *truth*. He reminds us of the grievous wrongs perpetrated (as he says) by Mexico upon our people in former years, and alludes to the delay of that government in the payment of debts due our people, and mourns over the loss of our commerce with Mexico; all for the purpose of justifying himself in sending the army to the Rio Grande, and commencing the work of human butchery!

If the country be *ours*, why does he seek to justify the taking possession of it by reference to the fact that Mexico is indebted to some of our people? If it be not ours, and he has taken possession of it in order to compel Mexico to pay those debts, why not say so? The fact that Mexico has not paid the debts due to our citizens can have no legitimate connection with taking possession of our own soil. But the writer of the message was obviously conscious that this invasion of the Mexican ter-

ritory could not be justified; and he endeavored to extenuate the act by assuring us that "the movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens unless she should declare war."

What aggressive acts toward a foreign power could our army commit while on our own territory? While the army was within the United States they could not commit violence upon Mexico. The order was also to abstain from all aggressive acts toward "Mexican citizens." It seems that the President expected General Taylor to find Mexican citizens located within the United States. And this sentence evidently alludes to the order of the Secretary of War, in which General Taylor was directed to take possession of the whole country "except that which was in the actual occupation of Mexican troops or Mexican settlements." Here is a distinct admission that this country, claimed by the President as a portion of the United States, was in the actual possession of Mexican troops and Mexican settlements. The idea that our army could *peaceably* surround those military posts occupied by Mexican troops could be entertained by no reflecting mind. The President must have known, and we all know, that those military posts were established for the sole purpose of protecting the country, and the sending of our army there must have been done with the moral certainty that war would ensue. The truth is most obvious to the casual reader. The President obviously intended to involve us in war with Mexico. No sophistry can disguise that fact. That truth will stand on the page of history in all coming time, to the disgrace of this nation and of the age in which we live.

Sir, I regard this war as but one scene in the drama now being enacted by this Administration. Our Government is undergoing a revolution no less marked than was that of France in 1792. As yet, it has not been characterized by that amount of bloodshed and cruelty which distinguished the change of government in France. When the Executive and Congress openly and avowedly took upon themselves the responsibility of extending and perpetuating slavery by the annexation of Texas, and by the total overthrow and subversion of the Constitution, and that, too, by the aid of Northern votes, my confidence in the stability of our institutions was shaken, destroyed. I had hoped that the free States might be aroused in time to save our Union from final overthrow; but that hope has been torn from me. The great charter of our political liberties has

been tamely surrendered by our free States to purchase perpetual slavery for the South. Our Union continues, but our Constitution is gone. The rights of the several States and of the people now depend upon the arbitrary will of an irresponsible majority, who are themselves controlled by a weak but ambitious Executive.

Sir, no man regards this war as *just*. *We know*, the country knows, and the civilized world are conscious, that it has resulted from a desire to extend and sustain an institution on which the curse of the Almighty most visibly rests. Mexico has long since abolished slavery. She has purified herself from its crimes and its guilt. That institution is now circumscribed on the southwest by Mexico, where the slaves of Texas find an asylum. A gentleman from Matamoras lately assured me that there were in and about that city at least five hundred fugitives from Texan bondage. Experience has shown that they cannot be held in servitude in the vicinity of a free government. It has therefore become necessary to extend our dominions into Mexico in order to render slavery secure in Texas. Without this, the great objects of annexation will not be attained. We sought to extend and perpetuate slavery in a peaceful manner by the annexation of Texas. Now we are about to effect that object by war and conquest. Can we invoke the blessing of Deity to rest on such motives? Has the Almighty any attribute that will permit Him to take sides with us in this contest?

I know it is said that a large army and heavy appropriations will make a short war. God grant that the prediction may prove true. I apprehend that Mexico has maturely considered the subject, and enters upon the war with a solemn conviction that her existence as a nation depends upon her resistance to our aggressions. The devotion of her people at Point Isabel conclusively shows it. Why, sir, look at General Taylor's report, and you will see a devotion manifested by the officers and peasantry of Mexico that speaks in thunder tones to those who regard the conquest of that people as a trifling matter. See the females and children, at the approach of our troops, leave their homes, consecrated by all the ties of domestic life, and, while they are fleeing to the Mexican army for protection, see their husbands and fathers apply the torch to their own dwellings, and then fly to arms in defence of their institutions. I confess I was struck with deep solemnity when that communication was read at your table; and, in imitation of William Pitt, I was ready to swear that, if I were a Mexican, as I am an

American, I would never sheathe my sword while an enemy remained upon my native soil.

Yesterday I was asked to declare to the world that "Mexico had made war upon us." That assertion I knew would be untrue, as I have already shown. I felt most deeply the impotence of this body, in thus attempting to change or alter great and important facts already entered upon the records of eternal truth, where they will remain while a God of truth shall exist. Sir, when we were about to assume upon ourselves the awful responsibility of involving our country in a serious and bloody war, with all its consequences; when about to appeal to a God of justice and of truth for his aid in maintaining our national rights, I dared not do so with an impious falsehood upon my lips.

But I hear it said that "we must go for our country, right or wrong." If this maxim be understood to require us to go with our country, or with the majority of our country, to commit a wrong upon other nations or people, either in time of peace or in time of war, I deny its morality; but if it be understood as imposing upon us, at all times and under all circumstances, the obligation of using all our influence and efforts to set our country in the right when we find her wrong, or to keep her right when we find her in the path of duty, then, sir, I yield my assent to its correctness. We are not to abandon our country because our Government is badly administered; but, in such case, we should use our efforts to correct the evil and place the Government in just and able hands.

Again it is said, "we must stand by our country." The man who would do otherwise would be unworthy of any country. He only is a true friend of his country who maintains her virtue and her justice; and he is not a true friend to his country who will knowingly support her in doing wrong. Tomorrow this nation will probably be in a state of war with Mexico. It will be an aggressive, unholy, and unjust war. It will then be my duty to use my efforts to restore peace at the earliest practicable moment that it can be done on just and honorable principles. But while the war continues efforts will probably be made to conquer Mexico, and we shall be called on to appropriate money and raise troops to go there and slay her people and rob her of territory. But the crime of murdering her inhabitants and of taking possession of her territory will be as great to-morrow, after war shall have been declared, as it would have been yesterday.

Justice is as unchangeable as its Author. The line of moral

rectitude will never bend to our selfish passions. In the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil, or in robbing them of their country, I can take no part, either now or hereafter. The guilt of these crimes must rest on others; I will not participate in them; but if Mexicans or any other people should dare invade our country, I would meet them with the sword in one hand and a torch in the other; and, if compelled to retreat, like the Mexicans at Point Isabel, I would lay our dwellings in ashes, rather than see them occupied by a conquering army.

We may always justify ourselves for defending our country, but never for waging a war upon an unoffending people for the purpose of conquest. There is an immutable, an eternal principle of justice pervading the moral universe. No nation, or people, or individual ever did or ever will violate that law with impunity.

Suppose we send an army into Mexico and kill hundreds and thousands of her people, burn her cities, and lay waste her country; do you think we shall escape the dread penalty of retributive justice? I tell you, we shall not. As sure as our destiny is swayed by a righteous God, our troops will fall by the sword and by pestilence; our widows will mourn; and our orphans, rendered such by this unholy war, will be thrown upon our public charity.¹

But it is said that war is always popular. I deny this assertion. I believe that nine-tenths of our people regarded the Florida war with contempt.² Their disgust arose from the fact that it was unjust and cruel, and arose from an effort to sustain slavery. This war is equally unjust, and arises from the same cause, and must be viewed in the same light by the people. It is impossible, in the nature of things, for it to be otherwise. Our people feel no hostility to those of Mexico. The Mexicans have remained at home, "under their own vines and fig-trees"; they have not molested us or encroached upon our rights. It is true that their population is less intelligent than that of our free States; and it is equally true that they are more rapidly improving their condition than are those of our slave States. They are surely in advance of them in the diffusion of universal liberty among their people. The means of intelligence and enjoyment are open to all.

Indeed, taking the whole population of our slave States and of Mexico into consideration, I think we shall find the Mexicans

¹ It is estimated that the number of victims who fell in this war, by pestilence and the sword, were eighty thousand. Of these, thirty thousand were Americans, and fifty thousand Mexicans.

² The Seminole War. See Volume VIII, Chapter VI.

the best informed, most intelligent, and most virtuous. Our people of the North have sympathized with them in their efforts to render their free government permanent and respectable. Can the lovers of liberty now desire to see a sister republic wantonly subverted while just coming into existence and struggling for the permanent establishment of civil freedom? It cannot be. You may declare war; display your banners, your glittering arms, your blazing uniforms; you may raise the battle-cry and sound your trumpets; but you cannot induce the intelligent men of the North to march to Mexico for the purpose of bathing their hands in Mexican blood for the extension of slavery. You may for the moment excite the young, the giddy and thoughtless; but their "sober second thoughts" will lead them to inquire for the *cause* of the war in which they are asked to engage. The true answer to that inquiry must overwhelm its authors with disgrace.

. There is, however, one cheering circumstance in the distant future. All history informs us that for ages no nation or people, once having adopted the system of universal freedom, was ever afterward brought to the maintenance of slavery. There are now probably eight or nine millions of people in Mexico who hate slavery as sincerely as do those of our free States. You may murder or drive from their country that whole population, but you can never force slavery upon them. This war is waged against an unoffending people, without just or adequate cause, for the purposes of conquest; with the design to extend slavery; in violation of the Constitution, against the dictates of justice, of humanity, the sentiments of the age in which we live, and the precepts of the religion we profess. I will lend it no aid, no support whatever. I will not bathe my hands in the blood of the people of Mexico, nor will I participate in the guilt of those murders which have been and which will hereafter be committed by our army there. For these reasons I shall vote against the bill under consideration and all others calculated to support this war.

MR. DELANO said: We were in the midst of a war which we had engaged in without authority of law and without being in the right, yet, now that war had begun, on the principle of "my country, may she be always right, but, right or wrong, my country," he was ready to adopt purely defensive measures. Where this war would end he could not predict. But we had not yet settled the Oregon question. He never had any confidence in the sincerity of the President's declarations of a purpose to maintain our rights in Oregon. He believed that