

Was the Mexican-American War inevitable? Was there anything that could have prevented it?

People throw around the word “inevitable” much too often. History is the result of many interrelated factors, interacting in complex and mistaken ways that are usually too variable to be considered inevitable. This is certainly the case with the Mexican American War.

In the presidential election of 1844, the Democratic Party candidate was James K. Polk, an extreme expansionist who was determined to gain California and the Southwest by force. When he was elected president he sent an offer to purchase this area, for \$12 million. The government of Mexico understandably refused to sell this northern third of their nation. Polk then sent an American army force to the banks of the Rio Grande, which Mexico considered part of their nation. When some Mexican troops fired on the Americans, Polk made a grand speech declaring that “American blood has been shed on American soil.” He then ordered an invasion of Mexico. All this was clearly a naked act of aggression.

James K. Polk also threatened war with Britain, over the Oregon Territory. He wanted the entire area (up to the southern tip of Russian Alaska), with the slogan “54' 40” or fight. But once he was elected, Polk sent diplomats to arrange a compromise. The USA and Britain agreed to split the territory in half, thus avoiding war.

If Polk had pursued a similar compromising approach with Mexico, a war might have been avoided. Maybe the USA would have offered more money, or asked for only part of the disputed areas in northern Mexico. Few things that happen in history are inevitable.

Here is another factor to consider. In the election of 1844, Polk was opposed by the Whig candidate Henry Clay. Clay was a prominent senator from Kentucky, and he strongly opposed the annexation of Texas. The Republic of Texas had been independent of Mexico since 1836, and Clay felt it was good to have a small buffer nation between the USA and Mexico. Clay predicted that if Texas joined the USA, it would lead to war over a border dispute. And that is exactly what happened.

Americans were very divided over Texas, and the election of 1844 was extremely close. If only about a thousand New Yorkers had voted for Clay instead of Polk, the electoral collage would have awarded the presidency to Henry Clay. And Clay would have refused to accept Texas into the United States. If Texas had not joined the Union, but had continued as a small independent nation, then Henry Clay would no doubt have been able to keep good peaceful relations with Mexico. Without the border dispute in south Texas, there would have been no war.

Still another alternative might have occurred in California. By 1846, California had been governed by Mexicans who had been residing in California for decades. Since 1836, due to the instability of the central government in Mexico, the Californios had been governing California as a de facto independent nation. The Californios did not want to be governed either by Mexico or by the United States. If they had managed to keep control, they might have kept California as its own independent nation. But the US army sent two military expeditions to wrest control and

raise the US flag by force. If these expeditions had been defeated and forced to retreat, California might have continued as an independent nation.

Thus, there were several possible scenarios by which the Mexican American War might have been avoided. This war was an imperialistic grab for power, with little justification other than military conquest. Saying something is “inevitable” offers a lame excuse for many bad acts by government leaders. There are almost always other alternatives to war.