

Jackson Dooley

Professor Kelly

HIST-1483-020

30 November 2017

The Mexican-American War: A War of American Values

The Mexican-American War significantly expanded the territories of the United States. This has become common knowledge throughout the public, and the war is frequently left at that defining statement. However, the Mexican-American War was more than a simple war of expansion and territorial disputes. Members of the American elite fiercely debated for the war and against it.¹ Through a combination of both political and moral rhetoric, the Mexican-American War became not only a war for territorial expansion but a war for American values.

The Polk administration and its allies argued a defensive war, one that was pragmatic and constitutional.² President Polk himself proclaimed that the war was defensive and that Mexico “has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil.”³ Polk did not introduce the reasoning of the war as one of expansion, as his opponents argued. Historian Amy Greenberg notes in her novel that “Polk never wavered from citing Mexican aggression as the war’s cause...”⁴ Democrat Andrew Kennedy advocated for the Polk administration in Congress, believing that Mexico was the aggressor. Kennedy said, “she [Mexico] finally crossed our

¹ The “American elite” are preachers, lawyers, and congressional politicians. The essay will only explore varying perspectives and rhetoric within this group.

² “Pragmatic” and “political” rhetoric are arguments that involve affairs that affect the state or nation. This includes abused authority, resource expenditure, and political dishonesty. They can mix with moral rhetoric, as seen later in the essay.

³ Cong. Globe, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. 783 (1846).

⁴ Amy Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 196.

territorial lines, and attacked our armies and citizens upon our own soil.”⁵In Senate, H.S. Foote of Mississippi fought off anti-war supporters whilst trying to secure the constitutionality of the war. Foote stated in Senate, “It is no unconstitutional war as some have argued, but it is a war declared by Congress, having every sanction that national legislation can give;”⁶ To the Polk administration and its allies, the war was completely rational and legitimate. Mexican aggression was the causation of the war, and it was not influenced by territorial wishes or the warping of executive authority.

There was not just a political defense for the war, but a moral one as well. H.S. Foote condemned those who opposed the war, going as far as to call them traitors. He used grand rhetoric when saying, “. . .that in no age since civilization began, has there been any name for any man who opposed his country either in thought, word, or deed, when in arms for her own defence, except traitor.”⁷ In republican or secular morals, being a traitor is synonymous with being a heretic in any church or religious organization. In this statement, H.S. Foote condemned those who stood against the war as those who stood against their nation. He then went on to say that any sort of opposition is anti-republic and against what he perceived as true republican morals. Isaac Parish, an Ohio congressman, stated that “It seems to me that the arguments which they have brought to their aid are but so many appeals to the worst passions and the strongest prejudices.”⁸ Parish was referring to those who oppose the war, citing them as prejudiced and overly passionate. Therefore, in Parish’s eyes, anti-war supporters espoused deplorable rhetoric.

⁵ Andrew Kennedy. *Speech of Hon. A. Kennedy, of Indiana, on the Mexican War*, (Washington D.C.: Office of Blair and Rives, 1846; A Continent Divided, 2016), 6, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1167.

⁶ Henry Foote. *Speech of Hon. H.S. Foote, of Mississippi, in the Senate of the United States, February 16, 1848, on the Resolution of Thanks to General Taylor*, (Washington D.C.: Congressional Globe Office, 1848; A Continent Divided, 2016), 1, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1395.

⁷ Foote, *Thanks to General Taylor*, 1.

⁸ Isaac Parish. *Remarks of Isaac Parish, of Ohio, on the Three Million Dollar Bill: Delivered in the House of Representatives of the U.S., February 10, 1847*, (Washington D.C.: Ritchie and Heiss, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016), 3, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1343.

War supporters argued that the war was on the side of republican morals and that those who opposed it were in direct conflict with such values.

Political opposition to the Mexican-American War branded the war as a waste of resources and questioned the causation and intention of the war. Jacob Miller, a senator from New Jersey, argued that the war was unwise as it strained the country's resources. Miller said, "it will require all the power of this nation to be exerted to their full extent..."⁹ Miller further argued that "It is evident that the war has assumed a serious and momentous aspect. It has gone beyond the control of mere cabinet management; not to be settled..."¹⁰ The venerable politician Henry Clay argued that the reasons presented for the war were untrue. Clay stated in his Lexington Speech, "This is no War of Defence, but one of unnecessary and offensive aggression."¹¹ Clay refused to believe claims that the war was in response to Mexican aggression, and found the fault in United States aggression instead. Historian Norman Graebner confirms these suspicions of expansionism. Polk did desire new territory from Mexico, but only desired New Mexico and California, which "had been the objectives of his expansionism in the Southwest since 1845."¹² Once the U.S. Army was in Mexico, debates over the war's aims rose to the forefront of politics. Graebner notes in his examination of the war that Polk did not present any objectives for the war other than an "honorable peace".¹³ Therefore, a concrete reasoning behind the war was unobtainable and left to conflict. Milton Brown, a representative of Tennessee in Congress, had

⁹ Jacob Miller. *Speech of Mr. Miller, of New Jersey, on the Mexican War, and the Mode of Bringing it to a Speedy and Honorable Conclusion: Delivered in the Senate of the United States, February 2, 1847*, (Washington D.C.: Towers, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016), 3, accessed October 31, 2017.

<http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/collections/pdf/usmw-E407-M644-1847.pdf>.

¹⁰ Miller, *Speedy and Honorable Conclusion*, 3.

¹¹ Henry Clay. *Speech of Henry Clay, at the Lexington Mass Meeting, 13th November, 1847: Together with the Resolutions Adopted on that Occasion*, (New York: G.F. Nesbitt, 1847; Internet Archive, 2010), 5, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/speechofhenryclay00inclay>.

¹² Norman Graebner, "Lessons of the Mexican War", *Pacific Historical Review*, no. 3 (1978): 326. doi: 10.2307/3637470.

¹³ Graebner, "Mexican War", 327.

suspicions about the roots of the war like Clay. Brown stated, “Texas and Oregon had lifted the President to power. To fail in his negotiations, in regard to both, was too bad. He knew he would fail in Oregon; therefore he must succeed in Texas.”¹⁴ From this perspective, the war was started in order to secure Texas from Mexico as United States territory without further dispute.

Greenberg states in her book, “But when he [Polk] submitted a request to Congress in 1846 for two million dollars to negotiate a settlement with Mexico, it became clear to Congress that there would be no peace without territory.”¹⁵ From the anti-war perspective, the war revealed political dysfunction.

Morally charged language was utilized by those who despised the war just as those who supported it. Pastors, and even lawyers, argued that the war was an antithesis to true Christian behavior. E. Edwin Hall, a Church of Christ pastor from Connecticut, passionately rebuked the war, saying in his sermon that “It is the embodiment of all evil, it is the image of Badness, fiercely opposing with its own carnal weapons the influence and ends of its Goodness.”¹⁶ Hall placed the war and its supporters on the side of evil, and those who opposed it and all that it stands for on the side of good. This war was seen as deciding the moral allegiance that the United States and her citizens held. Greenberg discusses Albert Hale, a minister from Illinois who made his anti-war sentiments public in his sermons.¹⁷ Hale said that those returning from the war “... have been schooled against immoralities, its cruelties and its crimes-will operate,

¹⁴ Milton Brown. *Speech of Mr. Milton Brown, of Tennessee, On the Causes and Origins of the Mexican War: Delivered in the House of Representatives of the U.S., Feb. 12, 1847*, (Washington, D.C.: J. & G. S. Gideon, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016), 9, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1341.

¹⁵ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 196.

¹⁶ E. Edwin Hall. *Ahab and Naboth: or, The United States of America and Mexico. A Discourse, Delivered in the First Church of Christ in Guilford, on the Annual Thanksgiving of 1846*, (New Haven: A. H. Maltby, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016), 15, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=258.

¹⁷ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 191.

like a moral pestilence, over the length and breadth of the land.”¹⁸ Charles Sumner, a Massachusetts lawyer, saw any sort of moral support for the war as blasphemous. Sumner called Christians who supported the war corrupt. He said, “It was not until Christianity became corrupted, that its followers became soldiers, and its priests learned to minister at the altar of the God of Battles.”¹⁹ These individuals, Sumner argued, worshiped a God of war and not the true Christian God. Sumner continued, “It cannot be doubted that this strange and unblessed conjunction of the clergy with war, has had no little influence in blinding the world to the truth now beginning to be recognized, that *Christianity forbids war in all cases*.”²⁰ In essence, if one were a supporter of the war, then one was not a true practicing Christian.

Moral rhetoric against the war can also be seen through the lens of republican morality, that is, a morality that is secular or applicable to the actions of a nation and its citizens. This tactic was so prevalent, that it drew opposition from individuals like Charles Sumner. Sumner argued that the State is not of the utmost importance and that overzealous allegiance to it was dangerous. Sumner said, “Let it be remembered that the State is not worth preserving at the cost of lives and happiness of people.”²¹ Dissimilar to other anti-war arguments, Sumner rebuked any mixing of patriotism and morals. Sumner said, “Remember that you are men, by a more sacred bond than you are citizens; that you are children of a common Father more than you are Americans.”²² To Sumner, values were to come from within oneself and from God before America. Milton Braman, a Massachusetts pastor, did use republican morals as an argument against the war. Braman said that if the nation allowed the injustice and destruction of human

¹⁸ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 191.

¹⁹ Charles Sumner. *The True Grandeur of Nations: Mr. Sumner's Oration, July 4, 1845*. (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1845; A Continent Divided, 2016), 34, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=220.

²⁰ Sumner, *Grandeur of Nations*, 34.

²¹ Sumner, *Grandeur of Nations*, 46.

²² Sumner, *Grandeur of Nations*, 46.

rights spawned from the war to persist, that it would become a part of the moral character of the nation. Should this happen, Braman argued, then “we shall fall as fell Carthage and Rome, and the other degenerate republics of antiquity.”²³ Braman clearly thought that the health of the republic was tied to the decency of its people.

The blending of moral and political rhetoric revealed the complexity of this war for American values. Previously, moral and political arguments have been distinguished from each other because there were arguments that were strictly moral and strictly political. However, to leave it at this would be a false dichotomy. It is clear that at this time American values could also be debated by the blending of the two modes of rhetoric.²⁴ For example, Pastor Braman stated in his sermon on the war that “Any considerable addition to our territory will increase the toils and difficulties of the government, and multiply the evils which embarrass the nation.”²⁵ Here Braman presents both the pragmatic or political consequences of expansionism and the moral indignity that it would yield. Braman recognized the blending of political and moral rhetoric on the pro-war side, calling it “political theology.”²⁶ Braman notes that the nation’s destiny “...is not recorded on the pages of the Bible, nor written upon the earth, nor figured in the constellations of the skies.”²⁷ Braman argued that it was incorrect to assume that moral values could coincide with such political actions of war and expansion. Henry Clay stated on the notion of an American conquest of Mexico that “it could not be achieved without frightful carnage,

²³ Milton Braman. *The Mexican War: A Discourse Delivered on the Annual Fast, 1847*, (Danvers: Courier Office, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016), 11, accessed October 31, 2017, http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=233.

²⁴ The overall argument is that of complexity. The argument about the Mexican-American War’s complexity would be incomplete and false if it were left at two stark modes of rhetoric. Therefore, it is necessary to present complex arguments that wove together morality and pragmatism.

²⁵ Braman, *Annual Fast*, 11.

²⁶ Braman, *Annual Fast*, 10.

²⁷ Braman, *Annual Fast*, 10.

dreadful sacrifices of human life, and the creation of an onerous national debt....”²⁸ Clay wanted the public to know that the war and his perceived consequences of the war would not only yield unimaginable atrocities, but a significant political and economic challenge, such as a national debt.

The tactic of blending political and moral rhetoric was used on the pro-war side as well. Andrew Kennedy remarked, “this constant denunciation of your country’s cause; the end of it all will be, either you will render your constituents wholly mercenary and unpatriotic, which God in his mercy forefend; or, which is more likely, you will sink yourselves and your very names to that infamy which always overtakes those who are capable of sacrificing their country to self, and sinking the patriot into the partisan.”²⁹ Here is another example of the weaving of political and moral rhetoric. Kennedy explained anti-war views as unpatriotic and politically unsound, as seen by his predicted effects on constituents, but also morally abhorrent, shown in reference to such actions or results being “forefended” or prevented by God. Since both sides used the blending tactic, it reveals that these elites believed American values were fed by Christian morals, political soundness, and ideals of republicanism.

The Mexican-American War challenged the thoughts, ideas, and values of pastors, politicians, and lawyers in the United States. Each side argued with political rhetoric and moral rhetoric. Both separately and combined, these modes of rhetoric sowed the seeds of discord. The variety of sides and strategies in this war over American values was large. Some individuals focused on the political legitimacy of the war, using pragmatism to either defend or attack the war. Moral arguments were just as pervasive and strong, combining values of republican virtue and Christian teaching to argue a side. Those who supported the war were at times called evil

²⁸ Clay, *Resolutions Adopted*, 7-8.

²⁹ Kennedy, *Speech of Hon. A. Kennedy*, 8.

and warmongering, and those against it were branded as prejudiced and traitorous. The blending of moral and political rhetoric added to the complexity of the overall debate of the war. For those elite, American values rested on morality and political soundness. The Mexican-American War cannot simply be left to history as a war that expanded the United States. Rather, it should be remembered as a war that challenged and strengthened competing views on what true American values were to be through a complex blending of political and moral forms of rhetoric.

Bibliography

- Braman, Milton. *The Mexican War: A Discourse Delivered on the Annual Fast, 1847*. Danvers: Courier Office, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=233.
- Brown, Milton. *Speech of Mr. Milton Brown, of Tennessee, On the Causes and Origins of the Mexican War: Delivered in the House of Representatives of the U.S., Feb. 12, 1847*. Washington, D.C.: J. & G. S. Gideon, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1341.
- Clay, Henry. *Speech of Henry Clay, at the Lexington Mass Meeting, 13th November, 1847: Together with the Resolutions Adopted on that Occasion*. New York: G.F. Nesbitt, 1847; Internet Archive, 2010. Accessed October 31, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/speechofhenryclay00inclay>.
- The Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. 783 (1846).
- Greenberg, Amy. *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- Foote, Henry. *Speech of Hon. H.S. Foote, of Mississippi, in the Senate of the United States, February 16, 1848, on the Resolution of Thanks to General Taylor*. Washington D.C.: Congressional Globe Office, 1848; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1395.
- Graebner, Norman. "Lessons of the Mexican War", *Pacific Historical Review*, no. 3 (1978): 326. doi: 10.2307/3637470.
- Hall, E. Edwin. *Ahab and Naboth: or, The United States of America and Mexico. A Discourse, Delivered in the First Church of Christ in Guilford, on the Annual Thanksgiving of 1846*.

- New Haven: A. H. Maltby, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=258.
- Kennedy, Andrew. *Speech of Hon. A. Kennedy, of Indiana, on the Mexican War*. Washington D.C.: Office of Blair and Rives, 1846; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1167.
- Miller, Jacob. *Speech of Mr. Miller, of New Jersey, on the Mexican War, and the Mode of Bringing it to a Speedy and Honorable Conclusion: Delivered in the Senate of the United States, February 2, 1847*. Washington D.C.: Towers, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. <http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/collections/pdf/usmw-E407-M644-1847.pdf>.
- Parish, Isaac. *Remarks of Isaac Parish, of Ohio, on the Three Million Dollar Bill: Delivered in the House of Representatives of the U.S., February 10, 1847*. Washington D.C.: Ritchie and Heiss, 1847; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=1343.
- Sumner, Charles. *The True Grandeur of Nations: Mr. Sumner's Oration, July 4, 1845*. Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1845; A Continent Divided, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. http://library.uta.edu/usmexicowar/record.php?content_id=220.