Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

LO\textsuperscript{1} Describe the conquest and development of the West between 1820 and 1850 by white Americans.

LO\textsuperscript{2} Explain how the expansionist spirit in the West led to political conflict at home as well as conflict with Mexico, even as it gave the United States its modern boundaries.
The ‘opening’ of the frontier kept alive the democratic promise that poor but free men could make it on their own.

Beginning in the 1820s, white Americans began settling west of the Mississippi River for the first time. They did so for a variety of reasons, the three foremost being (1) to flee religious persecution, (2) to pursue greater social freedom, and (3), most often, to seek riches.

Between the 1820s and 1860, Americans’ westward migration across the Mississippi occurred in two general phases. The first phase, which lasted from the 1820s to 1844, saw Americans move west without their government’s consent or decree; they moved mostly for personal reasons. The second phase of westward migration began in 1844, after the election of President James K. Polk, an active evangalist for American expansion. On his watch, the American nation doubled in size. This second, deeply nationalistic phase was promoted under the banner of manifest destiny, the idea that America was destined by God to conquer North America and spread American civilization far and wide. The artist John Gast captured the image perfectly (to your left), showing an angel of the Lord carrying a school book (representing education and civilization) and telegraph wires (representing the Market Revolution) as she guides white Americans west, all while Indians back away, cowering under the power of God’s divine plan. The reality of America’s westward expansion was of course much more complicated, but the idea of “manifest destiny” was a powerful propellant pushing white Americans west.

The continued westward movement of Americans had at least four significant consequences: (1) the further decimation of Native America; (2) the continued expansion of the Market Revolution; (3) the “opening” of the frontier, which kept alive the democratic promise that poor but free men could make it on their own instead of subjugating themselves to capitalist chieftains; and (4) perhaps most important, the explosion of the slavery issue onto the American political stage. After decades of cobbled-together political compromises, the question of whether slavery would be allowed in the new territories of the West helped lead to a political breakdown that ignited the Civil War. But, first, to the great westward expansion between the 1820s and 1860.

LO1 Western Conquest and Development, 1820–1844

Americans developed four unique territories in the West between 1820 and 1844: Texas, Oregon, Utah, and California. Each territory was developed for a different reason, and
each bore the imprint of its initial conquest long after the territory was settled.

Texas

Before the late 1840s, the most popular destination of westward migrants was Texas. It was a Spanish colony until 1821, when it became part of the newly independent nation of Mexico. Americans seeking land for growing cotton had been hesitant to settle in Texas while it was a Spanish colony. But the new nation of Mexico seemed much less powerful than Spain, and Americans in the 1820s seized their chance to settle in Texas. During that decade, about 20,000 Americans streamed into the province, rapidly outnumbering the 5,000 Mexicans who were living there. A few Anglo-Americans assimilated to Mexican culture, but most chose not to. The new settlers continued to speak English, created separate schools, and conducted most of their trade with the United States. American cotton planters brought slaves along with them, ignoring Mexico’s 1829 abolition of slavery.

By 1830, the Mexican government became worried that it was losing control of Texas. Objecting to the persistence of slavery there, it sought to curtail U.S. immigration to the region. It raised taxes there, built new military posts, and prohibited further American settlement. But it was too late. The floodgates had opened, and Americans, both free and enslaved, continued to pour into the province. Predictably, the new regulations frustrated the American immigrants, who eventually demanded autonomy from Mexican rule. When Mexico resisted, bitter conflict was destined to erupt.

Mexican-American Hostilities

Mexico had other problems, though. Between 1829 and 1834, Mexico suffered a series of internal political coups, leading up to General Antonio López de Santa Anna’s seizing power in Mexico City. He abolished the Mexican constitution and declared himself absolute dictator. He also intended to rein in Texas’s autonomy. Led by Stephen F. Austin and William B. Travis, and with Sam Houston as commander-in-chief of the new Texas army, Texans rebelled, declaring their independence and creating an interim government. Santa Anna refused to tolerate this insurrection, and in 1836, he led 5,000 troops to San Antonio, attacking the American rebels at an abandoned mission called the Alamo. Some 187 Texans, including western pioneer legends Davy Crockett and James Bowie, were killed during the battle. But before they lost the Alamo, the Texans had killed between 1,200 and 1,600 Mexican troops. Their stand became a source of inspiration for the Texas military, which continued to “remember the Alamo” during later battles.

A Victory for Texas . . . and for Slavery

Two months later, Texans scored the decisive victory over Santa Anna when Sam Houston surprised the Mexican forces at San Jacinto, near today’s city of Houston. Santa Anna himself was captured (while napping in his slippers), and the Texans forced him to sign treaties guaranteeing Texan independence. Soon after this victory, Texas drew up a new constitution that guaranteed its white citizens the right to own slaves and prohibited free black people from immigrating to the new nation of Texas. Texans formally petitioned the United States for immediate annexation. Many northern members of Congress feared that admitting Texas as a slave state would disrupt the Compromise of 1820, which had crafted
a delicate balance between slave and free states. American leaders therefore rebuffed the appeals for annexation and left the new Texas Republic to make its own way as an independent nation. Despite this temporary rebuff (Texas would become an official part of the Union in 1845), settlers continued to flood into Texas, most often to develop cotton farms.

Oregon and the Oregon Trail

The next region colonized by American settlers was Oregon. The U.S. government had asserted its sovereignty over Oregon ever since maritime merchant Robert Gray’s expedition to the region in 1792, which helped inspire Jefferson to send Lewis and Clark on their expedition. But there were also prior British, Spanish, and Russian claims on the territory. In the early 1800s, as the Oregon fur-trade competition increased, American diplomats took steps to ensure that their merchants would not be excluded from trading in the region. Before 1830, only a few American citizens (usually Protestant missionaries) ventured into distant Oregon, because most of it was controlled by Native American tribes and British fur-trading companies.

As the area’s beaver population dwindled, the British slowly withdrew. Their departure left the territory open to settlement, and in the 1830s and 1840s American settlers began to move into Oregon’s Willamette River valley. Between 1842 and 1845, the number of Americans in Oregon increased tenfold, from about 500 to about 5,000.

New Settlements and Indian Violence

Predictably, as the new settlements spread throughout the valley, tensions between Indians and settlers increased. Indians felt crowded, and many were dying from diseases imported by American settlers. In 1847, discontent erupted into violence when a group of Cayuse Indians killed fourteen settlers, including a white doctor who had been treating infectious diseases in white people but refused to treat Indians. The violent attack prompted outrage in Washington, D.C., and provoked Congress to establish more direct control over Oregon by organizing it as a formal American territory.

Oregon Fever

Although violence persisted between Indians and American settlers, increased government control prompted a surge of new arrivals. After the opening in the early 1840s of a new route through the Rockies, called the Oregon Trail, more and more Americans moved to the territory. They farmed in the bountiful valley, and by 1850 there were 12,000 American inhabitants (see Map 13.1, page 221).

Utah and the Mormons

Most American settlers in Texas and Oregon moved for economic reasons, but another group—the Mormons—went west seeking a haven from religious persecution. The Mormons found refuge in the area around the Great Salt Lake, in what would become the state of Utah.

Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormonism

In 1830, Joseph Smith organized a new religion called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known colloquially as the Mormons. Like other new religious communities founded during the Second Great Awakening, Mormonism emphasized a direct and ecstatic connection with God. It attracted people who both believed in Joseph Smith’s divine visions and who wanted to renounce the sinfulness and social disorder they saw all...
around them. Mormonism gained converts by the thousands. But many Christians viewed Mormons with suspicion because of their community’s isolated ways and curious practices, such as polygamy. Joseph Smith, for instance, was reputed to have had thirty-four wives between the ages of fourteen and sixty. Each time tension grew with neighboring “gentiles,” the Mormons moved their headquarters, first from New York to Ohio, then to several locations in Missouri. In 1838, they settled in Commerce, Illinois, which they renamed “Nauvoo” (as it is known today).

For five years, the Mormon community grew and prospered in Nauvoo. But in 1844 trouble erupted after a local newspaper, fearful of Smith’s growing power, published an exposé of the polygamy practiced by Smith and other Mormon men. As the mayor of Nauvoo and the head of its court and its militia, Smith demanded that the newspaper be suppressed. During the controversy, non-Mormons grew increasingly hostile toward the religion and appealed to state authorities to help drive the Mormons out. Soon after, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested for treason, and on June 27, 1844, a lynch mob entered the jail where the men were being held and shot them both dead. In 1845, in what was referred to as “the Mormon War in Illinois,” Mormon opponents torched more than two hundred Mormon-owned buildings in Nauvoo. Rumors surfaced that the federal government was planning a raid, and the Nauvoo city charter was revoked. The Mormons, now led by Smith’s successor Brigham Young, negotiated a truce so that they could leave Illinois peacefully.

Brigham Young

From published journals celebrating the western frontier, Young learned of an inland sea—the Great Salt Lake—that lay north of New Mexico. Although surrounded by inhospitable deserts and mountains, the land immediately next to the lake seemed ideal for settlement. To Young, the area also appeared sufficiently remote to guarantee that the Mormons would not encounter persecution. In addition, Utah was still technically under Mexican control and therefore outside U.S. jurisdiction. This meant that the Mormons could function independently, following their own laws and customs. They set out to find their promised land on what came to be known as the Mormon Trek (see Map 13.1).

To Utah

A dynamic leader, Young had little difficulty persuading most of his followers that the Great Salt Lake area would be their home. In 1847 and 1848, thousands of Mormons settled in the Salt Lake basin. There they developed an irrigation system, which expanded their acreage of arable land, and laid the foundation for today’s Salt Lake City.

But the Mormon dream of settling beyond the reach of the U.S. government did not last long. The United States won control of Utah in February 1848 as part of the settlement of the Mexican-American War, thus continuing the contentious relationship between Mormons and the federal government for the next fifty years. From 1856 to 1858, relations soured over the issue of who controlled the Utah territory, leading to a brief “Utah War.” One notable episode of this conflict was the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857. In the massacre, more than one hundred California-bound migrants from Arkansas were slaughtered by a collection of Mormon militiamen and Paiute Indians, both of whom feared the continued presence of American settlers in their territory.
Still farther west, American citizens were beginning to settle the Mexican state of Alta California. In the early 1840s, new Republican leaders awarded huge land grants in California to a handful of its American citizens and retired Mexican soldiers. Word of California’s bountiful, fertile lands spread quickly. With the opening of the Oregon Trail and its offshoot, the California Trail (Map 13.1), more and more Americans made their way to the distant Mexican state. By early 1846, about 800 Americans and about 8,000 to 12,000 californios lived there.

This all changed in January 1848, when gold was discovered along California’s American River. Emigration to California suddenly exploded. In 1849, an estimated 80,000 fortune hunters reached California, half of them Americans, the rest immigrants from across the globe. For instance, gold was the key attraction for numerous Chinese immigrants, beginning a long-standing Chinese presence in the West. Regardless of country of origin, though, most of the miners were young, unmarried men who had no intention of settling in California; they wanted to get rich and return home. But whether or not mines “proved out” and produced the riches expected of them, many of these “forty-niners” ended up staying in California. They set up temporary businesses, such as saloons, stores, and brothels, which soon surrounded the hastily erected shacks of mining camps. They also treated with scorn the surrounding Indian tribes, viewing them as obstacles.

Map 13.1. Overland Trails, 1846

California: Ranches and Gold

View a map of California Gold Country.

Read a letter from a gold miner in Placerville, California.
Tribal Conflicts

No matter where Americans went, they moved onto lands claimed by other parties. While Mexicans in Texas and British settlers in Oregon suffered from the American expansion, no group was more dislocated than Indians. Most dramatically, the hunters of the Western Plains—the Arapahoe, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Sioux Indians—depended on the migratory hunting of buffalo for food. White settlers moving through buffalo ranges disrupted the natural hunting process, threatening the livelihood of these tribes. The interference eventually prompted the Plains Indians (as these tribes are collectively called) to attack white pioneers on the emigrant trails, sparking many bloody battles. As for white settlers during the colonial era in New England and Virginia, conflict with the tribes of Native America was part of daily life for the westward bound.

The U.S. government’s response to this increased Indian conflict was typical: as the number of white settlers increased, the U.S. government continued
to cajole or force Native Americans into giving up their land. In the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty with Plains Indian tribes, the U.S. government agreed to make cash restitution for disruptions to the buf-

Fort Laramie Treaty
Treaty Agreement of 1851 between Plains Indian tribes and the U.S. government; the government agreed to make cash restitution for disruptions to the buffalo grounds, while tribal leaders agreed not to attack the large number of settlers moving through the area.

> "There is a good deal of sin & wickedness going on here, Stealing, lying, Swearing, Drinking, Gambling & murdering... Almost every public House is a place for Gambling... Men make & lose thousands in a night, & frequently small boys will go up & bet $5 or 10—& if they lose all, go the next day & dig more. We are trying to get laws here to regulate things but it will be very difficult to get them executed." —S. Shufelt, gold miner

> In 1849, an estimated 80,000 fortune hunters from around the world ventured to California in search of gold.
falo grounds, while tribal leaders in turn agreed not to attack the large number of settlers moving through the area. But in 1854 yet another transportation corridor for white pioneers was carved out of land that was once set aside as Indian territory. Following the development of this new route, Indian tribes were relocated once again. As they were being shuffled from one area to another, the creation of a defined system of reservations for Native Americans was not far off.

Mountain Men

In addition to new territories, from the 1820s to the 1840s a new breed of Americans emerged. These so-called mountain men roamed the Rocky Mountains and the various trails carved out by settlers traveling across the harsh landscape. Mountain men were frequently employed as trappers, working for one of the fur companies that bought and sold beaver pelts. But their main occupation was exploration. Men like Jim Bridger, James Beckwourth, and Christopher “Kit” Carson are some of the best-known mountain men. Their names are largely remembered in either the names of mountain passes and Rocky Mountain locales or in the folklore of the West that blossomed during these years, coloring the image of the West as a dangerous and exciting place. Each of these mountain men married Native American women, but they also worked as scouts for the U.S. Army, which over time participated in the ongoing encroachment of Indian lands. And Beckwourth is today celebrated as one of the key African American mountain men of the Old West.

Conclusion

Western settlement complicated matters reaching far beyond the lives of the settlers themselves. The haphazard manner in which westward movement took place forced politicians in the East to bring some form of governing order to the West. And independent-minded settlers, accustomed to managing their own affairs, did not welcome the imposition of eastern ideals. Friction was inevitable. Moreover, by taking responsibility for the actions of white settlers—particularly the rebels in Texas and the pioneers traversing Native American territories—government officials committed themselves to defending, and defining the course of, westward expansion. This led to westward expansion’s second phase.

LO\textsuperscript{2} The Expansionist Spirit Rebounds

During the 1840s, America’s official interest in acquiring western territory surged for five principal reasons (see “The reasons why . . .” box). These arguments motivated the
American government to aggressively resume the game of territorial expansion. Journalists and others who favored national expansion embraced an ideology justifying the sometimes brutal methods used to expand American civilization: manifest destiny.

**Texas and the Rise of James K. Polk**

Because of Texas’s substantial number of American settlers, annexing it was at the top of the U.S. government’s agenda. But the task proved arduous.

**Texas and Slavery**

The Texas Republic, upon winning its independence from Mexico in 1836, had already applied to become a U.S. state. But the Texas constitution guaranteed the perpetuation of slavery, so if Texas entered the Union, it would be as a slave state. President Andrew Jackson knew that this would disturb the balance in the Senate between free and slave states established by the Compromise of 1820. Moreover, U.S. annexation of Texas would surely start a war with Mexico, which had never recognized Texan independence and therefore still claimed Texas as a part of Mexican territory.

Jackson also refused to annex the Texas Republic because the 1836 presidential election was pending, and he badly wanted Vice President Martin Van Buren to succeed him. Annexing Texas might infuriate northern voters (because of the slavery issue), and Jackson was not willing to risk Van Buren’s loss. Van Buren, who did win the election and served as president from 1837 to 1841, avoided discussions of Texas altogether during his campaign. In response to this official silence, Texans suspended all efforts to gain admittance to the Union and focused on developing their own political and economic institutions.

During the decade following Van Buren’s election, the dilemma of whether to annex Texas loomed in the shadows of American politics. Foreign policy issues in the 1840s forced it back into the limelight. Britain considered establishing relations with the independent Texas to gain a stronger hold in North America. This prospect alarmed many Americans, and in 1843 Secretary of State John C. Calhoun signed a treaty with Texas that would admit it to the Union. President John Tyler (who became president in April 1841) then sent the treaty to the Senate for ratification. Would Texas finally become a state? Northerners in Congress reasoned that the excuse of foreign diplomacy was just a thinly veiled power play by southern slave owners. Swayed by this argument, the Senate defeated the proposed treaty. Texas would await statehood a little longer.

**Texas and the Whigs**

Besides the threats from Britain, a second reason Tyler advocated the annexation of Texas was that he was seeking reelection in the 1844 presidential race. He knew the issue would attract voters. He had little support from his party—although he was officially a Whig, he opposed much of the Whig platform and had vetoed several measures passed by Whigs in Congress. Ultimately, despite his interest in annexing Texas, Tyler failed to attract much public support in his bid for reelection, and he dropped out of the race before the November vote.
Texas and the Democrats

With Tyler out of the race, the Democrats were now in an ideal position to “steal” Texas annexation as their national campaign issue. They made overall territorial acquisition a key issue in their strategy to spread American civilization far and wide. They blustered on and on about how America’s territorial growth would make it a first-class nation. Their platform called for the “re-annexation” of Texas and the “re-occupation” of Oregon up to a northern boundary of 54°40’, an outrageous land grab that included nearly all of today’s British Columbia, extending to the southern border of today’s Alaska.

The Democrats’ plan, though greedy, was perceptive. By offering to acquire both Texas and Oregon, they intended to give something to the North and to the South, thus unifying the nation and securing a Democratic victory. The party’s presidential nominee was James K. Polk, a former Tennessee governor and congressman (whose nickname was “Young Hickory,” aligning him with Andrew Jackson, who was called “Old Hickory”), and he became the loudest spokesperson for the benefits to be gained from American expansion.

Texas and the Liberty Party

Henry Clay replaced Tyler as the new Whig candidate. Clay initially opposed annexing Texas. But midway through the campaign, he decided the issue was too popular to resist, and he needed the votes. Outraged at his reversal—and his political gaffe of not offering to acquire Oregon as well—a group of northern antislavery activists left the Whig Party. They created the Liberty Party, which opposed admitting any new slave territory to the United States. The Liberty Party nominated James G. Birney, who attracted voters who would otherwise have supported Clay. This division strengthened the Democratic Party and allowed Polk to win the election fairly easily. But the introduction of the Liberty Party revealed hairline fractures in the second two-party system—fractures that would steadily grow into an outright break.

Tyler and Texas

Tyler, who had a few months left in his term before being succeeded by Polk, interpreted Polk’s victory as a sign that the public did indeed support efforts to admit Texas. Thus, during his last months in office, in an effort to ensure himself a positive legacy, Tyler again pushed Congress to annex Texas through a congressional resolution. (A resolution is similar to a treaty but requires only a simple majority to pass instead of the two-thirds majority needed for a treaty.) This time, the Senate, swayed by the public enthusiasm it had witnessed during the election, narrowly voted in favor of the resolution. On March 1, 1845, the United States formally offered Texas statehood, which Texas accepted in December.

In response to admission of Texas as an American state, Mexico broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, setting the stage for conflict between the two nations.

Oregon and American Dominance in the West

Polk as President

Despite Tyler’s role in granting Texas statehood, it was Polk who would become the nation’s staunchest...
supporter of acquiring new territory. He was an avid believer that Americans were destined to control the West, and he had the personality, vigor, and power to be a strong cheerleader. However, when it came to the West, Polk was less concerned about slavery and more concerned about a surge in British influence in North America. Thus his first action as president was to snuff out any plans Britain had for reentering Oregon and California. Polk also had to live up to his campaign promise of bringing in a northern state to balance the recent addition of Texas.

54°40' 

During Polk’s presidential campaign, he pledged to fight for exclusive title to the Oregon Territory and to settle for nothing less than the entirety of American claims, which extended all the way up to a northern line of 54°40’—close to what is now the southernmost point of Alaska’s border with British Columbia (see Map 13.2). Britain, however, would certainly not concede that the United States owned a territory that Britain had long explored and claimed. After his inauguration in early 1845, Polk softened his position and returned to the demand made by every president since James Monroe: the United States would be willing to settle for a border along the 49th parallel—Oregon’s northern border today. Britain rejected the offer; it wanted to control the Columbia River, two hundred miles south of the 49th parallel. Angered at British stubbornness and inspired by the partisan cry of “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!” Polk returned to his more aggressive position. In early December 1845, he asked Congress to extend U.S. military protection to the Oregon Trail. He hoped that feigning military intervention would persuade the British to concede the vast Oregon Territory.

49th Parallel

His tenacious talk was merely a bluff. Polk had long believed that the land north of the 49th parallel, where few American settlers had reached, was not that important. What he really wanted was Puget Sound and access to the ports of California for trading. Britain’s government, meanwhile, decided that its interest in the region, originally based on the once-robust fur trade, which was now rapidly declining, was not worth a war. In late December 1845, Britain and the United States reopened negotiations over the issue, intending to prevent what would have been the third war in seventy-five years between the two nations. The British proposed a treaty accepting the 49th parallel as a border, although it sought to retain the right to navigate the Columbia River. The Senate approved the resulting Buchanan-Pakenham Treaty in July 1846, and America now had uncontested access to the Pacific.

Manifest Destiny

Amid the frenzy stirred by the Oregon and Texas statehood issues, a new expression of the spirit of an American...
empire was born. The term *manifest destiny*—meaning that the United States was *fated* to possess North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific—was coined by New York journalist John O’Sullivan. In July 1845, O’Sullivan wrote an editorial in his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* urging Whigs and Democrats to join together in support of “the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent, which Providence has given us.” Manifest destiny was popularized in political debates over Oregon, where it was used as an argument for why Britain should not block U.S. expansion. Soon the rhetoric made its way into American popular culture.

Though the term *manifest destiny* was newly coined, it reflected a much older American belief that divine providence was directing the nation. Many Americans felt that their country—by virtue of its strong Christian faith, its commitment to “civilization” and democracy, and the supposed “emptiness” of the West—would dominate North America as a great Empire for Liberty, thriving under God’s benevolent guiding hand. The phrase was explicitly chauvinistic, implying the need to “subdue” and “fertilize” the “virgin land” of the West. It was also explicitly racist, referring to the God-given rights of the white man to conquer the “red man’s lands.” Manifest destiny interpreted the conquest of the West as a story of triumph in the cause of freedom rather than a saga of conflict, death, and destruction. The concept grew in popularity throughout the 1840s, justifying westward expansion.

**The Mexican-American War**

When Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836, the Mexican dictator General Antonio López de Santa Anna vowed that any move by the United States to annex Texas would be met with military force. When Texas did become the twenty-eighth state, in 1845, President Polk privately relished Mexico’s threat. Polk hoped that by provoking Mexico to make good on its promise of war, the United States could crush the Mexicans and gain control of even more Mexican territory, particularly the far western prizes of California and New Mexico. During the next two years, Polk tried peaceful negotiations with Mexico for these territories (he offered to buy them many times), but all the while he was prepared to order a military strike if negotiations broke down.

**Polk Seeks a Fight**

Polk’s preparations for attack, however, seemed to be in vain. The Mexican officials, though they would not accept the annexation of Texas as legal, did not want to wage war over the matter. Instead, they chose to haggle over the precise boundary of Texas’s southern border. Texas state officials insisted that the proper boundary between Texas and Mexico was the Rio Grande River. The Mexicans, however, considered the Nueces River (130 miles north of the Rio Grande) to be the border. Polk decided that the United States had a responsibility to defend Texas’s land claims, and the first action he took as president was to station U.S. warships off the coast of Texas. In October 1845, Polk dispatched nearly 4,000 U.S. troops to the northern side of the Nueces River. By demonstrating American strength, Polk hoped to bully the Mexican government into ceding the disputed lands.

Despite these intimidation efforts, Mexico refused to respond. So, in November 1845, Polk took another approach, attempting to pressure Mexico into selling both New Mexico and California to the United States by sending an emissary to Mexico. Polk’s tactics failed once again. Frustrated, Polk decided to make another show of force. In January 1846, he ordered General Zachary Taylor, the head of the U.S. Army encamped along the Nueces, to move into the disputed region between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. Polk hoped to provoke the Mexican army into firing on the Americans. If American lives were endangered, the president reasoned, it would be easy to declare war on Mexico.

He finally got his fight. On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces crossed the Rio Grande and attacked Taylor’s men, killing eleven soldiers. Polk immediately declared that Mexico had “shed American blood upon the American soil.” According to the president, Americans had no choice but to avenge the lives of their slain countrymen.

**Patriotic Fervor**

On May 13, 1846, as patriotic fervor swept the country, Congress passed a declaration of war by an overwhelming majority. Volunteers responded en masse to fill the ranks of the army. The war was not universally popular, especially not among northerners.
who considered it a strategy to expand slavery into new western territory. Leading intellectuals, such as Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison, opposed the war, rightly viewing it as an unjust aggression against Mexico and an opportunity for slave owners to annex new land for their plantations. In 1847, a young Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln offered a resolution to Congress (which did not adopt it) demanding to be shown the exact spot upon which American blood was spilled on American soil. Lincoln rightly thought the first shots had been fired on disputed territory, not American land, and the proposal came to be called Lincoln’s “Spot Resolutions.” Nevertheless, these countervailing views were overpowered by the louder voices advocating America’s “manifest destiny.”

California and New Mexico

Now that the battle with Mexico had begun, Polk also planned to seize Mexico's other northern states, California and New Mexico (Map 13.3). In June 1846, a small group of American rebels, flying a flag decorated with a bear and a red star, seized the California town of Sonoma (north of San Francisco) and declared the state an independent republic. John C. Frémont led an armed expeditionary group in what came to be called the “Bear Flag Revolt.” The California Republic was, however, to be short-lived. By the end of July 1846, Frémont's men were inducted into the

If American lives were endangered, the president reasoned, it would be easy to declare war on Mexico.

 Inspired by patriotic fervor, seventeen-year-old Bostonian Sam Chamberlain joined the 1st Regiment of Dragoons and saw service in northern Mexico under the command of General Zachary Taylor. His illustrated account of the Mexican War, entitled “Recollections of a Rogue,” has all the color of a young American's first experiences in a foreign conflict—not all of them military, as this watercolor of a Mexican dance hall demonstrates.
Map 13.3: Principal Campaigns of the Mexican War, 1846–1847
seized Santa Fé, the capital of the Mexican region, without firing a shot. By January 1847, the troops had finished their mission and had moved to the California coast. They arrived just in time to put down a Mexican revolt against American rule that had been raging in Los Angeles since the previous September. Relatively easily, and within about six months, Americans had taken control of the large territories of California and New Mexico. Now all that was left was formalizing the land grab.

**Invading Mexico**

After the United States seized both territories, Polk was prepared to offer Santa Anna a deal. Overthrown in an 1844 coup, Santa Anna was now living in Cuba, plotting his return to Mexico. Polk offered him the chance to do so in exchange for a promise to end the war and to cede California, New Mexico, and Texas to the United States. Santa Anna agreed. Once he arrived in Mexico, however, Santa Anna reneged on this promise and rallied Mexican forces against the Americans.

To counter this revolt, Polk ordered his generals, Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, to invade Mexico from the sea. With this daring move, he hoped to take control of Mexico City, thus undercutting Santa Anna and his men, who had moved north to attack Americans along the border. In March 1847, after capturing the Mexican port of Veracruz, 14,000 American troops marched inland toward Mexico City, and, after numerous battles and several bouts with yellow fever, on September 13 the American troops entered the Mexican capital. Within three days, Santa Anna, flanked on both the north and the south, surrendered to the American forces.

**Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**

In February 1848, an American envoy named Nicholas Trist negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the Mexican War. The treaty gave the United States control of Utah, Nevada, California, western Colorado, and parts of Arizona and New Mexico, and it set the Mexican-American border at the Rio Grande River. This was everything the U.S. government wanted, all in exchange for $15 million. It also safely ignored several arguments that the United States should swallow the entire nation of Mexico.

**And in the end . . .**

The Mexican cession, comprising nearly 500,000 square miles of territory, turned the rhetoric of

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<td>1829</td>
<td>Mexico abolishes slavery.</td>
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<td>1835</td>
<td>The Liberty Bell becomes cracked.</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>The saxophone is invented.</td>
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<td>The Treaty of Nanjing ends the First Opium War between Great Britain and China, which began when China protested the importation of opium by British merchants. The treaty mandates that China open trade relations with Great Britain, including the continued trafficking of opium, and it makes Hong Kong a British colony, which it remains until 1997.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>The New York Baseball Club plays the Knickerbockers in the first recorded baseball game, at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey.</td>
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manifest destiny into reality. With Texas’s annexation and the acquisition of Oregon, New Mexico, and California, the United States had become an empire spanning the width of the continent—all within four short years.

But the struggle involved in taking all this land provoked the issue that no American politician wanted to engage: slavery. The issue of whether or not slavery should exist in the western territories would lead to the political crisis of the 1850s, which would ultimately bring about the American Civil War. It is to this impending crisis that we now turn.