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## ABSTRACT

The Mexican American War is frequently a footnote in the study of U.S. expansion. The conflict is often portrayed solely from the U.S. perspective. This paper suggests that supplementing a U.S. history curriculum with an inclusive look at this conflict teaches students about the complexity of the relationship between the United States and Mexico. The paper argues for a thorough study of the war and offers teachers some resources for shaping a unit on the conflict. Noting that it can be challenging for teachers to locate enough materials to create a unit, the paper provides an annotated bibliography to introduce the diverse resources that exist on the topic; in the bibliography are curriculum units, background texts, images and texts, and resources on contemporary portrayals/Mexican-U.S. relations. (Contains 15 resources.) (BT)

**An Inclusive Examination of the Mexican-American War**

Submission for the 1999 Fulbright-Hays Seminar Independent Project:  
"A Survey of Mexico's Educational, Cultural and Regional Diversity from  
both Historical and Cultural Perspectives"

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## An Inclusive Examination of the Mexican-American War

“The bulk of U.S. history texts which review the Mexican-American War do so in a summary fashion. Coverage generally consists of a two or three page section entitled ‘Western Expansion’ or ‘Manifest Destiny.’ On the other hand, Mexican history texts devote a good deal of space to the conflict...”<sup>1</sup>

“In U.S. history texts, Mexico is a way station on the purposeful trek of the United States across the continent.”<sup>2</sup>

“In February, 1848, Mexico and the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo...The United States had achieved its long-sought Manifest Destiny and now stretched from ‘sea to shining sea.’”<sup>3</sup>

The Mexican-American War is frequently a footnote in the study of United States expansion. In addition, the conflict is often portrayed solely from the United States perspective. Supplementing a United States history curriculum with an inclusive look at this conflict teaches students about the complexity of the relationship between the United States and Mexico. This paper argues for a thorough study of the war and offers teachers some resources for shaping a unit on the conflict.

The war, which was fought between 1846 and 1847, was the result of years of tension over boundary issues. While the causes of the war are disputable, most historians locate the origin of the war in the 1820s. Due to the desire of the Mexican government to increase their citizenry in northern parts of the country (which included present day Texas), Americans were promised land if they immigrated to Northern Mexico and met a number of conditions such as becoming Mexican citizens and practice Catholicism. By the year 1830, white settlers not only outnumbered the Mexicans 3 to 1, but most settlers were refusing to meet the original conditions. In the

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hogan, The Irish Soldiers of Mexico, (Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Pastor, “The American Mind” in Limits of Friendship, (New York: Knopf, 1988), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Beverly J. Armento et. al, A More Perfect Union, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), 235.

year 1835, Texans and Mexicans fought over ownership of the land. By the end of the battles in 1836, and for the next 9 years, Texans were declaring themselves citizens of an independent country: The Republic of Texas. Mexico continued to assert rights to this land. In 1845, the United States, after years of debate, voted for Texas to join the United States. In 1846 war broke out as the United States and Mexico debated over control of the land. The fighting ended in 1847 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. The United States paid Mexico \$15 million dollars and canceled over \$3 million dollars in Mexican debt in exchange for land.

For both countries, the numbers alone indicate the significance of this battle: Mexico surrendered 890, 000 square miles, more than half of Mexico's national territory, while the United States was able to expand to California. The negative impact on Mexicans was also significant, Thousands of soldiers died from battle casualties and disease. Mexican woman were raped and civilians' homes were ransacked. Finally, the economic impact of the war was augmented in 1849 when Americans discovered gold on the former Mexican land.

The conflict presents an opportunity to teach a tremendous amount about both countries in the 1830s and 1840s. For example, it creates a context for discussing Mexico's struggles after gaining independence from Spain in 1821 and the controversies surrounding Mexican President Santa Ana. It offers the chance to teach about key ideas of race and religion as the context of the war itself was shaped by the notion of "manifest destiny" or the belief that it was the "god-given" right of white Americans to spread their culture to "less civilized" people. Many historians cite this concept as one of the leading causes of the Mexican-American War. It is also the antecedent to the Age of Imperialism at the turn of the 20th century. Some historians also suggest that the Mexican-American War was tied to antebellum debates about slavery and, in fact, foreshadows the American Civil War. As Milton Meltzer notes,

while others suggest that the intervention of the United States in the 1840s reflects the continual U.S. influence on Mexico today.

In this particular case, as the opening quotes of this paper makes clear, most Americans learn little, if anything about the war. This translates into American ignorance about Mexico today. An informal study suggests that most United States texts refer to the conflict as the “Mexican-American War.” Many American adults have either not heard of the war or confuse it with the Spanish-American War of 1898. American museums rarely have thorough portrayals of the war and the images that do exist are relegated to eyewitness prints and daguerreotypes that were created during the war. The lack of accurate information about Mexico history and contemporary life allows many Americans to hold stereotypical views of their neighboring country. For example, most discussions about immigration invariably leave out the reality that California, Texas and many other Western states were, originally, Mexico.

Deciding to teach about the war is a first step, however, in order to successfully teach about the Mexican-American War, teachers should include a variety of primary and secondary sources (both text and art based), from both the American and Mexican perspective. Teachers can encourage debate and dialogue about the conflict and connect it to later United States interventions, whether in Mexico (in 1914 and 1916) or other Latin American and European countries. In addition, connecting the conflict of the 1840s to contemporary issues will offer students the opportunity to get beyond a superficial understanding of their neighbor.

It can be a challenge for teachers to locate enough materials to create a unit. The following annotated bibliography is an introduction to the diverse resources that exist on this topic. I highly recommend reviewing and translating some of the Mexican resources and contacting Mexican museums and bookstores for videos and pamphlets.

## An Annotated Bibliography

There is a wealth of material available on the war, particularly texts which focus on the strategies used by both sides. Thus, this list is by no means inclusive. I have chosen to focus on resources that are either particularly useful or are ones that might typically be overlooked, particularly within the United States. Most of the books in Spanish were purchased in Mexico and are available from the Ghandi Bookstore in Mexico City (the store is also on the Internet) or from Mexican Museums.

### Curriculum Units

Arevalo, John, James Drake, Gloria Sesso and David Vigalante. "Duel of Eagles: Conflicts in the Southwest 1820-1848." California: University of California, National Center for History in the Schools, 1998.

This excellent curriculum which is recommend for grades 8-12, offers lesson ideas, maps and primary sources from Mexican and American perspectives. It also offers insight into the effect of the war on the Native Americans of the Southwest. It is available for purchase from The National Center for History.

Ruiz, Madigan Octavio, Amy Sanders and Meredith Sommers. "Mexico's Loss of Land." In "Magazine of History." Winter 1996. Adapted from Many Faces of Mexico. Minneapolis, Minn: Resource Center of The Americans, 1995.

This curriculum unit includes secondary sources, primary sources and a simulation activity. It is informative and the guide, Many Faces of Mexico, includes lessons on contemporary Mexico.

### **Background Texts**

Alcara Ramón et. al. Apuntes Para La Historia de la Guerra Entre México y los Estados Unidos. Mexico: Consejo Nacional Para La Cultura y Las Artes, 1848, reprinted in 1991.

As indicated by the original publication date, this book which is in Spanish offers an historical look at the war.

Bárcena, José María Roa. Recuerdos de la Invasión Norteamericana. Mexico: Consejo Nacional Para La Cultura y Las Artes, 1883, reprinted in 1991.

This series of 3 books, in Spanish, consists mainly of text, as well as some maps and images. It is an inclusive book for a historical Mexican perspective on the war.

Garrido, Felipe. Historia: Sexto Grado. Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1998.

This is the national sixth grade textbook for Mexican students. While it only includes 5 pages on the war, it has beautiful images and is illuminating as it represents the national portrayal of the war. It is also available on-line.

Hogan, Michael. The Irish Soldiers of Mexico. Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997. \*\*\*This is also available in Spanish.



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