

11th Grade United States History
Document Based Question
The Mexican War
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Directions: The following question requires you to construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of Documents A-I *and* your knowledge of the period referred to in the question. In your essay, you should strive to support your assertions both by citing key pieces of evidence from the documents and by drawing on your knowledge of the period.

President Polk stated that the Mexican War began because “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced and that the two nations are now at war.” (Polk’s War Message, 1846) Assess the validity of this statement.

Document A

The North American Republic has already absorbed territories pertaining to Great Britain, France, Spain, and Mexico. It has employed every means to accomplish this--purchase as well as usurpation, skill as well as force, and nothing has restrained it when treating of territorial acquisition. Louisiana, the Floridas, Oregon, and Texas have successively fallen into its power....

While the United States seemed to be animated by a sincere desire not to break the peace, their acts of hostility manifested very evidently what were their true intentions. Their ships infested our coasts; their troops continued advancing upon our territory, situated at places which under no aspect could be disputed. Thus violence and insult were united: thus at the very time they usurped part of our territory, they offered to us the hand of treachery, to have soon the audacity to say that our obstinacy and arrogance were the real causes of the war....

From the acts referred to, it has been demonstrated to the very senses, that the real and effective cause of this war that afflicted us was the spirit of aggrandizement of the United States of the North, availing itself of its power to conquer us. Impartial history will some day illustrate for ever the conduct observed by this Republic against all laws, divine and human, in an age that is called one of light, and which is, notwithstanding, the same as the former--one of *force and violence*.

Source: Ramon Alcaraz et al., eds. *The Other Side: Or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States* (New York: 1850), 2-3, 30-32.

Document B

The Americans from the north have taken possession of practically all the eastern part of Texas, in most cases without the permission of the authorities. They immigrate constantly, finding no one to prevent them, and take possession of the sitio [site] that best suits them without either asking leave or going through any formality other than that of building their homes. Thus the majority of inhabitants in the Department are North Americans, the Mexican population being reduced to only Béjar, Nacogdoches, and La Bahía del Espíritu Santo, wretched settlements that between them do not number three thousand

inhabitants, and the new village of Guadalupe Victoria that has scarcely more than seventy settlers. The government of the state, with its seat at Saltillo, that should watch over the preservation of its most precious and interesting departments, taking measures to prevent its being stolen by foreign hands, is the one that knows the least not only about the actual conditions, but even about its territory.... Repeated and urgent appeals have been made to the Supreme Government of the federation regarding the imminent danger in which this interesting Department is becoming the prize of the ambitious North Americans, but never has it taken any measures that may be called conclusive....

The Americans from the North, at least the great part of those I have seen, eat only salted meat, bread made by themselves out of corn meal, coffee, and homemade cheese. To these the greater part...add strong liquor, for they are in general, in my opinion, lazy people of vicious character. Some of them cultivate their small farms by planting corn; but this task they usually entrust to their Negro slaves, whom they treat with considerable harshness.

Source: José María Sánchez, "A Trip to Texas in 1828," trans. Carlos E. Castañeda, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 29 (1926), 260-61, 271.

Document C

If Texas became peopled with an American population, it was by no contrivance of our government, but on the express invitation of that of Mexico itself; accompanied with such guaranties of State independence, and the maintenance of a federal system analogous to our own, as constituted a compact fully justifying the strongest measures of redress on the part of those afterwards deceived in this guaranty.... She was released...by the acts and fault of Mexico herself, and Mexico alone.... It was not revolution; it was resistance to revolution....

California will, probably, next fall away from the loose adhesion which, in such a country as Mexico, holds a remote province in a slight equivocal kind of dependence on the metropolis. Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country.... Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-American emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with school and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. A population will soon be in actual occupation of California, over which it will be idle for Mexico to dream of dominion.

Source: John L. O'Sullivan, *Democratic Review*, XVII (July-August, 1845), 5-6, 9-10.

Document D

Everywhere meetings have been held, presided over, as in New York, by public officials of the government, to collect money, buy ships, enlist men, and fan that spirit of animosity that characterizes all the acts of the United States with regard to Mexico. The newspapers, paid by the land speculators...have sponsored the insurrection of Texas with the same ardor they would have supported the uprising of 1776. Our character, our customs, our very rights have been painted in the darkest hues, while the crimes of the Texans have been applauded in the house of the President, in the halls of the capitol, in the marts of trade, in public meetings, in small towns, and even in the fields. The President of the Mexican republic was publicly executed in effigy in Philadelphia in an insulting and shameful burlesque. The world has witnessed all these incidents, of which we have become aware through the shameful accounts in the newspapers of the United States. Could greater insults, outrages, or indignities be offered us by an open declaration of war? Let national indignation answer the question.

The Anglo-Americans, not content with having supplied the rebels with battleships to prey upon our commerce, to deprive us of our property and to commit all the abuses of piracy upon the high seas and on our defenseless coast, have protected them with their fleet and have captured the ships of the

Mexican squadron that have tried to prevent contraband trade in Texan waters. It is such acts that make our blockade ineffective....

The loss of Texas will inevitably result in the loss of New Mexico and the Californias. Little by little our territory will be absorbed, until only an insignificant part is left to us. Our destiny will be similar to the sad lot of Poland. Our national existence, acquired at the cost of so much blood, recognized after so many difficulties, would end like those weak meteors which, from time to time, shine fitfully in the firmament and disappear.

Source: José María Tomel y Mendivil, "Relations Between Texas, The United States of America and the Mexican Republic," (Mexico, 1837), trans. and ed. by Carlos E. Castañeda, *The Mexican Side of the Texas Revolution* (Dallas, 1928).

Document E

Santa Anna came out from the city with 12000 men about 5000 of them cavalry, and took position fronting me. I had 2800 men, no artillery, and not even an officer was mounted. Valencia [a Mexican commander] had 7000 men about 2000 of them cavalry & 22 pieces of cannon many of them heavy....

This people have been conceived in sin & born in iniquity for ages the millions have been degraded by oppression and the few corrupted by unbridled power. Their whole moral character is debased, they have no self respect & are therefore incapable of self government; having no test within, they are guilty of any vice they think they can screen from punishment, and now all being alike base they naturally encourage each other's degradation. The best people in the country look on any reform as hopeless without the restraint & example of others and so actually seek to prolong the war with the view of benefiting by the example we give them even as conquerors. The immense crowd of office holders civil as well as military who have hitherto lived on the revenues & exactions of the government, are struggling to perpetuate the abuses by which they exist, and now then their very nationality is at stake the Congress which was to have met...is not yet a quorum. If two weeks more go by without the government being organized I do not think a peace can be made for years, and I believe indeed that they will cease to exist except as little quarrelsome, disorderly States....

Don't let any of my letter get into the paper.

Source: Persifor Smith, "General Persifor Smith to Judge R.W. Nichols," (Mexico, 1847), Gilder *Lehrman Document Number: GLC 5128*.

Document F

Texas has been absorbed into the Union as the inevitable fulfillment of the general law which is rolling our population westward....It was disintegrated from Mexico in the natural course of events, by a process perfectly legitimate on its own part, blameless on ours....

California will, probably next fall away from...Mexico...imbecile and distracted...The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders....All this without agency of our government, without responsibility of our people--in the natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles....

Democratic Review, 1845

Document G

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

Polk's War Message, 1846

Document H



Document I

Now we ask, whether any man can coolly contemplate the idea of recalling our troops from the [Mexican] territory we at present occupy...and...resign this beautiful country to the custody of the ignorant cowards and profligate ruffians who have ruled it for the last twenty-five years? Why humanity cries out against it. Civilization and Christianity protest against this reflux of the tide of barbarism and anarchy.

New York Evening Post, 1848

U.S. History Rubric Check Sheet

Scoring Rubric Prepared By Jim Tomlin

- **Thesis**
 - Well developed and clearly focused (8-9)
 - Clear and adequate (5-7)
 - Confused, limited, or missing (2-4)
 - No thesis, provides an inappropriate response (0-1)
- **Document Usage**
 - Sophisticated use of a substantial number of documents (8-9)
 - Several documents used, may be more descriptive than analytical (5-7)
 - Few documents used, significant errors in document interpretation (2-4)
 - No document used, obvious misunderstanding of documents (0-1)
- **Critical Thought**
 - Strong interpretation and analysis (8-9)
 - Limited or superficial analysis, mostly descriptive (5-7)
 - Limited or no understanding of the question (2-4)
 - Shows a complete lack of understanding (0-1)
- **Evidence**
 - Abundant, appropriate, dealing with all aspects of question (8-9)
 - Uses some factual information (5-7)
 - Superficial or missing supporting information (2-4)
 - Little or no evidence (0-1)
- **Writing Style**
 - Well organized and well written (8-9)
 - Acceptable organization and writing (5-7)
 - Weak organization and/or poorly written (2-4)
 - May be incomprehensible (0-1)
- **Error Level**
 - No errors or errors are insignificant (8-9)
 - May contain minor errors (5-7)
 - May contain major errors (2-4)
 - Has substantial factual errors (0-1)