

**THE MEXICAN WAR**  
**ADVANCED PLACEMENT DBQ**  
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The American as conquerer is unwilling to appear in public as a pure aggressor: he dare not seize a California as Russia has seized so much land in Asia, or as Napoleon, with full French approval, seized whatever he wanted. The American wants to persuade not only the world, but himself, that he is doing God service, in a peaceable spirit, even when he violently takes what he has determined to get.  
Josiah Royce

Although the American philosopher Josiah Royce wrote these words decades after the bloodshed was washed from the streets of Monterey and Vera Cruz, his words echoed the sentiments of many Americans at the time of the Mexican War. However, history is never just one sided. In 1847, men were volunteering and crying out, "Ho for the Halls of Montezumas!" and "Mexico or Death".

**Question: To what extent was the Mexican War a "justifiable" war and not simply an excuse perpetrated upon both the American and Mexican people in order to seize land from a weak neighbor?**

(Analysis: The question assumes that you already know that a major reason the war was fought was to obtain California from Mexico. However, it is asking you to actually use the documents to both justify and to repudiate the justification.)

**DOCUMENT 1**

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High -- the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere -- its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens.... .

Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. .. We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission -- to the entire development of the principle of our organization -- freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man -- the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity?

John O'Sullivan : "The Great Nation of Futurity", 1839

(Analysis: Although O'Sullivan is using a style of writing that we may find difficult to comprehend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of its structure and its vocabulary, we can make progress in interpreting his essay by concentrating on one sentence at a time with the overall knowledge that manifest destiny was a belief in which Americans felt that God had ordained for us to spread our

democratic institutions over all of the continent including for some Americans extending our borders southward to South America.)

## DOCUMENT 2



John Gast

"American Progress", 1872

(Analysis: Although Gast did not paint this allegorical work until 1872, this painting has come to symbolize the spirit of America's westward expansion. Try to find as many symbols of America's "far-reaching future", her "freedom of trade and business", her "high destiny", and her "salvation" for mankind. Also, you will need to comment on Gast's use of light and darkness in his work and what it symbolizes.)

## Document 3

[1] It is time now for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease . . . . It is time for the common duty of Patriotism to the Country to succeed;—or if this claim will not be recognized, it is at least time for common sense to acquiesce with decent grace in the inevitable and irrevocable.

[4] It is wholly untrue, and unjust to ourselves, the pretence that the Annexation has been a measure of spoliation, unrightful and unrighteous—of military conquest under forms of peace and law—of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of justice due by a double sanctity to the weak.

. . . The independence of Texas was complete and absolute. It was an independence, not only in fact but of right. . . .

John O'Sullivan  
"Annexation"

United States Magazine and Democratic Review  
July, 1845

(Analysis: In 1845, there were citizens in our country who felt that we had no right to annex Texas into the union. One reason was that Mexico still felt that Texas was part of Mexico and others did not want it added as a slave state. From already reading Document 1 by O'Sullivan, why do you think he is in favor of annexation? Why is Texas interested in being annexed?)

#### **Document 4**

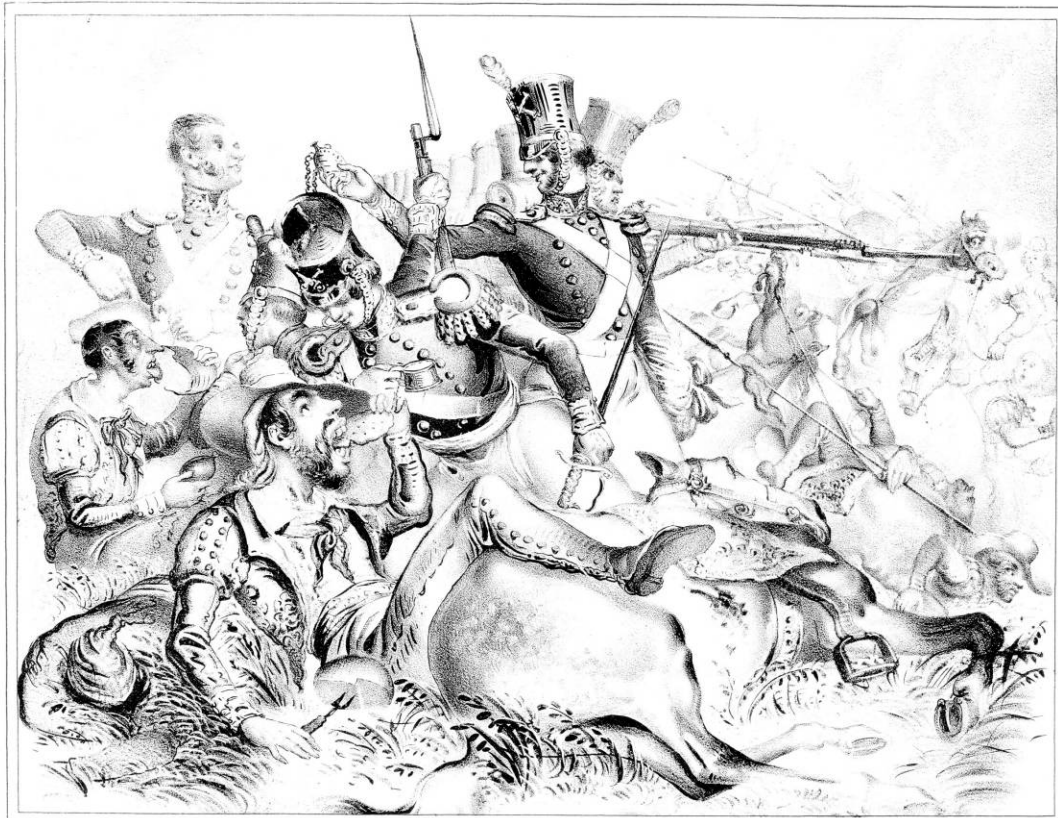
Nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of the Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already are our people preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children. But eighty years ago our population was confined on the west by the ridge of the Alleghenies. Within that period--within the lifetime, I might say, of some of my hearers--our people, increasing to many millions, have filled the eastern valley of the Mississippi, adventurously ascended the Missouri to its headsprings, and are already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific. The world beholds the peaceful triumphs of the industry of our emigrants. To us belongs the duty of protecting them adequately wherever they may be upon our soil. The jurisdiction of our laws and the benefits of our republican institutions should be extended over them in the distant regions which they have selected for their homes. The increasing facilities of intercourse will easily bring the States, of which the formation in that part of our territory can not be long delayed, within the sphere of our federative Union. In the meantime every obligation imposed by treaty or conventional stipulations should be sacredly respected.

James K Polk  
Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845

(Analysis: Earlier in his speech, President Polk discussed the importance of bringing Texas into the Union as quickly as possible. Now, he is talking about the border of Oregon which was part of his campaign rhetoric – 54, 40 or fight (the fight would be with Great Britain). In light of Document 1, what else can be inferred from the last four sentences in the above address?)

#### **Document 5**

(See next page)



At THE BATTLE OF PALO ALTO, the Americans greatly distinguished themselves, as well for their bravery, as their humanity toward their unfortunate adversaries. In the heat of the battle they were frequently seen handing their canteens and rations to the wounded Mexicans.

(Analysis: The above political cartoon depicts the first major battle of the conflict at Palo Alto. Keeping in mind O'Sullivan's article, how does the above caricature depict the Mexicans? the Americans? Pay close attention to how the Americans are aiding the Mexicans during the battle. Also, keep in mind that this battle took place less than two weeks after America declared war on Mexico?)

**Document 6**

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude, and on the 12th of April General Ampudia, then in command, notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours and to retire beyond the Nueces River, and in the event of his failure to comply with these demands announced that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question. But no open act of hostility was committed until the 24th of April. On that day General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated to General Taylor that "he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them." A party of dragoons of 63 men and officers were on the same day dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, "became engaged with a large body of these troops, and after a short affair, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender." . . .

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the

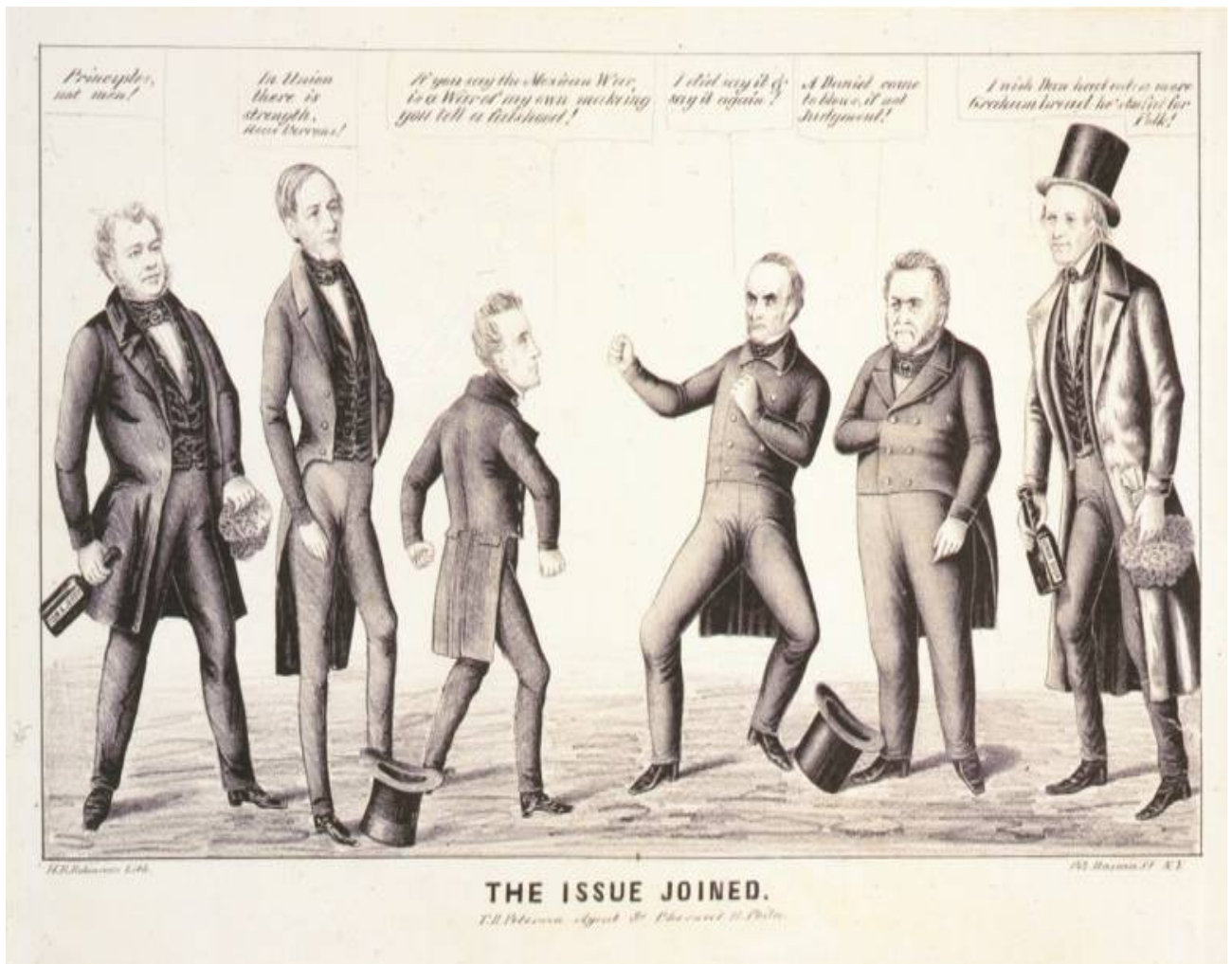
United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

President Polk

Message on War with Mexico, May 11, 1846

(Analysis: You will need to introduce outside information from the time period of January, 1846 to May, 1846 paying special attention to the diplomatic mission of John Slidell with the expressed purpose to purchase California for \$25 million and to the American troop movement under General Zachary Taylor.)

### DOCUMENT 7





## DOCUMENT 9

I was brought to Matamoras to-day about 4 o'clock, and I take pleasure in stating that since our surrender I and my brave companions in misfortune have been treated with uniform kindness and attention. It may soften the rigors of war for you to be informed fully of this fact. Lieutenant Kane and myself are living with General Ampudia: we lodge in his hotel, eat at his table, and his frank, agreeable manner and generous hospitality almost make us forget our captivity. General Arista received us in the most gracious manner; said that his nation had been regarded as barbarous, and that he wished to prove to us the contrary. Told Lieutenant Kane and myself that we should receive half pay, and our men should receive ample rations, and in lieu of it for to-day 25 cents a piece. On declining the boon on the part of Lieutenant Kane and myself, and a request that we might be permitted to send to camp for money, he said no; that he could not permit it; that he intended to supply all our wants himself. These promises have already been fulfilled in part.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

W. J. HARDEE,  
Captain 2d Dragoons.

(Analysis: This letter dated April 26, 1846, is from Captain Hardee to General Taylor reporting on the very first encounter where blood was shed (See Document 6). If you choose to comment on this letter, keep in mind what O'Sullivan writes in Document 1 and what sentiments are expressed in the illustration in Document 5.)