

The US–Mexican War of 1846–48

In the 1840s, the territorial ambitions of the United States were embodied in President Polk and the growing belief in the nation's "Manifest Destiny" to rule the continent. Under his leadership the United States would flex its muscles and expand across the continent from "sea to shining sea". The Oregon boundary question with Britain was settled peacefully in 1846 when both agreed that the 49th parallel would divide the United States and Canada. The situation with Texas and Mexico was more complex and not resolved amicably. A war would result that decapitated Mexico north of the Rio Grande and a hegemonic US gained a third of its current continental holdings. The US annexed Texas and in the post-war Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (*Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo* in Spanish) of 1848 gained the former Mexican states of Alta California and Santa Fe de New Mexico (California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and portions of Colorado and Wyoming). By the end of the 1840s, the political map of North America, except for a few minor adjustments was defined. This section will examine the causes and effects of the Mexican War of 1846 (*Intervencion estadounidense de Mexico*) on Mexico and the United States.

The road to war

Mexico became independent from Spain in 1821. It was a vast nation covering a third of North America with large tracts of land north of the Rio Grande River (or *Rio Bravo del Norte*). The most interesting area, economically and strategically, was California with its lush valleys and deep harbors. The majority of Mexicans lived south of the Rio Grande. When the war started in 1846 only 75,000 Mexicans lived in a vast territory stretching from California to Texas. It made the territory attractive to Mexico's ambitious and expansionist northern neighbor, the United States.

Post-independence Mexico was swept by a mood of optimism but the society was deeply fragmented between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, rural and urban, élites and peasants, liberals and conservatives. During the first two decades of independence, Mexico searched for stability experimenting with a monarchy, republican government and *caudillos*. Liberals reformers advocated a federal republic while conservatives championed a centralized state, a constitutional Monarchy and the traditional role of the Catholic Church. Describing Mexico during this period, Historian Jesús Velasco-Márquez concludes: "that only the existence of a profound link, beyond that of economics or politics, can explain the survival of the country. ... one can affirm that in Mexico, in contrast with the United States, that yes, a nation existed, but its condition was precarious." Mexico's huge geographical expanse, great range of social and ethnic diversity and, according to some historians, diminished vice-regal status and large debts, mostly to Britain, at the time of independence, made it a special case in newly independent Latin America. The country's precarious condition is illustrated by

Discussion point

Imperialism

Imperialism often happens for very practical reasons, such as economic expansion, desire for resources and geopolitical considerations.

Examine the real reason, as opposed to the justifications for 19th-century imperialism in the Americas: US "Manifest Destiny" against Mexico, Canada and Nicaragua; the Argentina–Brazil War; War of the Pacific (Chile against Bolivia and Perú); Haiti against Santo Domingo

the fact that in the first 33 years as a republic, Mexico had 49 presidents, some lasting only months in office. Some presidents were military strongmen, like the *caudillo* Antonio López de Santa Anna, who was president on eight occasions, sometimes for very brief periods. He was a career military officer, who supported various causes, liberal and conservative, as well as fighting against foreign intervention from France and the United States.

The new government of the United States, by contrast, had to deal with a much smaller geographical space and a homogeneous majority population. French, German and even British investment, industrialization and immigration fired the economic engine. Thousands of immigrants—particularly Irish escaping the famine—arrived after 1847 and changed the social make-up of the nation. As land became scarce and expensive along the Atlantic seaboard, US citizens and new arrivals from Europe looked west and began to push across the continent, to the area bought by the US in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. A growing sense of mission permeated the movement west, a mission to eventually take control of North America—a movement christened as “Manifest Destiny”. This mission used the justification to civilize and Christianize the native peoples in order to populate and cultivate the vast tracks of what was then seen as uninhabited lands in the west. By 1840, 4.5 million US citizens had left the Atlantic seaboard, advancing to the Mississippi River forcing Native Americans to migrate farther west. In the way of US southwest expansion was Mexico. The conflict came to a head over Texas.

The state of Texas

In 1824, Stephen Austin, the man credited with bringing the first wave of settlers from the United States into the Mexican northern territory, now known as Texas, was granted permission by the Mexican government to settle 300 families in Texas; known in Texas history as the “Old Three Hundred” they were followed by thousands of US citizens seeking free Texas land grants. Thousands of settlers, mainly from the US southern states, poured into Texas, bringing their slaves with them. This stretch of the country was at the time inhabited by barely 2,500 Mexicans, as the Mexican government considered it a backwater. By 1830, the Mexican government determined that the *Anglos* (as Mexicans called the English-speaking US residents in Texas) outnumbered Mexicans 4 to 1 and tried to end immigration. In addition, a heavy tax was placed on imports and exports in Texas; recognition that economic traffic was mainly between Texas and the United States. Mexican officials and soldiers employed to collect taxes, instead promoted smuggling and friction between the Texas militia and Mexican soldiers. In 1832, Austin, the uncontested head of the US

Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794–1876)

Santa Anna was a political leader, president and general who greatly influenced Mexico. Ambiguous, ambitious, duplicitous and self-aggrandizing, he was president many times, exiled three times and brought back twice to save the nation. Famously, he stormed the Alamo, then granted Texas independence and was thrown out of office. In 1838, he was brought back to fight the French who had landed at Veracruz. He was successful but lost his leg in the fighting. The Veracruz victory put him back in power as dictator. He was driven out in 1845 and exiled. He came back with the help of US President Polk on the promise he would make peace but instead led his forces against the US. Defeated, he retired to Jamaica in 1847.



settlers, went to Mexico City to petition the Mexican government but was arrested and jailed for two years, until 1834.

The inhabitants of Texas, both *Anglos* and Mexicans, asked the president of Mexico at the time, Antonio López de Santa Anna, for statehood, in order to have more autonomy regarding taxes and tariffs, as well as land concessions. Santa Anna refused to grant it. Conflict escalated until the Texans declared independence from Mexico in 1836, with the support in arms and resources, from the United States. Santa Anna led the Mexican Army into Texas and after a few initial successes (notably the Alamo) was soundly defeated at the Battle of San Jacinto and imprisoned. To avoid being hanged, he signed the Treaty of Velasco granting Texas independence. But the Mexican government refused to recognize the treaty, declaring that Texas was still Mexican and drove Santa Anna into exile, though they recalled their troops in 1836. A year later, the US recognized Texas as a sovereign state, as did France and Britain, who welcomed a buffer state between the US and Mexico. Between 1836 and 1845, relations between Texas and Mexico remained hostile. Cross-border raids were commonplace. Seaborne Mexican troops sacked coastal towns and attempted a blockade. The Texans responded with privateers and later created a navy that interdicted Mexican trade and supplied Yucatán insurgents.

The Texans had wrongly assumed that the United States would welcome them with open arms, but underestimated the northern anti-slavery lobby which opposed adding another slave state. Mexico had abolished slavery in 1830 but the Texans ignored the law and kept their slaves. The influx of southern slave-owning settlers into Texas was a matter of geographic proximity not a slave conspiracy as many northerners claimed. Regardless, this view of the situation convinced abolitionists to oppose the annexation of Texas until the matter of slave state admission to the union was resolved. Both the US and Mexico made efforts to negotiate, but this was not to be. Meanwhile, Texas was in financial trouble maintaining a costly military. The fledgling Texas government began negotiations with France and England, former supporters of Texan independence, but who were not keen on having it strengthen the US union. On March 1, 1845, outgoing President Tyler adeptly set the annexation table with an annexation bill rather than a treaty which required a two-thirds majority in the Senate. The annexation bill required a simple majority in Congress. Early in 1845, the bill passed and Texas became the 28th state of the union. Mexico had stated that annexation meant war and was confident its 20,000 man regular army could defeat the US army of 7,000. The Mexican newspaper *El Tiempo* summed it up this way “The conduct [of] the American is similar to that of the bandit. ... Mexico must defend itself.”

President James K. Polk and “Manifest Destiny”

James Polk was inaugurated as the new president of the United States on March 4, 1845. He had won largely because he was an expansionist, advocated “Manifest Destiny” and insisted on the reoccupation of the Oregon territory and the annexation of Texas.

Annexation carried the day. The Oregon territory dispute was resolved peacefully when the British finally agreed to accept the 49th parallel as the border. The Oregon Treaty of 1846 added the future states of Oregon and Washington to the fold. Mexico was a different problem.

Santa Anna, who had returned to power a few years earlier, was exiled in 1845 and José de Herrera took power. Incensed by Tyler's annexation bill the Minister to the United States was recalled and on June 4 Herrera issued a war proclamation vilifying the United States.

Polk wanted territorial concessions from the Mexicans and, if possible, to avoid war. In October he sent US Commissioner John Slidell to negotiate. Slidell was in fact authorized to offer the Mexican government 25 million dollars for lands north of the Rio Grande. By November, the Mexican press and public opinion had branded Herrera a traitor intent on surrendering Mexican lands. The Mexican press labelled Slidell's mission "a gross trap with [a] Machiavellian and outrageous end." The president bowed to pressure and rejected Slidell's overtures. But it was too late: Herrera was replaced by General Mariano Paredes. On December 29, 1845, Polk signed the annexation bill adding Texas to the union.

Polk's next move was to force the Mexicans to fight or negotiate. The real prize was California, with its lush valleys and the deep harbor of San Francisco. US citizens had, in fact, been immigrating there since 1840. Polk was an opportunist and decided to move into Texas. He ordered General Zachary Taylor to advance with 4,000 men across the Nueces River and drive south to the north bank of the Rio Grande. The Mexicans claimed the Nueces was the border and Taylor's advance was considered an act of war, a violation of Mexican sovereignty. In fact, the area was under dispute.

In Washington, Polk asked his cabinet to support a declaration of war. They hesitated because the president had not convinced the majority of US citizens that the war was necessary and unavoidable. Events now played into the president's hands. Mexican troops ambushed a US patrol on May 8, killing or wounding 16 US soldiers. This was the pretext Polk needed. With the full support of Cabinet he asked Congress for a declaration of war stating that "American blood had been spilled on American soil." On May 13, Congress voted overwhelmingly for war, but the measure was controversial. The south supported the president but influential northerners did not want to admit another slave state. Former president John Quincy Adams described the war as a southern expedition to find "bigger pens to cram with slaves." James Fennimore Cooper disagreed and wrote that the war was a great moral stride in America's "progress toward real independence and high political influence." Walt Whitman was stirred by what he witnessed and captured the nations mood, "There is hardly a more admirable impulse in the human soul than patriotism." The new Congressman Abraham Lincoln opposed the war and challenged the president to provide evidence that the

James Knox Polk (1795–1849)

James Knox Polk was inaugurated the 11th president of the United States in 1845. He was Governor of Tennessee (1839–1841) before becoming president in 1845. Polk was an imperialist who aggressively expanded the United States across the continent by whatever means necessary. He retired in 1849, fulfilling his promise to serve one term and died of cholera three months later.



“spot” of the skirmish was actually on US soil. The anti-war forces remained a vocal minority throughout the war but the majority of the US supported the president. The pro-war *New York Herald* announced a new role for the nation, a “new destiny” that would ultimately affect “both this continent and the old continent of Europe.” Manifest Destiny had taken root.

Historian Karl Bauer suggests “the war was a product of America’s romantic age”; a time of “Manifest Destiny”, when the US would define her greatness and national character. US citizens believed in the justification that their divine mission was to carry the gospel of liberty to the continent and the world and acquire vast tracts of territory. In fact, upon the US Congress’s declaration of war, the US navy blocked Mexican ports in the Pacific and the Atlantic and occupied California and New Mexico, neither of which had purportedly been in dispute over Texas. It is worth commenting that whether pro- or anti-war neither side expressed any sympathy for the Mexican people or that the United States was about to engage in a war of imperial conquest.

The progress of the war

The war lasted longer than expected. Mexico was favoured by the vastness of its territory and communications difficulties for the invading army, but weakened by constant internal conflicts and changes in power. The US army was better organized in armament, discipline and resources. Fighting raged throughout the disputed territories but the war-winning strategy was the two-pronged invasion of Mexico. There were many instances of popular resistance to the US occupation, especially in California. In addition, between 300 and 400 US soldiers, almost all of them Irish, actually joined the Mexican forces as the St. Patrick’s Battalion, sharing with them the Catholic faith and hostility for Protestant *Anglos*. On September 14, 1847, culminating a bloody drive across Mexico from Vera Cruz, General Winfield Scott’s army entered Mexico City and the fighting was over. Santa Anna resigned. In March 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed by new president Manuel de la Peña and the war ended.

The United States lost 13,000 soldiers, 1,773 killed in action and about 11,000 from disease, and spent over \$100,000 million. Mexico casualties have been estimated at 25,000. Geographically, Mexico lost all lands north of the Rio Grande, the current states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and portions of Colorado and Wyoming. Mexican historian Juan Brom writes that Mexico lost the war due to its internal affairs:

“The rivalries between military leaders made difficult and even impeded necessary collaboration; in addition, frequently the troops did not have required supplies in arms and foodstuffs. To this must be added the conflicts between Church and state, as well as the attitude of many governors, who did not support the national struggle. In short, the country lacked the unity and organization that are indispensable for an efficacious defence.”

Source: Brom, Juan and Duval, Dolores. 1998. *Esbozo de historia de México*. Mexico D. F.: Editorial Grijalbo. p. 176.

Activity

Saint Patrick’s Battalion

Look up David Rovics singing “Saint Patrick’s Battalion” on YouTube.com. This song commemorates the Irishmen who fought alongside the Mexican army against the United States in 1846–48.

Questions

- 1 Why did new immigrants from Ireland join the US army?
- 2 Why were the new Irish immigrants not taken in by Manifest Destiny?

Mexico's army was decimated and several important Mexican cities and ports had been reduced to rubble, foreign markets and imports destroyed, transportation routes disrupted and thousands of civilians killed. Mexico ceded the northern half of the country, about 800,000 square kilometres (55 percent of Mexico's land area) to the United States. The total doubles to 1.6 million when Oregon and Texas are added. The new border stretched the length of the continent from the Gulf of Mexico along the Rio Grande to the point where the river turns north due west to the Pacific Ocean. The treaty required the US pay Mexico 15 million US dollars for ceded lands and a further 3.25 million in indemnities. Mexicans living in the ceded area (about 75,000), would be granted US citizenship and to keep their lands (later rescinded). The US also promised to guard the border and stop Apache raids into Mexico.

Many Mexicans were aghast at the conditions and wanted to resume the war. The Mexican government, dominated by the creole élite, feared that further fighting would destroy what remained of the nation's shattered economy. They enlisted the support of the Catholic Church and the British who wanted the cash to help repay loans owed to them and Mexico succumbed and plunged into a dark period of economic and political chaos that lasted until the late 1860s. In 1853, Santa Anna was recalled again to establish order and promptly sold another 50,000 kilometers of land bordering New Mexico to the United States for an additional ten million dollars (the Gadsden Purchase of 1853). Santa Anna was exiled—for the last time.

President Polk had fulfilled his campaign promises and expanded the nation. Polk's plan was opportunistic. He was more interested in California than the southwest and would have preferred negotiations to gunfire. He probably just wanted Texas and California; the territories in-between were an added bonus. But when the opportunity presented itself he fought a war of imperial conquest and completed the continental map of the United States from sea to sea: from the Rio Grande to the 49th parallel. Wagon trains of settlers soon filled the Santa Fe Trail. Gold was discovered in California in 1849 and "49er's" flocked west to pan their fortune. Thousands of settlers made the arduous journey to the west. It was a golden age in many respects, but the war had unleashed other forces. Slavery would dominate the national political agenda. Numerous compromises failed to resolve the slavery issue in a nation founded on the "self-evident" principles of inalienable rights and freedoms.

Mexico was weakened and devastated by the war. One of the reasons for the defeat was the unwillingness of the Mexican government to mobilize large numbers of peasants into the army because they feared a long and devastating guerrilla war with the United States. So they concluded a hasty treaty. According to the Mexican historian Leticia Reina, the government "preferred coming to terms with the United States rather than endanger the interests of the ruling class." Mexican politician Manuel Rejón predicted the treaty would destroy Mexico's economy and concluded that the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was a death sentence for Mexican

Activity

Roundtable discussion

Road to war or conflict resolution

Conflict resolution between countries does not have to lead to war. Why was the territorial dispute between the US and Britain over the Oregon territory resolved peacefully? Why did the dispute between the US and Mexico over Texas lead to war? Divide the class into two groups, each preparing and answering their response to the questions in a roundtable discussion.

independence. Mexico would be a vassal of the United States. Mexicans living in the conquered territories, Rejón feared, would be treated as second-class citizens and lose their property and civil rights. His fears were soon justified. A group of lawyers known as the “Santa Fe Ring” used long legal battles to exploit the Mexican landholders and acquired lands extending over a million acres. For the next two decades rebellion, revolution and violence were Mexico’s national staples. The misfortune finally ended in the 1860s but Mexico had been humiliated by the war and the wounds took a long time to heal.

The US–Mexican War marked an end to the independence period in the Americas and except for British North America and a few Caribbean islands, the colonial powers had been evicted and new, independent nations had emerged. In Canada and the Caribbean nations the road to independence would take a different path.

Discussion point

For the descendants of Mexican landowners and ranchers stripped of their lands by the US courts in violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the treatment of their ancestors remains a contentious issue.



What impact did the Mexican War have on the ethnic populations of the territories acquired? How is their ethnic mix defined today?

Activity

The US–Mexican War of 1846–48

Source A

Following is an extract from the Monroe Doctrine, President James Monroe’s seventh annual message to the Congress on December 2, 1823.

The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.

In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere we are of necessity connected ... we owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power in any other light than as a manifestation of an unfriendly disposition to the United States.

It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in hope that other powers will pursue the same course ...

Source: “James Monroe: American President: An Online Reference Resource”. Miller Center of Public Affairs. University of Virginia. <http://millercenter.org/academic/americanpresident/monroe>.

Source B

Following is an extract from an article by the US columnist and editor J. O’ Sullivan, who approved of the annexation of Texas and is credited with coining the phrase “Manifest destiny”.

The expansive future is our arena and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.



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

We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission ... 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. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?

Source C

Following is an extract from a proclamation by the acting president of the Republic of Mexico, José de Herrera, issued June 4, 1845, denouncing the intention of the United States to annex Texas.

That the congress of the United States of the Noorth has, by a decree, which its executive sanctioned, resolved to incorporate the territory of Texas to the U.States tramples on the conservative principle of society, attacks all the rights that Mexico has to that territory, is an insult to her dignity as a sovereign nation, and threatens her independence and political existence; In consequence, the government will call to the arms all the forces of the army, according to the authority granted it by the existing laws; and for the preservation of public order, for the support of her institutions, and in case of necessity, to serve as the reserve to the army, the government, according to the powers given to it on the 9th December 1844, will raise the corps specified by said decree, under the name of "Defenders of the Independence and of the Laws."

Source: "Documents of the US–Mexican War." *Descendants of US–Mexican War Veterans*. <http://www.dmwv.org/mexwar/documents/herrera.htm>.

Source D

Following is an extract from the inaugural address of President James Polk on March 4, 1845.

I regard the question of annexation as belonging exclusively to the United States and Texas. They are independent powers competent to contract, and foreign nations have no right to interfere with them or to take exceptions to their reunion. Foreign powers do not seem to appreciate the true character of our Government. Our Union is a confederation of independent States, whose policy is peace with each other and all the world. To enlarge its limits is to extend the dominions of peace over additional territories and increased millions ... it is confidently believed that our system may be safely extended to the utmost bonds of our territorial limits, and that as strong as it shall be extended to the utmost bonds of our territorial limits, and that as strong as it shall be extended to the bonds of our Union, so far from being weakened, become stronger.

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 territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of the Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already our people are preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children ... the increasing facilities of intercourse will easily bring the States, of which the formation in that part of our territory cannot be delayed, within the sphere of our federative Union.



Source E

Following is an extract from "Against the Mexican War" by Thomas Corwin, Senator from Ohio, published in 1847.

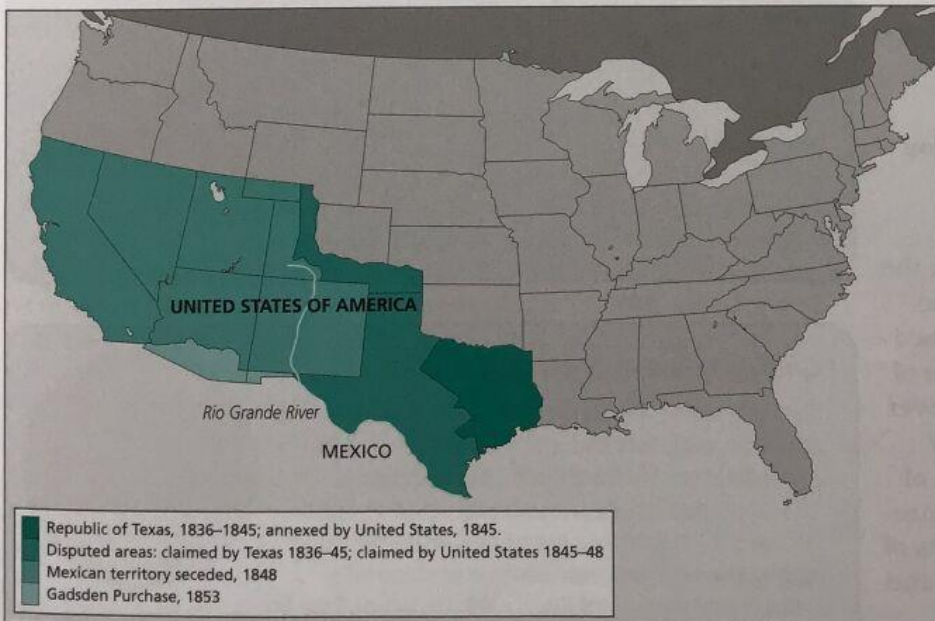
Should we prosecute this war another moment, or expend one dollar in the purchase or conquest of a single acre of Mexican land, the North and the South are brought into collision on a point where neither will yield. Who can see or foretell the result! Who so bold and reckless as to look such a conflict in the face unmoved!

... Let us abandon all idea of acquiring further territory and by consequence cease at once to prosecute this war. Let us call home our armies, and bring them at once within our own acknowledged limits. Show Mexico that you are sincere when you say you desire nothing by conquest. She has learned that she cannot encounter you in the war, and if she had not, she is too weak to disturb you here ... It is your invasion that has made war; your retreat will restore peace ... Let us here, in this temple consecrated to the Union, perform a solemn lustration; let us wash Mexican blood from our hands, and on these altars, and in the presence of that image of the Father of his Country that looks down upon us, swear to preserve honorable peace with all the world and eternal brotherhood with each other.

Source: Ravitch, Diane. ed. 1991. *The American Reader: Words that Moved the Nation*. New York: Harper-Collins. pp.77–79.

Questions

- 1 What is meant by Manifest Destiny in source B?
 - a Briefly explain the doctrine outlined by President Monroe in source A.
- 2 Compare the differing views on the annexation of Texas contained in sources C, D and E.
- 3 Using sources A, B and D assess why key American leaders advocated expansion.
- 4 Using your knowledge and with specific reference to the documents, why did Mexico and the United States decide to go to war?



The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo showing territory ceded to the United States.