The Mexican-American War is Just

By James Buchanan  
Date: 1847

Explanation of the Source: Secretary of State—and future president—James Buchanan (a Democrat) was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Mexican-American War. In this December 1847 letter, he explains the Polk administration's position on the war. Several of his bold assertions—particularly his insistence that the war was not being waged for conquest—would have been difficult for even the staunchest advocates of the war to swallow.

“Heaven has smiled upon the just cause; and the character of our country has been illustrated by a rapid succession of brilliant and astonishing victories. The exploits of our army have elevated our National character, and shed a lustre upon our name throughout the civilized world...

The war has not been prosecuted for conquest. At every stage in its progress, we have been willing to conclude a just and honorable peace. Indeed, we can never wage a war for conquest in the popular sense of that term. Our free institutions forbid that we should subject nations to our arbitrary sway. If they come within our power, we must bestow upon them the same blessings of liberty and law, which we ourselves enjoy. Should they be annexed to the Union ... they must participate in the freest and best Government upon earth—on equal terms with ourselves.

The Capital of Mexico is now the Head-Quarters of our conquering Army, and yet such is the genius of our free institutions, that, for the first time, its peaceful and well-disposed citizens enjoy security in their private rights, and the advantage of a just and firm Government. From all that can be learned, they appreciate our protection at its proper value; and dread nothing so much as the withdrawal of our army. They know this would be the signal for renewed and fierce dissensions among their military leaders, in which the Mexican people would become the victims. In this wretched condition of affairs, justice to them and to ourselves may require that we should protect them in establishing, upon a permanent basis, a Republican Government, able and willing to conclude and maintain an equitable Treaty of Peace with the United States. After every effort to obtain such a treaty, should we finally fail in accomplishing the object, and should the military factions in Mexico still persist in waging upon us a fruitless war, then we must fulfill the destiny which Providence may have in store for both countries.”
The Mexican-American War is Wrong

By: Frederick Douglass
Date: 1846

Explanation of the Source: Like all opponents of slavery, Frederick Douglass opposed the Mexican-American War, seeing it as little more than a scheme to extend the institution. In this letter written while he was touring England, Douglass explains his views.

“MY DEAR FRIENDS...I confess I feel sad, and sick at heart, by the present posture of political affairs in the United States. The spirit of Slavery reigns triumphant throughout all the land. Every step in the onward march of political events is marked with blood—innocent blood; shed, too, in the cause of Slavery. The war with Mexico rages; the green earth is drenched with warm blood, oozing out from human hearts; the air is darkened with smoke; the heavens are shaken by the terrible roar of the cannon; the groans and cries of the wounded and dying disturb the ear of God. Yet how few in that land care one farthing for it, or will move one inch to arrest and remove the cause of this horrible state of things? I am sad; I am sick; the whole land is cursed, if not given over to destruction. Massachusetts, the brightest of every other State, is now but the tool of Texas. Texas may be said to give laws to the whole Union. She leads the way in plunder and murder; and Massachusetts, with all New England, follow in the crusade like hungry sharks in the bloody wake of a Brazilian slaveship. What a spectacle for men and angels! Gov. Briggs issuing his order to send the sons of those who fell in the cause of freedom on Bunker Hill, to fight the battle of Slavery in Mexico! Gov. Briggs, the teetotaller! Gov. Briggs, the Baptist! Issuing his order to raise troops in Massachusetts, to establish with fire and sword the man-blasting and soul-damning system of Slavery! Who would have thought it? And yet it was to be expected. The deed was done long ago. The foundation of this frowning monument of infamy was laid when the States were first declared the United States. This is but another link around your necks of the galling chain which your fathers placed about the heels of my race. It is the legitimate fruit of compromise—of attempting a union of Freedom with Slavery. All was lost in that sad moment. The American Anti-Slavery Society has the right on this question. Her ground is the true one. I believe that the salvation of the country depends, under God, upon the effort of that society. The Union must be dissolved, or New England is lost and swallowed up by the slave-power of the country....”
Results of the Mexican-War

Explanation of the Source: The political cartoon below deals with the Mexican-American War. It shows what happened to the Mexican nation after the war. The ‘Mexican Flag’ Eagle is represented below to show what happened to Mexico with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

(An 1847 cartoon entitled "Plucked" portrays "The Mexican eagle" before and after war with the United States.)