

The Historiography of the Mexican-American War

Where Historians Disagree - The Mexican American War

Tim Johnson

Between the years 1846 and 1848 the United States waged a war with Mexico. This war is known by many names; most popular among U.S. historians is “Mexican War,” the name first popularized by contemporary American participants in the war. Additional frequently used titles are “Mexican-American War” and “United States-Mexican War.” Still, other historians refer to the war simply as the “conflict of 1846-1848.” In Mexico, the war has many alternative titles, including the *Invasión de los Norte Americans en Mexico*. Each nomenclature denotes various perspectives of the war, shifting or balancing blame and responsibility between those involved.

Despite the significance of this war in United States history, it has remained a rather unpopular war with historians and the general reading public. As one historian points out, “There are no Mexican War Round Tables, no Mexican War Book Clubs.” While the majority of Americans can name a handful of Civil War generals in the blink of an eye, very few outside the historical profession, and some might argue few within the profession, could do the same for the Mexican War. “It has almost become standard for authors writing about the Mexican War to inform readers that the topic has been neglected.”

Early historians of the Mexican War seemed to be obsessed with placing blame. Their histories are quick to point fingers and declare tyrants and victims in the war. In the earliest histories, personal opinions are not hidden, but blatantly sprawled across the page. Hubert H. Bancroft, who published his six-volume *History of Mexico, 1824-1861* in the 1880s, makes it abundantly clear that the United States, and the pro-slavery and land-hungry men who controlled it, should be held entirely to blame for the war.

James Ford Rhodes followed in the footsteps of Bancroft; however, instead of placing the blame on the United States as a whole, he points his finger firmly at the Southern slave-holding majority. Writing his epic seven-volume work titled *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, he published his account of the Mexican War in 1893. In his mind all the sins of the era were solely in the hands of the South, and thus there too lies the blame for the Mexican War. By his account it was the “aggressive southern slavocracy” who planted the seeds for war when they promoted the annexation of Texas.

Skeptical as to whether or not these early histories were “correct and complete”, Justin H. Smith set out to write his own comprehensive history of the war. Smith conducted extensive research for his project. Smith made it a point to look at all he could access, and consequently used a majority of sources overlooked by previous historians. Smith’s extensive research led him to form a new and dramatically different conclusion about the war. In response to prior historians’ shouts of “Blame America!”, “Blame Polk!”, and “Blame the South!”, Smith argued that we should “Blame Mexico!” Smith argues that America is not to be held responsible for the war and, instead, all responsibility lies with Mexico. As Smith wrote, “No other course than that taken by Polk would have been patriotic or even rational.” Published at the close of the First World War, a period of high nationalism, Smith’s nationalistic theme was adored by reviewers.

While Smith’s two-volume work remained the definitive work on the Mexican War for many decades, mid-twentieth century historians began to take a renewed interest in the war as they sought to fill the void of scholarly works on the subject. These historians sought to write summaries of the war, pieces that provided background information without too much in-depth analysis of one particular aspect of the war. Seeing the war as being unjustly neglected, Otis Singletary published his summary of the war, titled appropriately, *The Mexican War*, in 1960. As

he states in his prologue, his short work will fulfill its purpose “if it succeeds in conveying to the reader some interest in and appreciation of the wider implications of this unique event,” one which he saw as having a “profound influence upon the future course of American history.” Though his focus was on writing a summary accessible to the masses, Singletary does offer his own new interpretation of who is to blame for the war. Unlike the majority of earlier historians, Singletary does not point fingers at one side or the other, but instead holds both parties accountable.

In 1972, historian K. Jack Bauer gave a nod to Smith’s “classic,” as Bauer refers to it, but also justified why his current summary was necessary and appropriate. Admitting that few Mexican War sources have passed into the public domain without first passing the eyes of Smith, Bauer justifies his “trespass[ing] on Smith’s preserve” by citing the “truism that every generation must reinterpret history in the light of its own experience.” Bauer’s experiences, writing in the wake of the war in Vietnam, were indeed quite different from Smith who had the First World War as his reference point. With the contemporary conflict in Vietnam on his mind, Bauer makes many comparisons between the Vietnam War and the Mexican War. Highlighting the force of manifest destiny as the igniter of the conflict with Mexico, a conflict he views as unavoidable, Bauer states, “The story of the application of that force by James K. Polk, like that of America’s recent experience in Vietnam, depicts the dangers inherent in the application of graduated force.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, historians of the Mexican War, still writing with the aim of filling in the gap of scholarly work on this often neglected topic, have sought to do so, for the most part, in a way dramatically different from the historians discussed above. Instead of summarizing the war as a whole, many more modern historians have chosen to narrow their foci, looking closely at particular sub-topics within the Mexican War.

In his book, *The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism: 1843-1849*, Frederick Merk argues that the Polk administration, fearful of Europeans taking over North American territory, initiating schemes to interfere with slavery within the U.S., and imposing monarchic forms of government on young struggling republics, called for a renewal of Monroe Doctrine policies to protect North America, but more importantly to protect United States interests there. Thomas Hietala’s *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* examines the motivations of the Polk administration as well, but makes a rather contradictory argument to that of Merk’s. Arguing not that it was “threats from abroad or demands from pioneers” that influenced U.S. foreign policy, Hietala argues instead that “foreign policy in the 1840s was primarily a response to internal concerns.” Hietala infers that “the news of the Mexican assault on American forces came as a great relief to Polk and his advisers, for it provided an opportune justification for a course they had already plotted.” When first published in 1985, Hietala’s argument was criticized by many who still followed the more nationalistic line of thought first promoted by Smith.

Histories of the Mexican War have changed drastically over the years, varying both in the themes examined and the interpretations of how these themes played out in the war. Many of the historians discussed here disagree with each other, and new contradicting interpretations are entering the field every year. As Foss reminds us, “Scholars of the Mexican-American War have been hard-pressed to remain objective in the face of the contentious politics of the 1840s, using them - intentionally or unintentionally – as a sounding board for the latter day political debates.”