

The United States Did Not Have a Legitimate Claim

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With the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by the Mexican and U.S. senates in 1848, the Mexican-American War ended and well over 500,000 square miles of territory officially passed into American hands. This agreement is the oldest still in force between the two nations. It is also the most controversial, especially in Mexico. The reason is clear – the victors of the war dictated the terms of an accord that was designed to serve American interests. Although Mexico retained a legitimate, historical claim to Texas and California, the treaty recognized the military situation on the ground, one in which American forces occupied most of the land claimed and, indeed, much of Mexico that was not.

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Mexico's legitimate historical claims to the ceded land stem from two key factors – first, that the United States officially recognized the territorial boundaries of Mexico before that issue was clouded by the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836; and, second, that the primary cause of the Mexican-American War was American hunger for Mexican land.

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Expansionism, a perpetual theme in antebellum American history, eventually overwhelmed the incipient republican amenity between the two countries as well as the border... Predictably, Mexican-American relations gradually soured until the year 1845 saw them come to a head with the annexation of Texas and the inauguration of James K. Polk as president of the United States.

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The annexation of Texas and the consequent dispute over its border with Mexico provided the pretext for armed confrontation. Mexico considered Texas as sovereign territory and broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. As half of the U.S. Army marched to Corpus Christi to “protect” the new state, a Mexican army gathered at Matamoros 150 miles to the south. Between the two armies rested what historians now and many people then referred to as “disputed territory.” Texans claimed the Rio Grande as their state's border, although it had never served as a provincial boundary nor was it ever “controlled” by the Lone Star Republic. In Mexico, even those willing to accept the loss of Texas would only concede the Nueces River as its border. Polk then made a fateful decision; on January 13, 1846, he ordered an American army to march south. This aggressive move made war a probability. Diplomacy, the president understood, offered little hope of achieving his aims regarding California. War, Polk told his cabinet in April 1846, was the answer to the Mexico question. And so it proved to be.