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THE CAUSES OF THE MEXICAN WAR
A NOTE ON CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS*

by
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IN THE MID 1940s the Mexican War centennial passed almost without notice in this country. Neither pictorial magazines nor historical journals were glutted with the subject, and no worthwhile book appeared. This was not because the war was uninteresting and unimportant, for popular writers could have recounted the campaigns of General Taylor or General Scott, and historians could have pointed out that victory brought the entire Southwest into American possession. Perhaps an immediate reason why an anniversary conscious nation did not respond was because it would have been unpolitic to extoll the American character of an hundred years earlier, a character whose appetite had drawn

*This article is a consolidation of papers prepared for a course in diplomatic history conducted by Professor Richard N. Current at the University of Wisconsin. No attempt is made to discuss all the histories of the Mexican War. Some of the better-known histories, such as R. S. Ripley's *War with Mexico* (2 vols., New York, 1849), offer no real interpretations as to the causes of the war, and therefore have not been included. Only one example of a given point of view is presented. An additional study of interest is Roberto Esquenazi-Mayo's "Historiografía de la guerra entre México y los EE. UU.," *Duquesne Hispanic Review*, I (Fall 1962), 33-48; and (Winter 1962), 7-35. This journal is published by the Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, three times a year.

the United States into war with a nation that was its ally in World War II.

Even before the fighting ceased, students of the Mexican War began speculating as to the causes. The first commentaries appeared immediately following the war, during a period when feelings of repression and gloom, generated largely by abolitionists, enshrouded the conflict. The abolitionists advanced the view that the war was precipitated by Southern slaveholders conspiring to acquire lands for the creation of new slave states. Though many contemporaries, North and South, held different views, the issues involved soon became so thoroughly entangled with that of slavery that few historians during the nineteenth century were able to free themselves from this web. Not until the first decades of the twentieth century did a majority of historians present the war as one waged for the extension of the national boundaries — a cause quite divorced from the slavery issue. Despite this change in interpretation, however, the shroud of the early propagandists still hangs over the Mexican War. Even today extreme patriots are likely to see an element of truth in the charge that this was a war of aggression against a weak neighbor.

By 1850, at least a dozen volumes purporting to relate the true history of the conflict had appeared in the United States. As might be expected, these volumes, highly patriotic in tone, explained the conflict in terms of the preservation of the national honor. An additional aim was to refute the popular view that a citizens' army, composed of young men drawn from the workshop, countinghouse, and farm, was incapable of waging an offensive war.¹ Widespread interest in the war with Mexico, however, reflected partisan passions rather than spontaneous enthusiasm arising from the call to arms and military triumphs.

Two partisan historians who interpreted the Mexican War in a light favorable to the Democratic administration were John S. Jenkins and Nahum Capen. According to John S. Jenkins,² a lawyer who in 1848 wrote the first scholarly account of the conflict, territorial aggrandizement was not a war aim, even though, at the outset, it was foreseen that the successful prosecution of the war "would be followed by the

¹ See, for example, H. Judge Moore, *Scott's Campaign in Mexico* (Charleston, 1849), vi–vii.

² John S. Jenkins, *History of the War Between the United States and Mexico* (Auburn, New York, 1850), 93, 499.

acquisition of some part of the domain of Mexico." He considered the annexation of Texas "the original moving cause of the war," but excused his country from blame by stating that Texas, in maintaining a successful rebellion for eight years, deserved to be regarded as independent. By refusing to negotiate, Mexico had invited hostilities. The advance of American troops to the Rio Grande, Jenkins concluded, was the immediate cause of the war, but it was the only way by which the United States "could have asserted her title, when all intercourse with Mexico was suspended, to the territory admitted to be in dispute."

Also writing in 1848, Nahum Capen,³ who later served as postmaster of Boston, absolved his country in a different manner. Our country, Capen wrote, "is not an accident in the providence of God. . . . Every person and every nation has a destiny marked by an Almighty hand." He defined war as a clash of arms between two nations "to sustain right, or to continue wrong." Like the New England divine, Jonathan Edwards, Capen asserted that nothing takes place without a cause (or causes), which eventually can be traced back to God, the first cause. Imbued with this Puritan philosophy of history, Capen set out to discover the cause of the Mexican War. Many, he found, often went astray by identifying effects as causes. "Among the results which have been discussed as causes," he wrote, "we find the Texas question — *the independence and subsequent annexation of Texas as a state of our Union.*" Texas appeared to Capen as the only Mexican state of sufficient character to oppose successfully "the infamous usurpation of Santa Anna." Neither annexation, Taylor's march to the Rio Grande, nor Polk's war message caused the war. Mexico herself caused it through injustice and insincerity in dealing with the United States.

Citing the example of charity in chapter thirteen of *First Corinthians*, Capen held that in its conduct concerning the claims and in its attempts to maintain diplomatic relations, his country had furnished "a series of examples of kindness, of patience and forbearance" unparalleled in the annals of world history. A few pages later he added: "A

³[Nahum Capen], *The Republic of the United States of America: Its Duties to Itself, and Its Responsible Relations to Other Countries; Embracing Also a Review of the Late War Between the United States and Mexico; Its Causes and Results . . .* (New York, 1848), 28–29, 33, 55, 57. Capen dedicated his book to James Buchanan and published it anonymously. Nahum Capen (1804–1886) served as postmaster of Boston from 1859 to 1861, and is credited with the introduction of street letter boxes and the free delivery system in the United States.

debtor unprepared to pay is averse to all appointments with creditors." Mexico's career of "folly and crime" was the sole cause of the war, the United States merely the agent of her chastisement. Capen's rhetoric reached a climax in a harangue on justice and humanity: "*In the name of this sacred cause, the cause of GOD, the progress of man, the freedom of mind and body throughout the whole earth, this war was prosecuted by the government of the United States, in its wisdom, as an act of JUSTICE.*"⁴

In response to pro-administration writers like Capen, Abiel A. Livermore,⁵ a Unitarian clergyman, voiced the Whig interpretation of the causes of the War, an interpretation that in time was called the conspiracy thesis. Published in 1850, Livermore's *War With Mexico Reviewed*, a conscience-stricken attack on the motives of the war, was awarded a five hundred dollar prize by the American Peace Society. Contending that the causes of the war reached back several generations, the clergyman pointed to rising "military ambitions" as both a cause and effect of the war. The time had come to convince the world that the United States was developing into a world power.

Livermore questioned whether alleged racial, cultural, and religious superiority constituted adequate justification for a war of conquest. "The Anglo-Saxons have been apparently persuaded to think themselves the chosen people, the anointed race of the Lord, commissioned to drive out the heathen, and plant their religion and institutions in every Canaan they should subjugate," he asserted. The idea of a "destiny" connected with this race had gone far to justify, if not to sanctify, many acts on both sides of the Atlantic. England and the United States, he cried, "ought to hang their heads in shame, and weep scalding tears of repentance." In analyzing the causes for the war, Livermore was willing to concede something to the Mexican claimants, something to the magic power of Texas scrip, something to the threat of European interference in this continent. But he felt confident that he expressed an incontrovertible truth when he termed slavery the "main-spring" in causing the war with Mexico. "Had the idea of extending the 'peculiar' institutions of the South, and the political power resulting therefrom, been

⁴*Ibid.*, 107, 110, 164–65.

⁵Abiel A. Livermore, *The War With Mexico Reviewed* (Boston, 1850), 7–8.

entirely excluded from the question, not a shot would ever have been fired," he said.⁶

The classic statement of the conspiracy thesis is William Jay's *A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War*.⁷ In this clever and well-written book, the author, a son of John Jay and organizer of the New York Anti-Slave Society, asserted that the war was unnecessary, that it was the culmination of a prolonged Southern conspiracy to obtain lands for the expansion of slavery and the formation of additional slave states. As late as the 1890s, historians writing in the Whig tradition reflected Jay's views.⁸

According to Jay, Southern slaveholders realized after the Missouri Compromise in 1820 that little attractive land remained for expansion. Therefore, they looked with covetous eyes to Texas, then a vast country lying west of Louisiana, where the soil and climate suited the plantation system. During the two decades that followed, Southern slaveholders, in their efforts to take possession of Texas, considered various expedients: forcible seizure, colonization, purchase, independence, and annexation. All Americans who promoted any of these expedients were party to the conspiracy, Jay believed. When Mexico issued a manumission law in 1829, slaveholders, especially those of the breeding states who regarded Texas as a lucrative market for their "staple commodity," became irritated and alarmed. In time they came to look upon the acquisition of Texas as necessary for the preservation of their peculiar institution. To stimulate government action, they placed statements in the press to the effect that Great Britain intended to take possession of Texas — statements that Jay attempted to refute by maintaining that European powers had no serious designs on Mexican territory.⁹

After Joel Poinsett, former Secretary of War and citizen of South Carolina, failed in his mission to purchase Texas, the conspirators began promoting revolution and independence, with the thought of eventual annexation. They aroused American interest by a wide distribution of

⁶*Ibid.*, 8, 14.

⁷William Jay, *A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War* (Boston, 1849), 10.

⁸A Spanish translation was issued as recently as 1948. William Jay, *Revista de las Causas y Consecuencias de la Guerra Mexicana: Versión Española de Guillermo Prieto Yeme* (México: Editorial Polis, 1948).

⁹Jay, *Review of Mexican War*, 10, 15.

Texas land scrip, which would acquire value only in the event of independence. "In this manner," Jay stated, "a powerful pecuniary interest was excited in the free states in behalf of Texas." The Texas revolution of 1836 was successful primarily because of the influx of men and supplies from the United States, and the presence on the Louisiana border of an American army under General Edmund P. Gaines. Independence once assured, annexation was dressed up as attractively as possible. "A boon was held out to the breeding States," William Jay wrote, "by granting them the monopoly of the Texan market, the importation of slaves being prohibited, *except from the United States*."¹⁰ Annexation, however, was not immediately forthcoming.

To make his conspiracy thesis consistent, Jay belittled the American claims against the Mexican government, as well as American attempts at peaceful settlement. Mexico's suggestion of arbitration in 1838 came as a "sore disappointment to the partisans of annexation," yet it was a fair and honorable proposition that could not be rejected, "without bringing great odium upon the administration." Concerning the commission that considered the American claims (of \$12,000,000, about \$2,000,000 was awarded), Jay admitted some were legitimate, but these were not "fit subjects of national controversy." The Court of Claims, he concluded, "was a lottery in which magnificent prizes might be drawn, and in which the tickets cost nothing. Every man who had been in Mexico for the last twenty years, and could manufacture a wrong, was virtually invited to come and try his luck."¹¹

Jay believed that Polk's nomination for the presidency in 1844 grew out of his devotion to the cause of slavery, vituperation of the abolitionists, and advocacy of the immediate annexation of Texas. He attributed Polk's election to the fact that, though aware of the Texas plot, Northern Democrats were more faithful to their party than to their principles. Jay condemned the annexation of Texas, as it was finally accomplished by joint resolution, because "contracts between independent nations are *treaties*." But Polk's aim was not merely Texas with a Rio Grande boundary, but also California. "By blustering about our claims, swelling them to the greatest possible point of inflation, and then kindly offering to waive them all in consideration of a cession of

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 18, 53.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 66, 71.

California, and throwing in a *douceur* of a few millions," Polk hoped it would be possible to worry Mexico into a surrender of the province.¹² But Mexico had tenaciously held on to her soil and refused every bribe.

"Mr. Polk was determined to have Mexican territory, peaceably if he could — forcibly if he must," continued Jay.¹³ When the last attempt at peaceful acquisition — the John Slidell mission — failed, Polk put into effect his alternate plan. This was to bring on a war of "defense" by inducing Mexico to strike the first blow. The enemy would be quickly humbled and America would dictate the terms of peace, one of which would be the surrender of California. General Taylor's march to the Rio Grande was to be the culmination of the great conspiracy.

Another early historian, Charles T. Porter, advanced a distinctive point of view worthy of mention. Like Livermore and Jay, he denounced American greed, but unlike these men he could not see that the war had any connection with slavery. Arguing that circumstances suggested that the Mexican War was waged for the acquisition of territory, Porter asserted that the spirit which impelled it was confined to no section of the country. The North rivaled the South in greediness for the possessions of "a weak and distracted neighbor." Quite modern in this contention, Porter was nonetheless a spokesman for the mid-nineteenth century concept of "Manifest Destiny." He felt that ultimate American possession of Texas was certain, but at another time it "might have been secured under far better auspices."¹⁴

During the years following the Mexican War, sectionalism led to Civil War and a bitter aftermath. The men who wrote the nation's history during these years generally accepted the conspiracy thesis. Historian Hermann von Holst¹⁵ devoted many pages in his massive history to a scholarly documentation of Jay's book. James Ford Rhodes¹⁶ embraced the conspiracy thesis, as did also James Schouler. Schouler's

¹²*Ibid.*, 101, 109.

¹³*Ibid.*, 119. In a college diplomatic history text, the statement appears: "Back of these reasons lay Polk's determination to possess California — peaceably if he could, forcibly if he must." Julius Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1955), 248.

¹⁴Charles T. Porter, *Review of the Mexican War* (Auburn, New York, 1849), iv, 29.

¹⁵Hermann von Holst, *The Constitutional and Political History of the United States* (8 vols., Chicago, 1881–1892), III, chs. 9–10, 12.

¹⁶James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (7 vols., New York, 1904), I, 87–90. This work originally was published in 1893.

analysis of Polk's aim on the eve of the war illustrated the continuing adherence to the thesis:

To provoke this feeble sister republic to hostilities, at the same time putting on her the offence of shedding the first blood, was the step predetermined if she would not sign away her domains for gold. This was the programme: to let loose the demon of war, and under the smoke of defending the fourth part of Mexico we had just snatched from her, to despoil her of another. The programme succeeded after a struggle, but the dark catastrophe locked up in our bloody acquisitions was hidden for many years.¹⁷

Taylor was simply a tool in these proceedings, a "plain, blunt warrior"; Polk was a wily manipulator who hid his true design behind the mask of preserving American honor.

In 1892, in his *History of the Mexican War*, General Cadmus M. Wilcox¹⁸ questioned the conspiracy thesis. In his work, which replaced R. S. Ripley's study¹⁹ as the standard military history of the conflict, Wilcox, a Confederate officer who had served under both Taylor and Scott, offered no penetrating analysis of the cause of the war, but judged the nation's action to have been just. "Seen in the perspective of years the course of the United States Government is proved to have been judicious, its policy wise and prudent, and its aims honest and patriotic," Wilcox wrote. He believed that the ill feeling caused by the wanton Mexican attacks on the rights, persons, and property of American citizens for over forty years would have culminated in war, "even had the Texas question not been agitated."

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, historians approached the Mexican War with improved research techniques. Under close scrutiny, however, nearly all of the studies reflected the effects of the debate over imperialism and America's role in world affairs. The historians of this period tried to justify the imperialistic ventures of their generation, and, in effect, excused the Mexican War, by referring to the Spanish American War and the Mexican difficulties of 1910. For example, several of the accounts were written in

¹⁷James Schouler, *History of the United States of America Under the Constitution* (5 vols., New York, 1889), V, 526. During this period, Horatio O. Ladd, clergyman and president of the University of New Mexico, also published a history of the Mexican War, but this at best was a rehash of the great conspiracy. *History of the War with Mexico* (New York, 1883).

¹⁸Cadmus M. Wilcox, *History of the Mexican War* (Washington, 1892), 1-2.

¹⁹Born in Ohio, Ripley graduated from West Point in 1843, and served under Zachary Taylor during the Mexican War. In 1849 his *The War With Mexico* was published in New York.

response to strained relations with Mexico during the Wilson administration. At any rate, most scholars of the period found no basis for the conspiracy thesis.

In 1905, George Pierce Garrison,²⁰ of the University of Texas, after years of research concerning the Texas question and American expansion, found four reasons for friction between the United States and Mexico. These included American claims on the Mexican government, assistance to the Texans, violation of Mexican territory by United States troops, and annexation of Texas. Following Porter, who more than fifty years before had questioned the conspiracy thesis, Garrison maintained that the theory of conspiracy was an oversimplified explanation for the war. He believed that the conflict had a broad base of support both in Congress and in the popular press. Thus, sympathetic majorities had carried the nation into war.

Between 1907 and 1919 three scholarly books dealing extensively with early American-Mexican relations were published, and have not been superseded. The first was *American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk* by Jesse S. Reeves. A professor of history at Johns Hopkins, Reeves began by discussing southwestern expansion, asserting that the Mexican War and the conquest of California were disassociated from the conquest of Texas. There was little, he felt, that distinguished this expansion from that into the Mississippi Valley, into Oregon, or across the Pacific. Reeves then pointed to the primary object of the war:

The Mexican War was waged for the purpose of conquest, for the fulfillment of Polk's designs upon California. War would have been declared against Mexico had the Mexicans not crossed the Rio Grande or come into conflict with Taylor.²¹

As the author noted, Foreign Minister Waddy Thompson had excellent reasons for wanting California. With the port of San Francisco, with land rich enough to provide enormous wheat crops, and with no need to worry about slavery, this far western territory was a prize worth having. Reeves, however, suffered from lapses into questionable generalizations about Mexican culture. For example, he spoke of Mexico's failure to recognize Texan independence as a characteristic Spanish

²⁰George P. Garrison, *Westward Extension, 1841-1850* (New York, 1906), 188, 201-202.

²¹Jesse S. Reeves, *American Diplomacy under Tyler and Polk* (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1907), 58, 88, 101, 288.

obliviousness to "the awkward conditions" of the situation, as well as a refusal "to accept the inevitable."

The second book, *The United States and Mexico, 1821–1848*, by George L. Rives,²² was published in 1913. In his introduction, Rives, a lawyer who had served as Assistant Secretary of State during the 1880s, suggested that the war had not reflected the struggle over slavery or American aggressions in Texas. Unlike many previous historians, Rives had a genuine sympathy for the Mexicans, and wished that his country would be more tolerant and sympathetic toward Latin culture. Rives' approach, however, was strictly narrative, which meant that the reader would find little analysis and many facts.

Historian Justin Smith's *The War With Mexico*, the third study, did not burden the reader with a stagnant presentation of endless facts. Quite the opposite was true, for Smith allowed his scorn for the Mexicans to dominate his account. The Mexicans, he wrote, "were unlikely to handle in the best manner a grave and complicated question requiring all possible sanity of judgment and perfect self-control . . . misunderstandings between them and a nation like the United States were not only sure to arise but sure to prove troublesome." His analysis represented the inevitability concept of history, a position that was sure to draw fire from other historians.²³

Stressing the inevitability of the war, Smith easily excused the Americans who violated neutrality laws to help Texas. He attacked Santa Anna as an international plotter and a tormentor of war prisoners. As for the role of California in the conflict, the seizure of Monterey was defended on the grounds that the Mexicans had previously mistreated Americans in the area — and seizure meant revenge. He also defended American claims against the Mexican government — which even Waddy Thompson felt excessive — and accused the Mexicans of deliberately delaying payment in the hope that time would obscure debts. Using metaphors which Capen had employed over seventy years before, Smith concluded that such frictional incidents as the "scandalous" treatment of

²²George L. Rives, *The United States and Mexico, 1821–1848* (2 vols., New York, 1913), I, v–vi.

²³Justin Smith, *The War With Mexico* (2 vols., New York, 1919), I, 28. For a discussion of inevitability as applied to the American past, see Pieter Geyl (ed.), *Debates With Historians* (New York, 1958).

²⁴Smith, *War With Mexico*, I, 63–67, 75, 80–81, 187–90.

emissaries Poinsett and Slidell and the annexation of Texas had caused the war.²⁴

Most historians, however superficial their treatments of the war, have pointed to American claims against Mexico as an important factor. In fact, Clayton C. Kohl, a historian at Bowling Green University, devoted a whole study to the problem. Although his book is not as important as the three volumes aforementioned, it still merits discussion. Kohl argued that claims were the only grievance which the United States had against Mexico:

Although they were misrepresented in character and exaggerated in amount, nevertheless they were worthy causes for protest and even for war. Mexico's dilatory, evasive and oftentimes insolent policy regarding them can in no way be justified.²⁵

Polk, he continued, used the claims as a pretext for war to get indemnity in the form of land. At this point the Kohl study becomes confusing, because he maintained that had other considerations, particularly the desire for land, not been present, the war would not have occurred, for the claims alone were too insignificant. Finally, Kohl relied too heavily upon government documents to tell the complete story.

Not all the examinations of the causes of the Mexican War during the first two decades of the twentieth century can be labeled scholarly history. The popular historian also tried his hand, the results reflecting to an extent the prevailing cultural climate. Thomas B. Gregory,²⁶ newspaperman and Universalist minister, and Farnham Bishop, author and teacher, represented this popular approach. Both were uncomplimentary to the Mexicans, especially Gregory, who wrote of the "mustachioed, hot blooded Latin" arousing the "independent, progressive self-reliant Saxon."

Since 1920, American historians have not departed radically from

²⁵Clayton C. Kohl, *Claims as a Cause of the Mexican War* (New York U. Press, 1914), 77-79. Like Garrison, Kohl denied the existence of a slaveholders' conspiracy thesis. See also Chauncey Boucher's attack on the conspiracy thesis, "In Re that Aggressive Slaveocracy," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VIII (June 1921), 13-79.

²⁶Rev. Thomas B. Gregory, *Our Mexican Conflicts, Including a Brief History of Mexico From the Sixth Century to the Present Time* (New York, 1914), 55. Gregory's gaudy book was published by Hearst's International Library Company. Born in North Carolina, Gregory pastored churches during the 1880s in Maine, and during the 1890s in Chicago. Disfellowshipped because of his advanced views, he founded the Liberal Society of Chicago in 1900, and later was on the editorial staff of several Hearst newspapers. Farnham Bishop, *Our First War With Mexico* (New York, 1916), 70.

the views advanced during the preceding two decades. To be sure, there are variations in approach, but no one has resurrected the conspiracy thesis. It was the "destiny" of America to expand to the Pacific and "as far south as the arid portions of Mexico," wrote historian Edward Channing²⁷ in 1921. Though Americans had no moral right to absorb the land of other people, Channing felt that the original owners had made little use of it, and that the new owners had put the land to profitable use without delay. Channing upheld Justin Smith's contention that the annexation of Texas was the most important event leading to war.

In 1929, Eugene C. Barker,²⁸ of the University of Texas, stoutly defended American expansion against scholarly critics. In an address entitled, "The Historiography of Expansion," Barker accused unnamed historians of unnecessarily impugning American motives. Young scholars, he charged, "set up an abstract ethical standard" and condemn the United States for departing from it, while at the same time "tacitly assuming" that the opposing nation habitually conforms to such a standard. These same inconsistent novices try to conceal their inadequate understanding of the war with footnotes and bibliographies. But this paraphernalia could not disguise the "timid subjection to partisan sources and partisan authorities." Sycophantic historians ignored the real causes of war — Mexican belligerency over claims and Texas independence. Barker's denunciations of scholars reluctant to accept Mexico's guilt may well have reflected a reaction against the debunking of the 1920s. At any rate, his remarks showed that the conspiracy theory of the war had a new use.

The expansionist theory was presented in the 1930s by John Fuller,²⁹ a history professor at Virginia Military Institute, who attributed the conflict to the need for new cotton lands and the desire for seaports in California. Fuller's important study, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All of Mexico*, proved that expansion received support from the

²⁷ Edward Channing, *A History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1905–1925), V, 550.

²⁸ Eugene C. Barker, "The Historiography of Expansion," in James Willard and Colin Goodykoontz (eds.), *The Trans-Mississippi West* (Boulder, 1930), 221, 245–46.

²⁹ John Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico* (Baltimore, 1936), 19, 24–25, 37, 60, 120. Richard R. Stenberg has maintained that Polk attempted to precipitate war. See "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigue in 1845," *Pacific Historical Review*, IV, (January 1935), 39–68.

North, and that Calhoun, in this case, opposed it. Even during the course of the war, maintained Fuller, the South was split on the question of dismembering all of Mexico. Opposition came from the pro-slavery *Charleston Mercury*, Howell Cobb of Georgia, and Joseph Lesesne of Alabama. Northern opposition, on the other hand, came from Whigs who feared their political fortunes would decline if they supported expansion. Thus, Fuller helped clarify the political alignment before and during the conflict.

The role of commercial expansion in the far west has been studied recently by historian Norman Graebner.³⁰ As early as the 1820s, he suggested, New England merchants saw the possibilities of the California coast both as a producer of hides for the leather industry and as a potential market. The real prize was San Francisco Bay, which was regarded as "the unqualified answer to American hopes of commercial greatness in the Pacific area." San Francisco could become a trade terminal and supply station for ships touching port as far away as India and China. The desire for the Bay, Graebner wrote, cut across party lines: both Calhoun and Webster saw its value, as did President Polk. For the majority of Americans, however, California remained unknown — and without the emotional overtones of Texas. To Graebner the cause of the war was not to be sought in the annexation of Texas, "the most serious in a long series of diplomatic crises," or in the clash at the Rio Grande. Rather, he felt that the causes resided in the web of commercial and diplomatic relations that spanned two decades.

Textbook interpretations of the Mexican War have been rather vague. In their widely used college text, *The Growth of the American Republic*, Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager minimized both American claims and the annexation of Texas as catalysts for war. They felt that Polk's desire for land other than Texas provoked Mexico into hostilities, while the claims themselves were never really repudiated. Julius Pratt, an authority on American diplomacy, reasonably summarized the causes as Mexican resentment over the Texas annexation, confusion as to the actual Texas boundary, failure of Mexico to pay claims, and Polk's anxiety to acquire California for the United States. Historian Samuel F. Bemis stressed as causes Mexico's inept control of

³⁰Norman Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific* (New York, 1955), 63, 153.

its northern provinces, and their orderly annexation by the United States after an appropriate length of time. Polk received favorable treatment from Bemis. The President, he said, tried to be fair with Mexico, but feared that a foreign power would seize California.³¹

The most recent discussion of the Mexican War appeared in a volume by historian Otis Singletary,³² in the Chicago History of American Civilization series. Emphasizing the war in the field, Singletary spent little time on the causes of the hostilities. However, he did assert that the annexation of Texas was only the immediate cause, and like Justin Smith he cited the emotional effects of border atrocities upon the American mind. And there was also the inevitability theme in his analysis: "Mexico was an inevitable target for her acquisitive northern neighbor. . . . In such a dévious way did geography and history conspire to bring on disaster."

A survey of the interpretations of the cause of the Mexican War illustrates that the assumptions of the historian, those derived from his personality as well as those arising from the society in which he lives, have an influence upon his work. Although relatively easy to detect in a Jay or a Smith, this becomes more difficult to gauge in recent historiography. It remains, for example, for a future generation to determine to what extent Graebner's approach, emphasizing economic and commercial factors, reflects the attitudes of our own time.³³

In sum, there is sufficient reason for a lack of consensus among historians on the causes of the Mexican War. Domestic politics, the personality of Polk, the designs of merchant groups, and the demands of creditors and claimants all suggest differing interpretations. Clearly there is a need of further investigation. Certainly, studies concerning the nature of nationalism as well as cultural tensions would add to an understanding of the origins of the conflict. As it stands, until a comprehensive, up-to-date study is done, historians must still rely upon Justin Smith's account published over forty years ago.

³¹ Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols., New York, 1950), I, 589-90; Julius Pratt, *United States Foreign Policy*, 237; Samuel F. Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York, 1957), 232-39.

³² Otis A. Singletary, *The Mexican War* (U. of Chicago Press, 1960), 14-15.

³³ In a recent article, Corinne L. Gilb called for a study of who writes history and why. "Should We Learn More About Ourselves?" *American Historical Review*, LXVI (July 1961), 987-93.