

CQ: In 1846, should the United States wage war in Mexico?

The answer from **Charles Sumner**: No

Read the following documents, answer the questions presented, and then begin to build a rationale to explain *why* Charles Sumner does not support a war against Mexico in 1846.

Charles Sumner, speech on the Mexican War (1847)

Sumner delivered the following speech to the Massachusetts legislature in 1847.

“A war of conquest is bad; but the present war has darker shadows. It is a war for the extension of slavery over a territory which has already been purged by Mexican authority from this stain and curse. Fresh markets of human beings are to be established; further opportunities for this hateful traffic are to be opened; the lash of the overseer is to be quickened in new regions; and the wretched slave is to be hurried to unaccustomed fields of toil. It can hardly be believed that now, more than eighteen hundred years since the dawn of the Christian era, a government, professing the law of charity and justice, should be employed in war to extend an institution which exists in defiance of these sacred principles.

It has already been shown that the annexation of Texas was consummated for this purpose. The Mexican War is a continuance, a prolongation, of the same efforts; and the success which crowned the first emboldens the partisans of the latter, who now, as before, profess to extend the area of freedom, while they are establishing a new sphere for slavery.

Mr. Sims, of South Carolina, has said that "he had no doubt that every foot of territory we shall permanently occupy, south of thirty-six degrees thirty minutes, will be slave territory"; and, in reply to his colleague, Mr. Burt...said, "nothing but slave labor can cultivate, profitably, that region of country."

But it is not merely proposed to open new markets for slavery: it is also designed to confirm and fortify the "Slave Power." Here is a distinction which should not fail to be borne in mind. Slavery is odious as an institution, if viewed in the light of morals and Christianity. On this account alone we should refrain from rendering it any voluntary support. But it has been made the basis of a political combination, to which has not inaptly been applied the designation of the "Slave Power."

The slaveholders of the country - who are not supposed to exceed 200,000 or at most 300,000 in numbers - by the spirit of union which animates them, by the strong sense of a common interest, and by the audacity of their leaders, have erected themselves into a new "estate," as it were, under the Constitution. Disregarding the sentiments of many of the great framers of that instrument, who notoriously considered slavery as temporary, they proclaim it a permanent institution; and, with a strange inconsistency, at once press its title to a paramount influence in the general government, while they deny the right of that government to interfere, in any way, with its existence. According to them, it may never be restrained or abolished by the general government, though it may be indefinitely extended."

Source: Charles Sumner, written for the Massachusetts legislature in April, 1847. Available online at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASsumner.htm>

Questions:

1. What does Charles Sumner believe to be the true reason for the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico? What evidence does he cite to support this belief?
2. How does Sumner describe the practice of slavery? What types of language does he use?
3. According to Sumner, who or what is the “Slave Power”? What are its goals?
4. According to Sumner, how would the framers of the Constitution would respond in the current situation?

Charles Sumner was a Massachusetts native, a Harvard graduate, and a lawyer in the late 1840s. After the Mexican-American War, Sumner would go on to form the Free-Soil party, a party made up a variety of individuals that opposed slavery and/or its expansion into the territories. Sumner’s attacks on slavery were so strong that in 1856 he was beaten unconscious by South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks in the Senate. The attack prevented Sumner from direct participation in the government for many years. He would return with the same anti-slavery attitude. When someone asked him whether he ever looked at the other side of the slavery question, he answered: "There is no other side."