

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

Document: President Polk's war message to Congress in 1846 (He says yes).

The existing state of the relations between the United States and Mexico renders it proper that I should bring the subject to the consideration of Congress.... The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico on honorable terms, and the readiness of this government to regulate and adjust our boundary on such fair and equitable principles as would lead to permanent relation of the most friendly nature, induced me in September last to seek the reopening of diplomatic relations between the two countries.... The Mexican government not only refused . . . but, after a long continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory, and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil....

In my message at the commencement of the present session, I informed you that, upon the earnest appeal both of the congress and convention of Texas, I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte." This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made.... The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended and exercised beyond the Nueces.... it is now included within one of our congressional districts. Our own Congress had . . . by the act approved December 31, 1845, recognized the country beyond the Nueces as a part of our territory, by including it within our own revenue system.... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country....

The Mexican forces . . . assumed a belligerent attitude, and, on the twelfth of April, . . . notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours, and to retire beyond the Nueces river, and, in the event of his failure to comply with these demands, announced that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question. But no open act of hostility was committed until the twenty-fourth of April [when American troops] . . . became engaged . . . and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

The cup of forbearance has been exhausted, even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision and honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.... I invoke the prompt action of Congress to recognize the existence of war, and to place at the disposition of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace . . .

Questions to consider:

1. What efforts does Polk claim to have made to avoid war?
2. What does Polk argue is the basis for the disagreement (which boundaries are in dispute)?
3. Who does Polk claim started the war and for what reasons?
4. Why is Polk asking Congress to declare war?