

# Free book review on the mexican war, 1846-48: a case of u.s. imperialism

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## **ABSTRACT**

Karl Jack Bauer's *The Mexican War* (1974) does describe the United States as the aggressor in the conflict and concedes that President James K. Polk was motivated by the desire to expand the borders to the Pacific. Indeed, there was never any real question about this in either the U. S. or Mexico at that time—or later. He justifies this action by asserting that that this type of expansion was inevitable, and if it had not been carried out by Polk's administration then some other one would have done it eventually. Although the U. S. president preferred to purchase the northern half of Mexico rather than seize it by force, he was prepared for war just the same. Mexico's rulers were determined to resist this aggression at all costs, even though they realized that they were going to suffer a catastrophic military defeat.

Although the Mexican War of 1846-48 is generally regarded as an imperialist war by most U. S. and Mexican historians, Karl Jack Bauer argued that the expansion of the U. S. was inevitable and inexorable. He denied that President James K. Polk actually planned the war or conspired to provoke a military clash along the Rio Grande River. Polk would have preferred to purchase Texas, New Mexico and California for \$50 million rather than going to war, but Mexico refused to receive his envoy James Slidell or negotiate on any such proposed purchase. Gen. Miguel Lopez de Santa Anna, who had attempted to suppress the Texas Rebellion in 1836, was brought back to power to oppose the U. S, invasion. Santa Anna had never recognized the independence of Texas and was not prepared to surrender any territory to the United States. In the political climate of Mexico, which Polk, Slidell and Secretary of State James Buchanan did not really comprehend, any such sale

of national territory would have been regarded as treason. Polk was prepared for war, of course, and most of the book deals with the pincer movement on Mexico City led by Zachary Taylor in the north and Winfield Scott in the south, which crushed the Mexican army. Under the provisions of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Rio Grande did become the new border and the northern half of Mexico was annexed to the United States. Bauer agrees that Polk was indeed an imperialist, but with limited goals since his military victories had left him in a position to seize even more territory had he so chosen.

Bauer clearly blames the U. S. for the war although he maintained that these western territories would have been seized sooner or later. John L. O'Sullivan and the supporters of Manifest Destiny sincerely believed that the U. S. "represented the wave of the future and the hope of mankind" and their ambition extended to the annexation of all of Latin America (Bauer 2).

Acquiring Texas was simply the first step in a far more ambitious program for the imperialists, although their plans were hindered by the fact that the North did not wish to add another slave state to the Union. For the South which had already lost control of the House of Representatives, acquiring Texas and dividing it up into "three or four states had an obvious appeal" (Bauer 3). With the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the next decade, the Southern leaders would go to extremes to add another slave state, and finally cause the breakup of the Union. For the Mexican leaders like Santa Anna, who repudiated his agreement to the independence of Texas as having been made under duress, the 1836 rebellion had been conclusive proof that "intrigue and force were standard American procedures" (Bauer 4). For the

conservative elites who really controlled Mexico, including the Catholic Church, the landed aristocracy and the military, there would be no recognition of Texas independence or annexation, much less further U. S. demands for additional territory. They were prepared to go to war on this point, even though they knew that they might suffer a catastrophic defeat, which indeed they did in 1846-47.

President John Tyler and his Secretary of State John Tyler agreed to a treaty to annex Texas in 1844 and sent Taylor to the border to defend against an expected Mexican attack. This agreement “ encountered strong opposition” in the Senate and was defeated in June 1844, after which Tyler and Calhoun annexed Texas by joint resolution in Congress (Bauer 6). That year, James K. Polk of Tennessee was elected on a platform favoring the annexation of Texas and Oregon. He also supported the Rio Grande border even though “ very few inhabitants lived in the area and most of them were Mexicans” (Bauer 11). In addition he intended to acquire California, not to expand slavery as his Whig and abolitionist opponents charged but because of its ports and natural resources, and the prospect of expanding trade with Asia. As early as 1842, U. S. naval forces had attempted to seize California and also stimulate rebellions by the local inhabitants against Mexico.

Although Polk was prepared for war and had already moved troops to the Rio Grande, he still preferred a negotiated settlement. He sent James Slidell as his envoy to Mexico City with an offer of \$50 million for New Mexico, California and Texas with a Rio Grande boundary, but the government refused to receive him. By this time, all the Mexican factions “ were united in preferring war to acquiescing in the loss of Texas” and regarded any

financial negotiations with the U. S. as treason (Bauer 17). No one in authority in Mexico would even recognize the annexation of Texas as legitimate, and indeed the military overthrew the civilian government and restored Santa Anna to power just on the rumor that Slidell might be received. Polk had already sent Taylor's troops to the Rio Grande in any case and also ordered the navy to prepare for a blockade of Mexico. Bauer denied that these were intended to be aggressive or provocative moves and maintained that " the occupation of Mexican soil was intended to serve defensive purposes" (Bauer 21). In reality, he came into office determined to acquire all this territory, preferably by purchase but by war if necessary, and the initiative in the events leading up to the war was always in his hands while the Mexicans were in a purely defensive and reactive position. Even in August 1847, with his armies totally defeated and Mexico City occupied, Santa Anna still refused to recognize the annexation of Texas and the Rio Grande border. He also refused to sell California and New Mexico to the U. S., and even had he desired to do so " his hold on the reins was too weak and the pressure for an unyielding stand too string to permit real negotiations" (Bauer 378). Only after Santa Anna was temporarily out of power did Polk's new envoy Nicholas Trist negotiate the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with a weak interim government, which was ratified by the Senate in March 1848 with " only the minority ' all-of-Mexico Democrats and Whigs opposed" (Bauer 387). Polk had obtained everything he wanted in 1844, including the Rio Grande boundary, New Mexico, California and the entire northern half of Mexico. If Polk had wanted to seize even more of the country or break it up, he probably could have done so. For this ' restraint', Bauer

found that he was “ an imperialist but he was not rapacious”, although most Mexicans would certainly have disagreed (Bauer 392).

Had Polk even attempted to go further he would not have had much support in Congress since the conflict over slavery in the new territories nearly led to civil war. David Wilmot introduced his Proviso in 1846 that slavery would not be permitted in any territory acquired from Mexico, and the Southern states threatened to secede if it became law. Although the North-South division was temporarily papered over by the Compromise of 1850, the issue of slavery expansion finally would break up the Union ten years later. As far U. S. relations with Mexico, these events left a legacy of bad will and distrust that lingers to the present, for from the Mexican viewpoint there is almost universal consensus that this was a war of imperialism and aggression. In the wake of the 1848 defeat, Mexico was in danger of falling apart completely, setting the stage for Santa Anna’s most completely authoritarian stint as dictator. At that time, the conservative elites believed that a revolution like that in France was a real possibility. Peasant and Indian rebellions broke out all over the country, while in the Yucatan the Maya almost drove the whites out. For the conservative elites, only the church and the military could hold the nation together in 1848-53, when they turned to Santa Anna for the last time. His concern that Mexico was about to fragment totally and possibly be taken over by the U. S. prompted him to accept the supreme power again, and this time, he ruled with an iron hand. He suppressed all revolts with unrestrained brutality, censored the press, closed all opposition newspapers and threatened that anyone who dissented would be tried by court martial and shot. Santa Anna did not even put on a pretense of having elections and

elections and representative government in his final dictatorship, although simply creating a police state was not a real solution for the country's deeper dysfunctions, and these remained after his final overthrow in 1855.

## **WORKS CITED**

Bauer, Karl Jack. *The Mexican War, 1846-48*. University of Nebraska Press, 1974, 1992.