Two Sides to Every War:

Mr. Polk's War & The North American Invasion

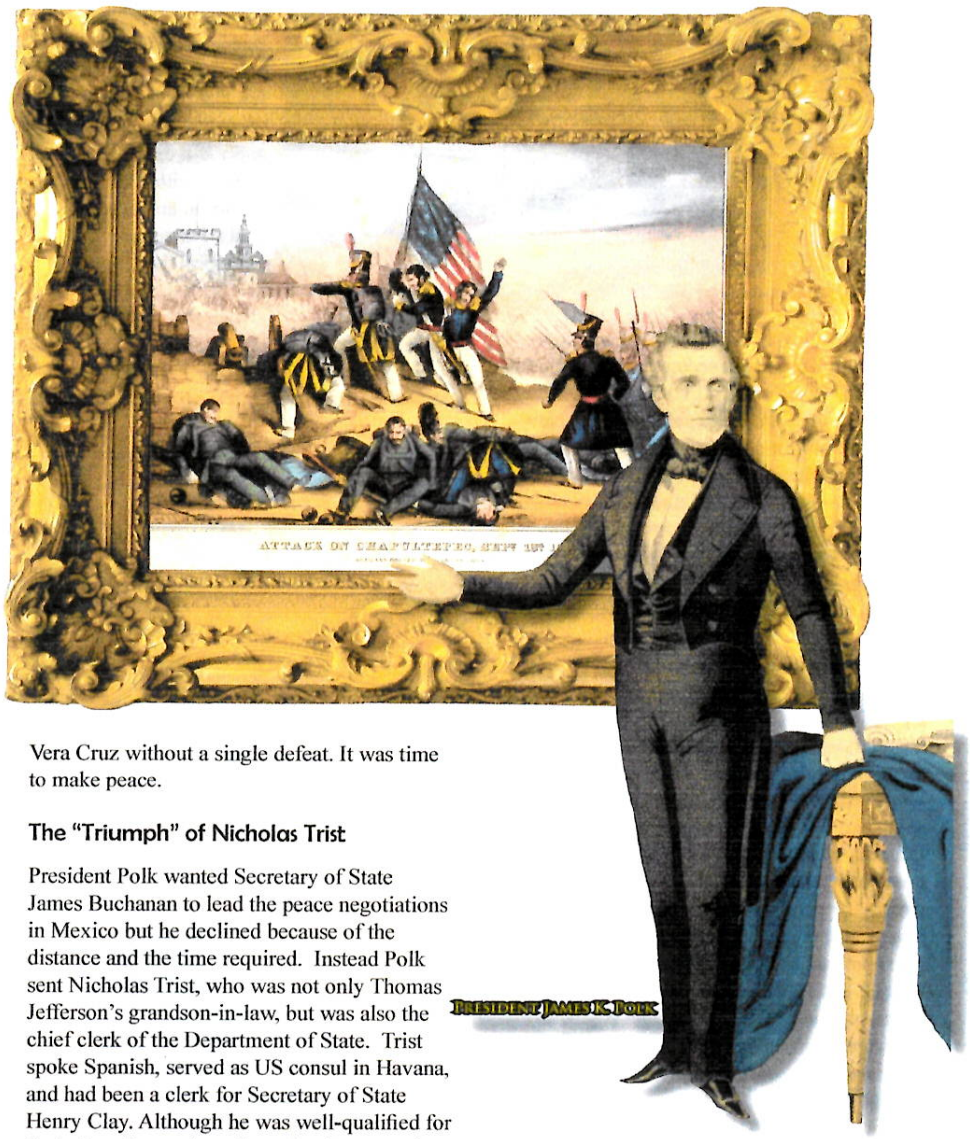
If there are two sides to every story, there are at least two ways to interpret every war. The Mexican-American War was no exception. In the United States, it was known as "Mr. Polk's War"; in Mexico it was called "The North American Invasion." President Polk didn't see the annexation of Texas as a cause of the war since, in his view; it was just "the peaceful acquisition of a territory once [our] own," which would diminish the chances of border wars in the future. For Polk, the war was about something else entirely. It was about Britain, France and the territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The United States just happened to fight Mexico instead.

"Clear and Unquestionable"

Polk wanted California and the Oregon Territory. He believed that any lands settled by Americans belonged to the United States and that the government needed to protect Americans "wherever they be upon our soil." Polk sent diplomats to negotiate with the British, but he sent John Slidell of Louisiana to buy California. Slidell was, perhaps, the wrong choice as a diplomat. He spoke no Spanish, was pro-slavery, and anti-Catholic. To no one's surprise, his offers were rejected by two different Mexican governments. President Polk labeled Mexico the aggressor after a Rio Grande border skirmish (May 9, 1945) and declared war.

At first, the war was popular with southerners and those who lived in the Mississippi Valley. When the federal government asked Tennessee to supply 2,800 volunteers, the state responded with 30,000 and earned its nickname as the "volunteer state." Others, including poet Henry David Thoreau who was jailed for refusing to pay taxes for the war effort and a young Illinois congressman, Abraham Lincoln, questioned the need for war, and political opposition to the war grew intense.

But the war was a military success: John C. Fremont took California, while Zachery Taylor moved into northern Mexico, defeating Santa Anna among others. Winfield Scott landed on the same shores as Hernando Cortes in 1519 and took Vera Cruz without a single defeat. It was time to make peace.



The "Triumph" of Nicholas Trist

President Polk wanted Secretary of State James Buchanan to lead the peace negotiations in Mexico but he declined because of the distance and the time required. Instead Polk sent Nicholas Trist, who was not only Thomas Jefferson's grandson-in-law, but was also the chief clerk of the Department of State. Trist spoke Spanish, served as US consul in Havana, and had been a clerk for Secretary of State Henry Clay. Although he was well-qualified for the task and was given the authority to reach an agreement, Polk allowed very little room to negotiate. If the Mexicans were reluctant but still interested in reaching an agreement, Trist was instructed to send for a more experienced diplomat.

Almost immediately, Trist disregarded his instructions and the Mexicans—who had lost every battle—proposed unrealistic peace conditions. Buchanan immediately recalled Trist because of the Mexican "insult", but delay in receiving the news meant that Trist had already restarted negotiations. Buchanan issued another order to return, but Trist refused because he believed that "If the present opportunity be not seized at once, all chance for making at treaty will be lost for an indefinite period—probably forever." Instead, he sent Buchanan a 65-page letter and continued negotiating.

Images: Wikimedia and the Library of Congress

Memorial at Chapultepec to the Six "Boy Heroes" who died fighting US Troops [Wikimedia]

The result was the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in which Trist secured every US objective, setting the California border three miles south of San Diego and acquiring New Mexico, California, and all the land in between (half of all Mexican territory) for $15 million and the assumption of the claims of US citizens against Mexico. It was a stunning triumph and President Polk was decidedly unhappy. Grudgingly, Polk supported the treaty in the US Senate, where it was approved on March 10, 1848.

Trist's refusal to abandon the peace talks meant that the United States avoided a potentially disastrous guerilla war. His negotiations were as important as those surrounding the Louisiana Purchase or the Trans-Atlantic Treaty of 1819. But Trist paid a terrible price—he was fired from the Department of State, which refused to pay his travel expenses until 1871. As one historian wrote: "Anyone wishing to contemplate the part chance plays in human destiny might give some thought to the career of Nicholas P. Trist. His act of rare courage and principle for a cause he believed to be right cost him the support of the President and brought him dismissal, disgrace, poverty, and the total disregard of posterity."

Echoes through History

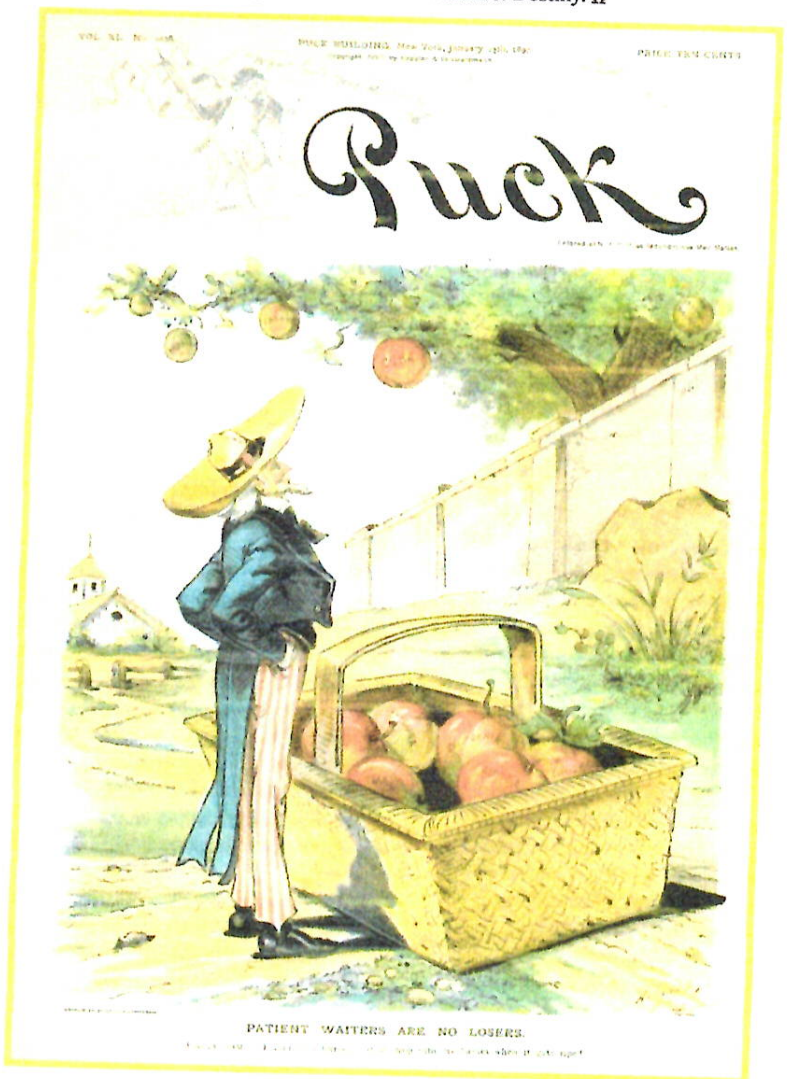
The effect of the war on the Western Hemisphere was profound.

Mexico lost 50,000 men and 40 percent of its territory and resources, crippling its future economic growth. In 1800, the Mexican economy was half of that of the United States; by 1867, it was only 1/8th as productive and the trend continued into the 20th century. Distrust of the United States became part of its national outlook even as the heroism of its young soldiers at the Battle of Chapultepec provided a rallying point in the creation of the modern Mexican state.

Other Latin American nations, with different histories and points of reference, became suspicious of US intentions as well. Many felt that the Monroe Doctrine would only apply if it did not conflict with American territorial and economic goals. For some countries, the United States was seen as a greater threat than any European nation.

The war had a lasting effect on the United States as well. The Marine Corps added a red "Blood Stripe" to the leg of its uniform trousers in honor of the Corps' losses storming the castle at Chapultepec. But the United States won and, for many Americans, that confirmed, the superiority of their country and the benefits of expansion. The United States doubled in size and acquired gold and silver, petroleum reserves, good farmland, and excellent Pacific ports. It also acquired a right-of-way for a canal across the Isthmus of Panama.

But perhaps most unsettling of all, winning sparked a desire among some people to repeat the experience. In June 1848—just three months after the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, journalist John O'Sullivan, promoted another opportunity for American expansion in Cuba. There were other possibilities on the horizon as well: Canada, Alaska, perhaps all of Mexico. O'Sullivan coined a phrase to explain America's future--Manifest Destiny.



Reading: By Hook or By Crook:

American Efforts to Acquire or Liberate Cuba, 1848-1855

Name:_____ Period:_____ Date: _____

Question	Answer	Line #
1 Why did American opposition to annexing Texas decrease or diminish during the early 1840s?		
2 Why was the acquisition or liberation of Cuba apparently of little interest to the government of the United States from independence in 1783 until 1848?		
3 How much did the Polk administration offer Spain for Cuba? How did Spain respond?		
4 What would it mean to acquire or liberate Cuba "by hook?" What would it mean to acquire or liberate Cuba "by crook?"		
5 How did Narciso Lopez's first invasion of Cuba end? How did the second invasion end?		
6 What was the "Ostend Manifesto?" How did its release to the public affect Presiddent Franklin Pierce?		

Reading: By Hook or By Crook:
American Efforts to Acquire or Liberate Cuba, 1848-1855

By 1783, when the United States of America became an independent nation under the Treaty of Paris, Cuba had been a Spanish colony for nearly three centuries and held a key position in Spain's economic, administrative, and strategic affairs in North and Central America. But despite Spain's dominant role in Cuba, Spain's continental and global rivals, Britain and France, maintained not only interest in but ambitions toward the economically and strategically attractive island. Indeed, French forces captured and destroyed much of Havana, the future Cuban capital, in 1555. And in 1762, toward the end of the Seven Years' War (known in British North America as the French and Indian War), British forces took and maintained control of Havana for more than a year before exchanging it for Spanish Florida in 1763.

International politics aside, Cuba, over time, became and remained for many American plantation owners, would-be plantation owners, and would-be governors—not to mention the several would-be emperors, who in the mid-19th century became known as "filibusters"—an enticing target for territorial expansion. Interestingly, this seems not to have been the case with respect to the young United States government, perhaps because, in the early years of the republic, the American Congress, and—after the adoption of the Constitution in 1787—the nation's presidents, had a number of more pressing concerns. They had to deal with, among other things, tax rebellions in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and disposition of the vast territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Beginning in 1803, expansion focused first on the vast Louisiana Territory between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, then on Florida, and then on Texas (which applied for statehood as early as 1836).

But by the time James K. Polk of Tennessee was elected 11th president of the United States in 1844, a critical mass of Americans in government, including influential members of Congress and the new president himself, had joined many southerners and westerners (and their northern sympathizers) in favoring continued territorial expansion of the United States, especially westward—as implied by the newly popular notion of "Manifest Destiny"—but also southward toward Spanish America.

Priority was given to annexing Texas. The former Mexican province had gained independence in 1836 but had seen its almost immediate application for statehood rejected because of American fears that war with Mexico would result and because Texas would enter as a slave state. By 1844, public and political opposition had not only diminished but been overtaken by relatively broad-based enthusiasm for Texas statehood, in large part because Americans' fear of British influence in Texas had become greater than their fear of war with Mexico and their aversion to slavery.

Between Polk's November 1844 election and March 1845 inauguration, both houses of Congress passed, and outgoing President John Tyler signed, a joint resolution calling for the annexation of Texas. That same year, Texas entered the Union as the 28th state (and as a slave state). The gaze of expansionist Americans then turned to the Oregon Territory, the subject of conflicting British and American territorial claims and the acquisition of which, along with Texas, was a central "plank" in Polk's campaign "platform." With both sides eager to avoid war, compromise suited both and the Oregon Treaty was signed in June 1846. At that point, only Mexican-controlled territory in the American southwest lay between the United States and its "Manifest Destiny" of a great enlightened republic stretching from Atlantic to the Pacific, from "sea to shining sea." The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the 1846-1848 US-Mexican War, removed that obstacle and added to the United States a vast tract of territory that would eventually host all or part of at least seven states, including, most prominently, California.

In 1848, with Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican Cession secured, the president and other expansionists in Congress and the larger society (including particularly John L. O'Sullivan, the nationalistic journalist who in the late 1830s and early 1840s articulated the concept of and coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny") turned their attention to Cuba. Their primary motivation may have been pre-empting British acquisition of Cuba, but the thought of annexing the resource-rich and strategic island, and perhaps granting it statehood, had developed strong intrinsic appeal for many Americans. After consulting with his Cabinet and supporters in Congress, President Polk had his secretary of state, the future president James Buchanan, instructed the American representative in Spain to offer $100 million for the purchase of Cuba. The Spanish government considered but firmly rejected the offer and the government of the United States, now convinced that sale of the island to Britain was equally unlikely, let the matter drop for the time being.

But other American expansionists and soldiers-of-fortune, the latter called "filibusters" from 1850 onward, declined to let Cuba fade from the cross-hairs of their figurative political, military, economic, and commercial "scopes." If the U.S. government was unwilling or unable to acquire Cuba "by hook," which is to say legally and peacefully, the filibusters and their expansionist supporters were certain that, working together, they could acquire it "by crook," which is to say illegally and by force of arms. Four planned expeditions are discussed here, of which two actually landed "freedom fighters" on Cuban shores. The first coincided with, and in President Polk's view threatened to undermine, Polk's offer to purchase Cuba from Spain. Partly out of a desire to sustain the thrills of combat after the Mexican War ended, and partly in response to a request from pro-American Cubans in Havana, a number of former and soon-to-be former American military officers and soldiers, led by U.S. General William J. Worth, participated in an 1848 conspiracy to forcibly evict Spain from Cuba. The Polk administration viewed the conspiracy negatively and, both on its own and in cooperation

with the Spanish government, successfully thwarted the conspirators' planned invasion of the island. The second conspiracy was the first of two organized by Narciso López, one of the two most notorious filibusters (the other being William Walker, who gained control Nicaragua and named himself president of that Central American nation before being executed by the Honduran government in 1860). Though he operated in both instances from various American ports, López was not an American. He was, instead, a Venezuelan-turned-Spaniard-turned-Cuban. When Spanish authorities expelled him from Cuba for plotting with Cuban revolutionaries, López came to the United States and immediately began planning to return to Cuba and overthrow Spanish authority there. After securing the contingent participation of Mississippi governor and former U.S. Major-General John A. Quitman, López and his 500 or so recruits tried to invade Cuba in May 1850 but were soon forced to withdraw. Ever-determined, López evaded U.S. attempts to prosecute or block him and organized another expedition that reached Cuba in August 1851, but was crushed by Spanish forces, with López being captured this time and executed by Spanish authorities. A fourth plan to take Cuba was conceptualized by a Louisiana-based movement called "The Order of the Lone Star" shortly after Lopez's execution in 1851. By 1853, the Order came under the control of the aforementioned John Quitman, whose interest in Cuba remained high.

In 1853, American expansionists of all stripes took heart in the unstated but implied intention of president-elect Franklin Pierce, a northerner but a Democrat, to annex Cuba and make it a slave state. In 1854, at the suggestion of Pierce's secretary of state, William Marcy, three senior American diplomats met at Ostend, Belgium, to draft a proposal to the Spanish government for the purchase of Cuba. Exceeding their instructions, the drafters included a threat of military force against Cuba if Spain were to reject the offer. When the draft, known as the "Ostend Manifesto," became public, it created serious diplomatic problems, not only with Spain but with Britain and France as well. It sullied Pierce's reputation in the United States, and gave Pierce's political enemies, especially those in the northern states, ample ammunition with which to pillory Pierce, who would serve only one term, for many months. Separately, in 1855, John Quitman and his "Order" came under US government pressure to stop trying to acquire or liberate Cuba "by crook," and, taking note of a buildup of Spain's defenses on the island as well, gave up on the dream, as did most Americans for the next twenty years.