

The Dilemma of the West

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The quest for western lands on behalf of Manifest Destiny culminated by the late 1840s with the acquisition of Oregon, the annexation of Texas, and the Mexican-American War. In all three instances, American expansion succeeded beyond expectations. However, such rapid expansion contributed to a debate over the fate of slavery in Western territories. This was a debate that threatened to unravel the tenuous compromises and coalitions that underlay the second-party system.

Our discussion of “The Dilemma of the West” breaks down as follows:

1. James K. Polk

Alongside John L. O’Sullivan, support of **Manifest Destiny** was best personified by **James K. Polk**, who was elected president of the United States in 1844.



TERM TO KNOW

Manifest Destiny

The phrase that came to stand for the idea that White Americans had a calling and a duty to seize and settle lands in western North America.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

James K. Polk

Democratic President from 1845-1849 who supported the concept of Manifest Destiny and oversaw the Mexican-American War, the Mexican Cession, and the negotiations with Great Britain over the Oregon Territory.

A devoted supporter of Andrew Jackson, Polk was a former congressman and governor from Tennessee who won the nomination of the Democratic Party in 1844. He was also a slaveholder who owned cotton plantations in Tennessee and Mississippi.

In addition to his political and economic background, Polk gained the nomination and, ultimately, the presidency by being an unequivocal champion for westward expansion. He endorsed the annexation of Texas, giving little thought toward its potential impact on sectional tensions. He also argued that the United States should gain title to the entire Oregon territory from Great Britain. American control of the territory was to stretch to its northern boundary with Alaska at the latitude 54°40'.



DID YOU KNOW

A popular slogan during Polk's campaign was "Fifty-four forty or fight," in reference to the American acquisition of Oregon territory.

If American expansion had truly been a Manifest Destiny, it would have occurred peacefully. Yet expansion required deliberate planning and constant government action. Politics, diplomacy, and conflict were as much a part of Manifest Destiny as covered wagons on western trails, and President Polk displayed skills in all three areas.

2. Resolving the Oregon Question

After taking office in the spring of 1845, Polk focused much of his initial attention on resolving the Oregon question, or the joint-occupation of Oregon Territory by the United States and Great Britain. As permanent American settlement in the region tipped the balance of power in Oregon in favor of the United States, both powers recognized the need to revisit the original joint-occupation agreement.



Great Britain proposed that the pre-existing boundary between the United States and Canada along the 49th parallel simply be expanded westward to the Columbia River, at which point the border would continue along the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, the United States argued for the westward extension of the boundary along the 49th parallel to the Pacific Ocean.



DID YOU KNOW

The only portion of the original Oregon Territory truly under disagreement was a section in present-day northwestern Washington known as the "disputed triangle" (the "Disputed Area" highlighted in light green in the map above). Great Britain sought to retain access to this area because the Hudson's Bay Company conducted much of the fur trade from there.

After several months of debate and deliberation, Great Britain and the United States reached a compromise during the late spring and early summer of 1846. Both sides agreed to extend the boundary between Canada and the United States westward along the 49th parallel with the exception of Vancouver Island, which remained in British hands. In exchange for relinquishing its claims to the southern tip of Vancouver Island, the United States received control of the entire "disputed triangle."

3. Border Dispute with Mexico

With the Oregon Question resolved, Polk focused his entire attention on Texas and Mexico.

Conflict between the United States and Mexico revolved around Texas, which the United States formally annexed in 1845, shortly before Polk took office. Mexico interpreted the annexation as "an act of aggression" and severed diplomatic relations.

Tensions between the United States and Mexico centered largely on this question: what constituted Texas? At the end of the Texas War for Independence, Santa Anna was pressured to recognize the Rio Grande as the border between Texas and Mexico. The United States supported Texas's claim. Mexico, however, refused to be bound by Santa Anna's promises and insisted the border lay farther north, at the Nueces River.



In 1845, when Texas joined the United States, Mexico insisted the United States had a right only to the territory northeast of the Nueces River. In contrast, the United States claimed all land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande.

Upon annexation, Polk wasted no time in sending American troops to the disputed territory between the Rio Grande and Nueces River. He instructed a U.S. force to construct a fort on the north side of the Rio Grande, which, from the Mexican perspective, appeared to be a violation of their sovereign territory.

On April 24, 1846, American soldiers were attacked by a Mexican cavalry unit on patrol near the town of Matamoros, a town situated on the southern banks of the Rio Grande. In response, Polk sent more troops under General Zachary Taylor to the disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande. U.S. naval squadrons also anchored near Veracruz and Mazatlan, prepared to blockade Mexico's chief ports if war broke out.

After a failed attempt to negotiate with Mexico (one in which the United States continued to insist on the Rio Grande as the border), Polk asked Congress to declare war on Mexico on May 9, 1846. At one point, he angrily declared that Mexico "had passed the boundary of the United States (the Rio Grande), has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil...."



DID YOU KNOW

A small but vocal antislavery faction in Congress decried Polk's declaration, arguing that Polk had deliberately provoked hostilities so the United States could annex more slave territory. Illinois representative Abraham Lincoln and other members of Congress issued "Spot Resolutions," in which they demanded to know the precise spot on U.S. soil where American blood had been spilled by Mexico. Despite opposition from Lincoln and other antislavery Whigs, Congress formally declared war on Mexico on May 12, and the Mexican-American War began.

4. The Mexican-American War

U.S. military strategy during the Mexican-American War had three main objectives:

1. Take control of northern Mexico, including present-day New Mexico

General **Zachary Taylor** accomplished much of this first goal. In the fall of 1846, he captured the city of Monterrey in northern Mexico. He then turned back Santa Anna's army at the Battle of Buena Vista in February 1847.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Zachary Taylor

Military hero of the Mexican-American War and slaveholder from Louisiana who was elected president in the election of 1848.

Meanwhile, an Army of the West under General Stephen Watts Kearny marched westward from Fort Leavenworth (in present-day eastern Kansas) to New Mexico. On August 18, 1846, his forces entered Santa Fe without firing a shot. Before departing for California, Kearny organized a new civil government for New Mexico and appointed Charles Bent, the owner of Bent's Fort in present-day southeastern Colorado, to lead it.



DID YOU KNOW

On January 17, 1847, a coalition of Pueblos and Mexicans rose up against American forces and killed Charles Bent. Sixteen of the insurgents were ultimately hanged and the territory endured control by the American military for four years. New Mexico would not be organized under a civil government until 1850.

2. Seize California

General Kearny would arrive in California to find it already in American hands through the joint efforts of California settlers, U.S. naval commander John D. Sloat, and **John C. Fremont**, a former army captain and son-in-law of Missouri senator Thomas Benton. Sloan had been at anchor off the coast of Mazatlan when he

learned that the United States had declared war on Mexico. He then quickly set sail for California. He seized the town of Monterey in July 1846, less than a month after a group of American settlers led by William B. Ide had taken control of Sonoma and declared California a republic. A week after the fall of Monterey, the U.S. navy took San Francisco with no resistance.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John C. Fremont

Military leader in the Mexican-American War; first Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1856.



DID YOU KNOW

Similar to what occurred in New Mexico, a number of *Californios*, or Mexicans who lived in California, resisted the American occupation. Between September and December 1846, *Californios* retained control of much of southern California, including San Diego and Los Angeles, before submitting to American forces.

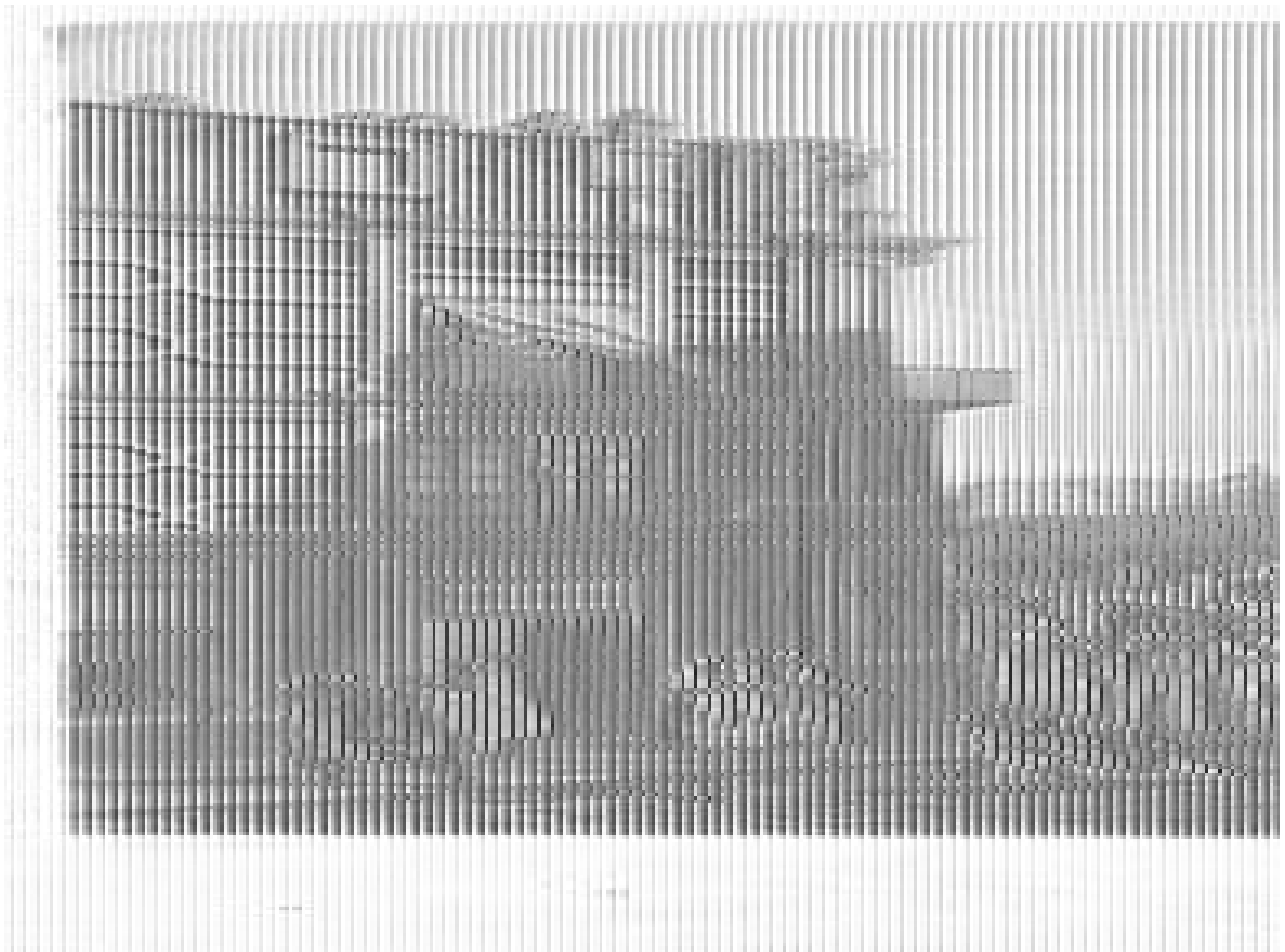
3. Capture Mexico City

General Winfield Scott accomplished this objective and his army faced the stiffest resistance of the war. Scott captured Veracruz in March 1847, and moving in a northwesterly direction from there (much as Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés had done in 1519), he slowly closed in on the capital. Every step of the way was a hard-fought victory, however, and Mexican soldiers and civilians both fought bravely against the American invaders. During the siege of Mexico City, a number of defenders, including young military cadets, fought to the end.



DID YOU KNOW

According to legend, cadet Juan Escutia's last act during the Battle of Chapultepec was to save the Mexican flag. Rather than surrender, he leaped to his death from the city's walls with the flag wrapped around his body.



In **General Scott's Entrance into Mexico (1851)**, Carl Nebel depicts General Winfield Scott on a white horse entering Mexico City's Plaza de la Constitución as anxious residents of the city watch. One woman peers furtively from behind the curtain of an upstairs window. On the left, a man bends down to pick up a paving stone to throw at the invaders.

On September 14, 1847, Scott entered Mexico City's central plaza and the war was essentially over. Subsequent negotiations culminated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which was signed in February 1848. Its terms included:

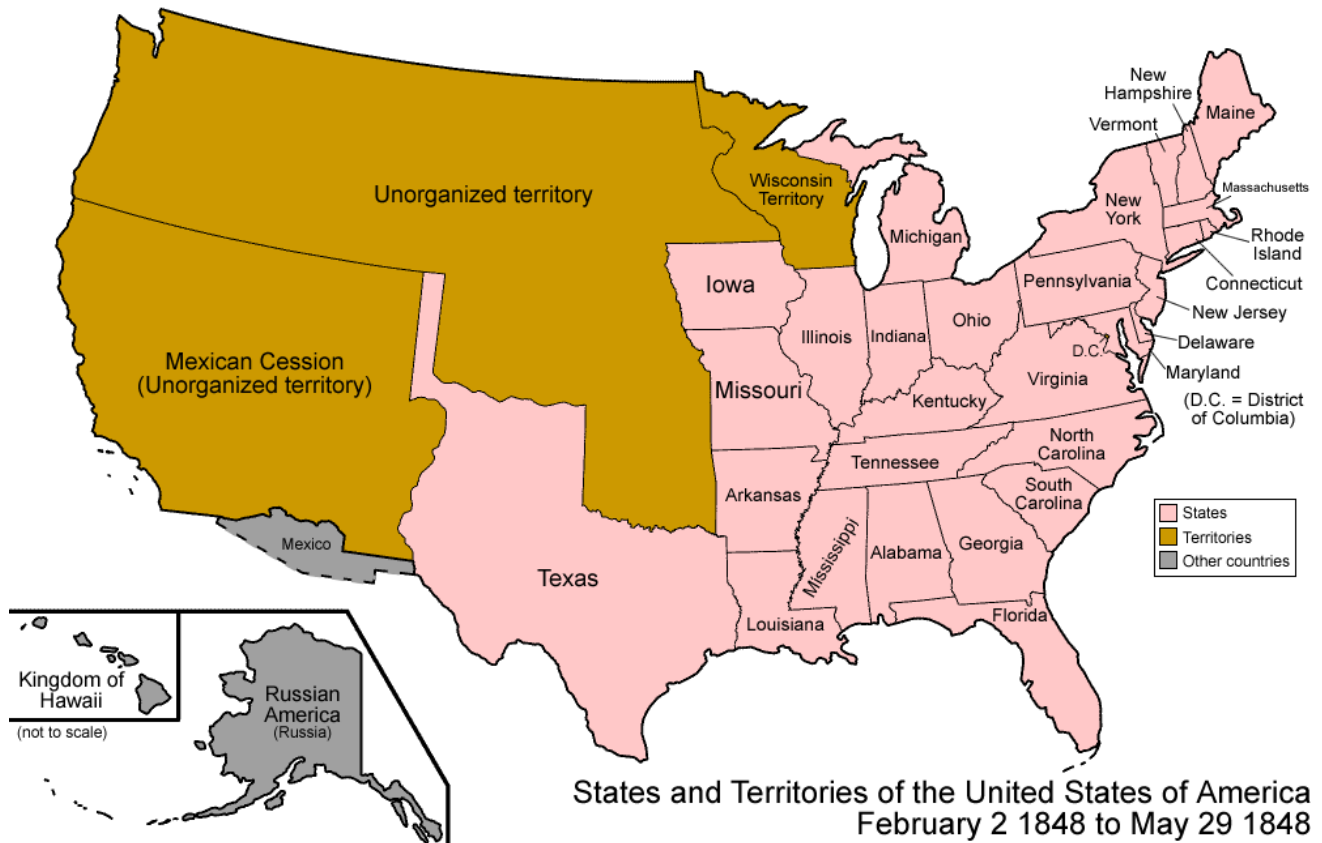
- The **Mexican Cession**, or the acquisition of nearly all of Mexico's northern territories west of the Rio Grande by the United States (see map below).
- Mexican citizens who lived in any territories ceded to the United States were promised American citizenship when their territories became states.
- The United States agreed to assume \$3.35 million worth of Mexican debts owed to American citizens.
- The United States paid Mexico \$15 million to compensate for its losses in territory.



TERM TO KNOW

Mexican Cession

The lands west of the Rio Grande acquired by the United States from Mexico in 1848; included present-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado.



The Mexican Cession included the current states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and portions of Colorado and Wyoming.

5. The Politics of Westward Expansion and Slavery

Throughout the war, northern Whig politicians criticized Polk's conduct, and concluded that the president sought territory from Mexico in order to provide for the expansion of slavery.

In August 1846, Polk requested a \$2 million appropriation from Congress to defray any potential costs of a peace negotiation between the United States and Mexico. Upon hearing of the request, **David Wilmot**, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, introduced an amendment that agreed to the appropriation on one condition: that slavery would not be permitted in any western territory acquired during the war. This amendment came to be known as the **Wilmot Proviso**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

David Wilmot

Democrat from Pennsylvania and author of the Wilmot Proviso, legislation that banned slavery from any western territory acquired during the Mexican-American War.



TERM TO KNOW

Wilmot Proviso

An amendment to an appropriation bill that would have barred slavery from any territory acquired from Mexico.

That Wilmot, a loyal Democrat, attempted to counter the actions of Polk, a Democratic president, hinted at the party divisions that were to come. That the Wilmot Proviso passed the House of Representatives along sectional lines foreshadowed the growing division between North and South.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Northern representatives voted for the proviso regardless of their party affiliation.

Southern representatives voted overwhelmingly against the proviso.

The Senate went on to kill the appropriation (including the Wilmot Proviso) during a filibuster, and Polk would eventually receive the money necessary to conduct treaty negotiations with Mexico. But the significance of the failed Wilmot Proviso lay in the fact that the vote fell according to sectional differences over slavery.

In an attempt to resolve any tension regarding the issue of slavery in western territories that the failed Wilmot Proviso exposed, members of the Democratic Party introduced a new position: **popular sovereignty**.



TERM TO KNOW

Popular Sovereignty

The belief that citizens should be able to decide upon the issue of slavery in the western territories based on the principle of majority rule.

Lewis Cass, a Democrat from Michigan, was among the first political officials to advocate for this idea, but there were many others within the Democratic Party who supported the notion. According to the promoters of popular sovereignty, slavery was a matter for the individual territories and states to decide. Residents of a territory could vote on whether to allow slavery and Congress should not interfere with this process.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lewis Cass

Democrat from Michigan who was among the first political officials to advocate for the idea of popular sovereignty to decide upon the issue of slavery in the western territories.

Meanwhile, some northern politicians (predominantly antislavery Whigs but also some Democrats who had become frustrated with the political influence of southern slaveholders) adopted the exact opposite position. They were willing to let slavery remain in the South, but they were increasingly unwilling to provide for the expansion of the institution into western territories. These politicians started to articulate the notion of **free soil**.



TERM TO KNOW

Free Soil

Opposition to the expansion of slavery into western territories and support of the settlement of western territories by White farmers.

The advocates of free soil were not motivated by racial equality or humanitarian concerns. Rather, they employed rhetoric associated with free labor ideology.




➔ **EXAMPLE** David Wilmot publicly referred to the Wilmot Proviso as a "White Man's Proviso," by arguing that it sought to protect free White laborers from any unfair competition that might accompany the expansion of racial slavery into the territories acquired from Mexico.

6. The Election of 1848

The political divide over slavery—between North and South, between the doctrines of popular sovereignty and free soil—erupted during the presidential election of 1848.

Three political parties and presidential candidates emerged. The table below represents the characteristics and circumstances of each party and includes the campaign poster for each.

Lewis Cass	Zachary Taylor	Martin Van Buren
Nominated by Democrats (since Polk already promised to serve only one term as president)	Nominated by Whigs	Nominated by the Free-Soil Party composed of antislavery Whigs and northern Democrats in a frustrated response to Cass and Taylor's nominations
Known as the champion of popular sovereignty	Known as the military hero of the Mexican-American War Slaveholder from Louisiana	

The **Free-Soil Party**, which was comprised exclusively of northern politicians, had one goal: to oppose the expansion of slavery into the West. In the minds of its members, southern slaveholders had marshaled their wealth and power to control national politics for the purpose of protecting slavery and extending it into the territories. Many in the Free Soil Party even believed that a slaveholding elite conspired to control domestic and international affairs through a cabal that came to be known as **Slave Power**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Free Soil Party

A political party organized in 1848 that sought to exclude slavery from the western territories.

Slave Power

A term northerners used to describe the disproportionate influence that they felt elite southern slaveholders wielded in both domestic and international affairs.

The Free-Soil Party did not gain many votes and Zachary Taylor ultimately won the election of 1848. But it was clear that western expansion had allowed slavery to enter national politics once again.



SUMMARY

President James K. Polk's administration was a period of intensive expansion for the United States. He negotiated a peaceful settlement with Great Britain regarding ownership of the Oregon Country. He also brought the United States into armed conflict with Mexico, which resulted in the acquisition of territory north and west of the Rio Grande. Few nations had expanded so quickly. However, this expansion led to debates about the fate of slavery in the West, creating tensions between North and South. The doctrines of popular sovereignty and free soil emerged and, by the election of 1848, slavery had once again entered national politics and threatened to unravel the second party system.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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John C. Fremont

Military leader in the Mexican-American War; first Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1856.

Lewis Cass

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Zachary Taylor

Military hero of the Mexican-American War and slaveholder from Louisiana who was elected president in the election of 1848.



DATES TO KNOW

1818

Great Britain and the United States agree upon a joint occupation of Oregon.

1835–1836

The Texas War for Independence resulted in the formation of the Republic of Texas.

1844

James K. Polk is elected president.

1845

The United States annexes Texas.

1846

Oregon Treaty with Great Britain divides the Oregon Territory at the 49th parallel; The United States declares war on Mexico and seizes control of California; Wilmot Proviso is introduced in Congress.

1848

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War; The United States acquires the Mexican Cession; The Free Soil Party emerges in the election of 1848; Zachary Taylor is elected

president.