

# Opposition to the Mexican War

During the first few weeks following the declaration of war a frenzy of pro-war hysteria swept the country. Two hundred thousand men responded to a call for 50,000 volunteers. In New York, placards bore the slogan "Mexico or Death." Many newspapers, especially in the North, declared that the war would benefit the Mexican people by bringing them the blessings of democracy and liberty.

But from the war's very beginning, a small but highly visible group of intellectuals, clergymen, pacifists, abolitionists, and politicians, mostly from the North, denounced the war as brutal aggression against a "poor, feeble, distracted country." They argued that the war was an immoral attack on a weaker neighbor, an effort to spread slavery, and inconsistent with American democratic ideals. A freshman Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln lashed out against the war. In Congress, he proposed the so-called "Spot Resolution," demanding that President Polk identify the precise spot on which Mexicans had "shed American blood on American soil." One of Lincoln's constituents branded him "the Benedict Arnold of our district," and he was denied re-nomination by his own party.

As newspapers informed their readers about the hardships of life on the front, public enthusiasm for the war began to fade. The war did not turn out to be the romantic exploit that Americans envisioned. Troops complained that their food was "green with slime" and "acted as an instantaneous emetic." Diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, measles, and yellow fever ravaged American soldiers. Seven times as many Americans died of disease and exposure as died of battlefield injuries. Of the 90,000 Americans who served in the war, only 1,721 died in action. Another 11,155 died from disease and exposure to the elements.

Public support for the war was further eroded by reports of brutality against Mexican civilians. Newspaper reporters claimed that the chapparral was "strewn with the skeletons of Mexicans sacrificed" by American troops. After one of their members was murdered, the Arkansas volunteer cavalry surrounded a group of Mexican peasants and began an "indiscriminate and bloody massacre of the poor creatures." A young lieutenant named George G. Meade reported that volunteers in Matamoros robbed the citizens, stole their cattle, and killed innocent civilians "for no other object than their own amusement." If only a tenth of the horror stories were true, General Winfield Scott wrote, it was enough "to make Heaven weep, & every American of Christian morals blush for his country."

Dissent even made its way to the battlefield. A group of enlisted Irish-Catholic Americans, shocked by the desecration of Catholic churches, deserted to the Mexican side, formed the San Patricio Battalion, and fought against the American army. At Churubusco, 65 members of the battalion (which also consisted of foreign nationals resident in Mexico) were captured. Fifty were executed and 11 others were punished with fifty lashes apiece and the letter D (for deserter) branded on their cheeks.

A young essayist and poet named Henry David Thoreau staged the best known act of protest against the Mexican war. On July 23, 1846, the constable of Concord, Massachusetts, arrested the poet for failure to pay the state poll tax (a head tax on male citizens between the ages of 21 and 70). The constable actually offered to pay the tax if Thoreau was short of money, but Thoreau insisted that he refused to pay on principle, as a protest against his country's involvement in the Mexican War. The constable then placed Thoreau in the local jail. Thoreau spent only a single night in jail because his tax was paid, much to his disgust, by one of his relatives.

Questions:

1. What factors quickly caused public opinion to turn against the Mexican War?
2. What areas of the country were most opposed to the war? Why?
3. What are some of the actions people took against the war?

# Civil Disobedience

by Henry David Thoreau

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe--"That government is best which governs not at all"; . . . The objections which have been brought against a standing army, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. . . . It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then?

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the State government, directly, and face to face, once a year -- no more -- in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me. Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. . . . Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority.

1. What is Thoreau's view of governmental authority?
2. In paragraph 2, Thoreau outlines three options for dealing with unjust laws. How does he believe people ought to respond to unjust laws? Why? Do you agree?
3. Does Thoreau believe that all unjust laws ought to be broken? Explain.
4. What did Thoreau encourage opponents of the Mexican War to do?
5. Is there any line in this essay that best represents Thoreau's feelings? Explain.

# Massachusetts Resolutions on War with Mexico, 1847

Resolves. Concerning the Mexican War, and the Institution of Slavery.

*Resolved*, That the present war with Mexico has its primary origin in the unconstitutional annexation to the United States of the foreign State of Texas, while the same was still at war with Mexico; that it was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President, to General Taylor, to take military possession of territory in dispute between the United States and Mexico, and in the occupation of Mexico; and that it is now waged ingloriously,—by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor,—unnecessarily and without just cause, at immense cost of treasure and life, for the dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest of a portion of her territory, from which slavery has already been excluded, with the triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the “Slave Power,” and of obtaining the control of the Free States, under the Constitution of the United States.

*Resolved*, That such a war of conquest, so hateful in its objects, so wanton, unjust, and unconstitutional in its origin and character, must be regarded as a war against freedom, against humanity, against justice, against the Union, against the Constitution, and against the Free States; and that a regard for the true interests and the highest honor of the country, not less than the impulses of Christian duty, should arouse all good citizens to join in efforts to arrest this gigantic crime, by withholding supplies, or other voluntary contributions, for its further prosecution, by calling for the withdrawal of our army within the established limits of the United States, and in every just way aiding the country to retreat from the disgraceful position of aggression which it now occupies towards a weak, distracted neighbor and sister republic.

## Questions:

- Identify three reasons why the Massachusetts legislature opposed the war with Mexico?
- What did the legislature call on people to do?
- Do you think the resolutions are a patriotic act? Explain.