

Background to Calhoun's Speech on the Conquest of Mexico

Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. From 1823 to 1825, Mexico passed laws offering new settlers land in Texas at very low prices. By 1830, Americans in Texas far outnumbered Mexicans, and the U.S. government had twice offered to buy Texas from Mexico. The "Texans" insisted upon self-government, which they believed they had been promised by Mexico's government. When that failed to materialize, they demanded independence, resulting in the Texas Revolution between October 1835 and April 1836. Although heroes like William Travis, Jim Bowie, and Davy Crockett died at the Alamo, the Texans soon won their independence at the Battle of San Jacinto under the leadership of Sam Houston. After achieving independence, most Texans wanted to join the Union. President Jackson, however, refused their request, possibly out of regard for his Vice President, Martin van Buren, who had presidential ambitions. van Buren would need strong northern support to win the presidency, and since Texas had slavery, northerners did not want it to become part of the United States. For the next nine years, Texas would remain an independent country, the Lone Star Republic.

Texas was finally annexed in 1845, due to the election of President James K. Polk in 1844 and the popularity of Manifest Destiny—many Americans now believed that the United States had a divine mission to spread our democracy across all of North America. Polk had campaigned on the promise of annexing not only Texas but also Oregon, which was soon acquired as well. But President Polk wanted to obtain even more: After Mexico refused to sell New Mexico (the name then for the huge region between Texas and California) and California to the United States, Polk decided to acquire them through war. Polk, however, wanted to be able to claim that Mexico had been the aggressor, so he ordered General Zachary Taylor to march his troops into the disputed border territory between Texas and Mexico. Fighting broke out as expected; Polk then announced that Mexican troops had initiated hostilities, and Congress declared war on May 13, 1846.

Polk's war plan had three parts, all of which were achieved: First, American troops would drive Mexican forces out of the disputed border region in western Texas. Second, the United States would seize New Mexico and California. And third, American forces would take Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, because nothing short of capturing the capital would persuade the Mexican government to give up so much of its territory. Mexico City fell on September 14, 1847, but Mexican authorities held out against signing a treaty until February 2, 1848, by then having grown fearful of even harsher terms. In the end, Polk received all the land he had set out to acquire before the war, which amounted to the northern half of Mexico—or the southwestern quarter of what is now the United States.

The fervor of Manifest Destiny had been so strong that many Americans, including some members of Polk's cabinet, had also wanted to take all or a large part of the southern half of Mexico, which was where the vast majority of Mexicans actually lived. About a month before Mexico agreed to terms, John C. Calhoun, a famous pro-slavery politician from South Carolina, gave a speech in the United States Senate where he opposed taking over southern Mexico for reasons that involved race. The fact that a prominent senator would speak in such terms reveals much about the scope and depth of racism in 19th century America.