Chapter 13

[[**Big Idea:** What were the causes of the Mexican War, and in what ways did it bring about a growing sectional crisis during the 1850s?]]

The event that started the Mexican War is no mystery. In May of 1846 American troops advanced into disputed territory along the Texas-Mexico border and the Mexican army responded with force. “We were sent to provoke a fight,” Ulysses S. Grant recalled many years later, “but it was essential that Mexico should commence it.”

This event had many complex causes. Ever since Texas had won defacto independence from Mexico in 1836, southern politicians had urged its admittance to the Union. In the 1840s, expansionist-minded Americans joined the agitation, arguing that annexation would begin what they called the nation’s “manifest destiny” to expand to the Pacific Ocean.

Running for president in 1844, Democratic candidate James Polk strongly endorsed annexation. His victory insured its success. And much more. Democrats in Congress brought Texas into the Union in December 1845. Soon thereafter, Polk dispatched agent John Slidell to buy Mexico’s northern territories of New Mexico and California. He also sent troops to California, hoping to encourage American settlers there to rebel and join the Union. When Slidell’s mission failed, Polk played his trump card, ordering troops to occupy the disputed territory along the Texas border. Taking liberties with the truth, the president declared that Mexico had “invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil.”

As is often the case, the onset of war unleashed patriotic enthusiasm . . . but also bitter opposition. Seasoned politicians, such as Martin Van Buren and Henry Clay, had long opposed Texas annexation. They warned that territorial expansion would dramatically inflate sectional tensions over slavery, already on the rise because of a rising abolitionist movement.

Their predictions were on the mark. With slaveholding Texas in the Union, many northern politicians vowed to halt the further expansion of slavery. They nearly won congressional approval for the Wilmot Proviso, outlawing slavery in any territory acquired from the war. In the event, the nation came out of the war with vast new territories and an unresolved controversy over slavery. The Mexican War set in motion the forces that would destroy the Union in 1861.