

“Manifest Destiny Revisited: the Mexican War (1846-1848) in the Global Context of 19th Century Imperialism”

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Summarized by Timothy Doran

The global context of U. S. “manifest destiny” in the middle of the 19th century was European imperialism is the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars generated by the French Revolution. In response to this context the 1823 Monroe Doctrine stated that the United States would come to the defense of the new American republics of Latin America. Yet in 1829 the United States failed to marshal troops to New Orleans to help the Mexicans fight off Spain. The United States also failed to help Mexico against the French takeover. The British effort to take islands from Honduras in 1838 was not met by United States resistance nor did Nicaragua receive U. S. assistance against incursions a little later. In fact, the United States did nothing when these invasions took place, and only in the late 19th and early 20th century began to enforce the Monroe Doctrine.

Instead, in the mid-19th century, the United States provoked a war with the vulnerable Mexico. It is important to contextualize this American imperial aggression within the post-Napoleonic international context and in particular in regard to Britain’s response and Mexico’s vulnerability. What was going on in Britain at this time that made it unwilling to take on the United States given that Britain had economic and other interests in Latin America? A huge loan had been made by British creditors to the Mexican government. But international events were occupying the attention and energy of Britain, and allowed the United States to face down Britain on a number of occasions. Tensions and conflicts occurred in a number of cases, but no war. As for why was Mexico so vulnerable, the asymmetry of power silenced the weaker power. The United States provoked a war at this time because it thought it would win: it had clear intelligence about the weakness of Mexico and was willing to risk going to war.

Nonetheless, it was not a quick war. U. S. troops were unprepared. In the first year most of the troops were volunteers. By the end, roughly 107,000 troops were involved, and the country suffered the highest death rate of any war in which the United States ever had participated. Two other major factors constrained the United States from exploiting its victory and becoming a full-blown American power. The first was the struggle between north and south: the compromise of 1850 is always thought of as a prelude step leading to the civil war. The second constraint was race. The movement to stop the United States from taking over more territory after defeating Mexico was a racial one: Americans did not want to bring lots of non-whites residing in conquered lands into U.S. territory.

John Quincy Adams was part of the back story to the Monroe Doctrine. All other European powers were told keep their hands off of Latin America. But Adams opposed the Monroe Doctrine, reasoning that if the United States enacted it, they themselves would be prohibited from taking Texas and Cuba. Jefferson thought the United States might want those places. Quotations going back to 1801 give us this information. The United States had a vision of extending the Louisiana Purchase. Until that treaty there were U.S. political leaders who felt that the boundary of the United States included the limits of U.S. claims. There was a dispute over Texas between the claims of the United States and the claims of the Spaniards.

The claims needed to be cancelled in 1819. West Florida became part of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. By 1813, the Spaniards were caught up in other events and conceded West Florida to the United States. In 1819, the Adams-Onís treaty saw more territory taken from a weakened Spain: East Florida, becoming the state of Florida. The British were preoccupied with European wars, so the United States decided to try to annex Canada. However, the British returned, made rather quick work of the United States, and burned the White House. The United States and Britain agreed to a treaty. Britain did not have the time or energy to take back the United States: it was busy at the end of the Napoleonic Wars as well as with serious domestic unrest on its own soil. The Corn Laws raised the tariff on grains and maintained high prices on bread and grains. In 1819 in Manchester 80,000 persons amassed to protest the Corn Laws. In this protest, 113 women were wounded and 400 people shot. There was also the insistence of the new middle class on receiving representation. The Reform Act of 1832 had many provisions and was a concession on the part of the elite to the great popular discontent. Recent events in France scared the establishment and emboldened the middle class. The House of Lords was scared by this and worried about a revolution. In 1834 the Municipal Corporations Act gave more voice to municipal government. The Poor Law was passed in 1838. Acts of 1840s and 1850s conceded increasing amounts of political space, until the working day was limited to 10 hours.

For these reasons, England said it would make concessions since it had its hands full. After 1815 the peace settlement meant that England acquired new territories, including Ceylon, new islands in the French Indian Ocean, and more concern for the sea lanes between India and England. Asia had become more important with the taking of Singapore. Further, in the 1820s through 1830s: England made incursions into Burma and South Africa. Next was the Opium War of 1839 – 1842. The British comprised the first major drug cartels. They acquired Hong Kong and five treaty ports allowing Britain extraterritorial rights into China. In the 1850s, they had another series of conflicts with China, and in the midst of all this Britain was concerned about the pretentious player in Europe that wanted to expand its borders: namely, Russia.

In 1833 the Falkland Islands were taken by Britain. The United States, again, did nothing. Another indication that the United States would have backed off was that the British didn't want to get into a hassle with a second rate power. Great Britain's acquiescence in historical moments gave a green light to the United States. The Spanish were not in a position to protect their own borders and shores in Europe or the United States. Ships from different parts of Europe, as well as from the United States, were going up and down the California coast since Spain didn't have a navy to defend its coast. Mexico had no means of defending its northern borders. The biggest problems the Spanish faced were yellow fever and diarrhea.

Mexico even invaded Guatemala as they wanted Guatemala to become dependent on Mexico. In 1838 the French came in to take Veracruz, the major port of Mexico. French sailors kissed Mexican girls and taught them bread making, then demanded money to go home. In 1836 in Texas, ruffians plus Mexicans demanded an independent republic. When the Mexicans were defeated in 1836, it was clear that they could not defend themselves. Polk did not want war and kept raising the offered price, thinking that Mexico would cave in and agree to selling land.

Is or was the United States an imperialist country? If it wasn't for the combination of north/south tensions, combined with race, the US would have become a full blown imperial actor; but those two factors probably combined to make it less aggressive.

In this sense the US does not become a full-blown imperial power until a little later with Cuba, but the Mexican war is a harbinger of what is to come.