

National Archives Teaching With Documents

Lincoln's Spot Resolutions

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Background

Tension has existed between the legislative and the executive branches of the U.S. government over war powers since the [Constitution](#) simultaneously vested Congress with the power to declare war and the President with the power of Commander-in-Chief. Although Jefferson insisted on congressional approval before sending troops into combat, later Presidents have not felt bound by this precedent. Their alternate view was boosted by the Supreme Court in 1827 in the case *Martin v. Mott*. The Court ruled that it was constitutional for Congress to vest the president with the discretionary authority to decide whether an emergency had arisen and to raise a militia to meet such a threat of invasion or civil insurrection. Nonetheless, in the winter of 1845-46, as relations between the United States and Mexico deteriorated, there was no express delineation of powers between the two branches.

Prior to Texas's independence, the Nueces River was recognized as the northern boundary of Mexico. Spain had fixed the Nueces as a border in 1816, and the United States ratified it in the 1819 treaty by which the United States had purchased Florida and renounced claims to Texas.

Even following Mexico's independence from Spain, American and European cartographers fixed the Texas border at the Nueces. When Texas declared its independence, however, it claimed as its territory an additional 150 miles of land, to the Rio Grande. With the annexation of Texas in 1845, the United States adopted Texas's position and claimed the Rio Grande as the border.

Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States and refused to recognize either the Texas annexation or the Rio Grande border. [President James Polk](#) (ARC Identifier: 528666) sent a special envoy, [John L. Slidell](#) (ARC Identifier: 528280), to propose cancellation of Mexico's debt to United States citizens who had incurred damages during the Mexican Revolution, provided Mexico would formally recognize the Rio Grande

boundary. Slidell was also authorized to offer the Mexican government up to \$30 million for California and New Mexico.

Between Slidell's arrival on December 6, 1845, and his departure in March 1846, the regime of President Jose Herrera was overthrown and a fervently nationalistic government under General Mariano Paredes seized power. Neither leader would speak to Slidell. When Paredes publicly reaffirmed Mexico's claim to all of Texas, Slidell left in a temper, convinced that Mexico should be "chastised."

Zachary Taylor

The agent for chastisement was already in place. On January 13, 1846, more than 3,500 troops commanded by [General Zachary Taylor](#) (ARC Identifier: 527669) moved south under President Polk's order, from Corpus Christi on the Nueces River to a location on the north bank of the Rio Grande. Advancing on March 8 to Point Isabel, the U.S. troops found that the settlement had been burned by fleeing Mexicans. By March 28, the troops were near the mouth of the Rio Grande across from the Mexican town of Matamoros.

Polk claimed the move was a defensive measure, and expansionists and Democratic newspapers in the United States applauded his action. Whig newspapers said that the movement was an invasion of Mexico rather than a defense of Texas. While newspapers in Mexico called for war, General Pedro de Ampudia warned, "If you insist in remaining upon the soil of the department of Tamaulipas, it will clearly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question."

General Ampudia's prediction came true on April 25 when Mexican cavalry crossed the Rio Grande and attacked a mounted American patrol, killing five, wounding eleven, and capturing forty-seven.

President Polk

In Washington, President Polk, although unaware of the developments, had drafted a message asking Congress to declare war on Mexico on the basis of Mexico's failure to pay U.S. damage claims and refusal to meet with Slidell. At a cabinet meeting on May 9, he notified his cabinet that he would ask for war in a few days. Only Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft counseled for delay, waiting for a Mexican attack.

On that evening, Polk received Taylor's account of the April 25 skirmish. Polk revised his war message, then sent it to Congress on May 11 asserting, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon America's soil." On May 13, Congress declared war, with a vote of 40-2 in the Senate and 174-14 in the House.

Although Congress had declared war, it was not without reservation. An amendment was proposed, although defeated, to indicate that Congress did not approve of Polk's order to move troops into disputed territory. Sixty-seven Whig representatives voted against mobilization and appropriations for a war.

Ohio Senator Tom Corwin accused Polk of involving the United States in a war of aggression. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina abstained from voting, correctly foreseeing that the war would aggravate sectional strife. Massachusetts [Senator Daniel Webster](#) (ARC Identifier: 528348) voiced doubts about the constitutionality of Polk's actions, believing that Polk had failed to consult adequately with Congress. As the war deepened, "Conscience" Whigs denied Polk had tried to avoid war.

A freshman Whig Congressman from Illinois, [Abraham Lincoln](#) (ARC Identifier: 528389), questioned whether the "spot" where blood had been shed was really U.S. soil. On December 22, 1847, he introduced the "Spot Resolutions," of which the second and third pages of Lincoln's handwritten copy are shown. One of several congressional resolutions opposing the war, it was never acted upon by the full Congress. Lincoln's action temporarily earned him a derisive nickname, "spotty Lincoln," coined by one Illinois newspaper.

Other citizens shared their legislators' concern, particularly those in the Northeast who saw the war as a ploy to extend slavery. The most celebrated was Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay his \$1 Massachusetts poll tax because he believed the war an immoral advancement of slavery.

Acerbic former [President John Quincy Adams](#) (ARC Identifier: 527673) described the war as a southern expedition to find "bigger pens to cram with slaves." Regional writer James R. Lowell, author of the Biglow Papers, had his Yankee farmer Hosea Biglow scorn fighting to bring in new slave states. [Charles Sumner](#) (ARC Identifier: 525357), a noted abolitionist, also condemned the war from pacifist principles. Philadelphian Joseph Sill's diary records widespread public disapproval for the war by October 1847. The

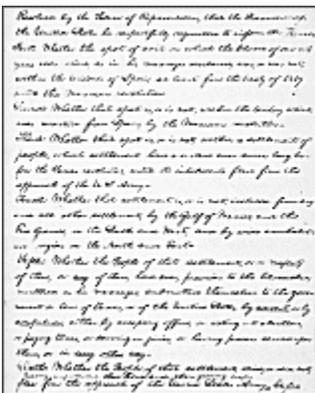
Massachusetts state legislature resolved the war an unconstitutional action because it was initiated by order of the President with the "triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the slave power and of obtaining the control of the free states."

Concern that Taylor's order sending troops into the disputed territory provoked the clash was foremost in an October 1847 article in one Whig newspaper, *The American Review*: "The Constitution contemplates that before deliberate hostilities shall be undertaken in any case, a declaration of war shall be made; but in this case a hostile aggressive move was made under the personal orders of the President."

Ironically, when Lincoln became President, he extended the war powers of the executive, action he had criticized as a Congressman. Following the firing on Fort Sumter, he declared a naval blockade on his own authority. The capture and condemnation of four runners led to a case that went to the Supreme Court. In 1863 the Court affirmed Lincoln's actions in the Prize Cases, 2 Black 635.

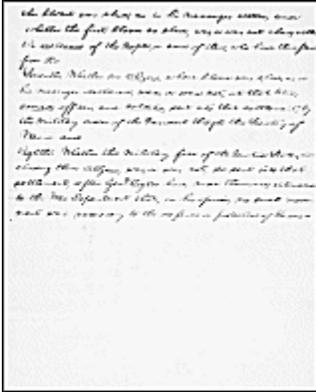
The "Spot Resolutions" are kept in the Records of the [U.S. House of Representatives, RG 233, HR 30 A-B 3](#).

The Documents



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National Archives and Records Administration
Records of the U.S. House of Representatives
RG 233, HR 30 A-B 3.
[ARC Identifier: 306605](#)



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Records of the U.S. House of Representatives

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[ARC Identifier](#): 306605

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Teaching With Documents:
Lincoln's Spot Resolutions

Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 4-Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)
 - Standard 1C-Demonstrate understanding of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the nation's expansion to the Northwest, and the Mexican-American War.

This lesson correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard IV.A.1.-Explain how nation-states interact with each other.
- Standard IV.B.2.-Evaluate, take, and defend positions about how United States foreign policy is made and the means by which it is carried out.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share this exercise with your history, government, and language arts colleagues.

Interpreting the Document

1. Students should review information in their textbooks about the U.S. entry into the Mexican War and opposition to that war. Supplement the text with information from the note to the teacher.
2. Ask students to locate on a map or in an atlas the following geographical features: the Nueces River, the Rio Grande, Corpus Christi, Point Isabel, Matamoros.
3. Ask students to read the document, either aloud as a class or silently. Then ask them to summarize each of the eight resolutions in their own words:
 - a. Using the text and note to the teacher, ask students to answer each of Lincoln's points.
 - b. Using Polk's war message, ask students to answer each of the points.
 - c. Ask students to compile a list of secondary sources where they might find information to resolve the discrepancies between the two versions of the events.
 - d. Ask students to compile a list of primary sources that they could examine to resolve the discrepancies between the two versions.

Public Opinion

1. Most students are aware that television influences public opinion from politics to fashion, but they are less sensitive to the impact of other forms of communication. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - a. Apart from television, how do they get information about current events?
 - b. Apart from television, what sources do they turn to for information upon which to base an opinion? (For example, consumer, book, movie, record, or fashion reviews and editorials)
 - c. Can they tell what side of an issue their local newspaper favors? Opposes? How?
 - d. Apart from articles on the editorial page, what other decisions made by newspaper editors influence public opinion and knowledge?
 - e. What impact would political party newspapers have had in the 1840s, an era before television or radio?

2. Antiwar protesters did not just appear with the Vietnam War, as some students believe. Time permitting, you may wish to assign students to read Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" or the play based on his incarceration, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, or James R. Lomell's *Biglow Papers*, or other examples of opposition to the Mexican War. Students should report to the class the issues raised and tactics used by these earlier protesters.
3. Direct students to look into earlier and later antiwar material, from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to Holly Near's songs about the conflict in Central America. Ask students to conduct research and prepare written or oral reports or to write an editorial on one of the following topics:
 - a. Protesters of conscience against wars other than the Mexican War.
 - b. Moral issues raised by conscientious objectors at different periods in history.
 - c. Tactics used by antiwar protesters over time and how these tactics have changed.

The photographs included in this project are available through the Archival Research Catalog ([ARC](#)) and are in Record Group 111, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer.

[ARC](#) replaces its prototype, the NARA Archival Information Locator (NAIL). You can still perform a keyword, digitized image and location search. ARC's advanced functionalities also allow you to search by organization, person, or topic.

ARC is a searchable database that contains information about a wide variety of NARA holdings across the country. You can use ARC to search record descriptions by keywords or topics and retrieve digital copies of selected textual documents, photographs, maps, and sound recordings related to thousands of topics.

Currently, about 20% of NARA's vast holdings have been described in ARC. 124,000 digital images can be searched in ARC. In keeping with NARA's Strategic Plan, the percentage of holdings described in ARC will grow continually.

Mueller, Jean West and Wynell B. Schamel. "Lincoln's Spot Resolutions." *Social Education* 52, 6 (October 1988): 455 - 457, 466.

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1.	<p>TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Letter <input type="checkbox"/> Patent <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum </td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Map <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram <input type="checkbox"/> Press release <input type="checkbox"/> Report </td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional record <input type="checkbox"/> Census report <input type="checkbox"/> Other </td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Letter <input type="checkbox"/> Patent <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum	<input type="checkbox"/> Map <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram <input type="checkbox"/> Press release <input type="checkbox"/> Report	<input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional record <input type="checkbox"/> Census report <input type="checkbox"/> Other
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2.	<p>UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten <input type="checkbox"/> Typed <input type="checkbox"/> Seals </td> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Notations <input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp <input type="checkbox"/> Other </td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten <input type="checkbox"/> Typed <input type="checkbox"/> Seals	<input type="checkbox"/> Notations <input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp <input type="checkbox"/> Other	
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3.	<p>DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:</p> <hr/>			
4.	<p>AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:</p> <hr/> <p>POSITION (TITLE):</p> <hr/>			
5.	<p>FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?</p> <hr/>			
6.	<p>DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)</p> <p>A. List three things the author said that you think are important:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>B. Why do you think this document was written?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>			

**Designed and developed by the
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