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One of the greatest things about the study of history is the ability to ask questions about the importance or the role certain people or policies had on specific events. Many people are fascinated by playing what if games with history or by taking an event analyzing whether or not it helped or hurt the country that is being studied. A significant number of Americans do this with the country's civil war in the early 1860s.

Unfortunately, many Americans devote little time to the study of the wars that expanded the size of the United States, which led the country down the path to civil war. Of course, any study of war demands the study of the military and its role. The wars of expansion for the United States were not any different. However, the role of the military within the United States was unique.

No one can argue that governments throughout the world use their militaries to promote their national interests. In the same manner, the United States has used its military time and time again to promote the national interests of the United States. What made the United States unique was the way in which the national interest was decided. During the wars of expansion for the United States it was the opinion of the citizens of the United States that demanded the country expand its borders. Therefore, in a democracy such as the United States, that opinion becomes the opinion of its government and the government must carry out that demand. In the case of expansion, the government had to use the military to accomplish those goals. This paper will argue that the United States' military did positively serve the national interest of the United States

by successfully accomplishing the popular goal of the country's borders reaching the Pacific Ocean.

In order to understand why many Americans believed in the right of their country to have borders that stretched from ocean to ocean, we must take a look at the history of expansion in North America. In fact, one of the very first documents in North American history set the stage for westward expansion. The "First Virginia Charter" outlined the colony of Virginia's border. The charter gave a specific northern, southern and eastern border. However, when one examines the charter a western boundary was not defined for the settlers of the Jamestown colony.¹

As the colonies expanded in population so did the westward expansion of the colonies. Because of problems in securing the protection of the colonists as they moved west, the British felt forced to stop the westward expansion with the Proclamation Line of 1763. This halt to westward expansion greatly upset the colonist and began a path that would ultimately end with the independence of the United States. However, independence did not stop the desire to expand westward. Thomas Jefferson continued the approach to the Pacific Ocean with the Louisiana Purchase. In a speech Jefferson bragged of the great amount of territory the United States owned. He said the nation had "room enough for our descendents to the hundredth and thousandth generation."² A majority of Americans agreed with Jefferson's view when he was reelected in 1804.

When it was felt the British were interfering with the country's expansion by supplying the natives with guns and ammunition, the United States began another path to war with Britain. Once the Treaty of Ghent removed the British as a threat to the road to

¹ "The First Virginia Charter"

the Pacific, the country began systematically removing the natives from the land desired by western settlers. In a speech to Congress, President Andrew Jackson argued for the quick removal of natives from land desired by white settlers. Jackson told Congress it was in the best interest of the natives to be moved from the area. If they would not move, Jackson argued the settlers would overwhelm the natives and make them extinct.

Therefore the government, through the efforts of the military, needed to move the natives west of the Mississippi River.³ Jackson's opinion was not in the minority in American opinion. In fact, this opinion possibly increased Jackson's popularity because he won a more the 1832 Presidential election by a wider margin than he did in the 1828 election.⁴

With this long history of westward expansion, many Americans began to believe that it was the right of the United States to rule a great empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. When the opportunity for this presented itself in the form of the independence of Texas, many Americans agreed with John L. O'Sullivan when he wrote:

Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allowed by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.⁵

Not everyone agreed with O'Sullivan's opinion of the United States receiving Texas into the Union. Henry Clay believed that the annexation of Texas was not in the

² Koch, Adrienne and William Peden, eds., The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, (New York, 1944), 323.

³ Jackson, Andrew, "Second Annual Message to Congress on December 6, 1830," A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 3, (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 216-7.

⁴ Roseboom, Euguene, A History of Presidential Election, (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 105.

best national interest of the United States because of the possible conflict it would cause with Mexico. Clay wrote in 1844:

I consider the annexation of Texas, at this time, without the assent of Mexico, as a measure compromising the national character, involving us certainly in war with Mexico, probably with other foreign powers, dangerous to the integrity of the Union, inexpedient in the present financial condition of the country, and not called for by any general expression of public opinion.⁶

The Whig party nominated Clay to be their candidate for the Presidency in 1844. Meanwhile the Democrats had nominated James Polk as their candidate with a platform of annexation of Texas and Oregon, even if it meant war with Mexico or Britain.⁷

Therefore, the stage was set for a showdown in the Presidential Election of 1844. One candidate believed it was in the best interests of the United States of America to not annex Texas and face a possible war with Mexico, while the other candidate believed the best interest of the country lay with the annexation of Mexico despite a possible war with Mexico. In 1844, the people voted for the expansionist Polk by a narrow margin. Out of 2,698,605 votes, Polk received 1,337,243 votes, while Clay received only 1,299,062. In the Electoral College voting Polk received 170 out of a possible 265 votes.⁸ In a democracy the margin of victory does not matter, because it is a simple matter of the side with the most votes wins. Polk quickly moved to annex Texas into the United States. When the Mexicans objected and declared war on the United States, Polk responded to Congress:

The most energetic and prompt measures and the immediate appearance in arms of a large and overpowering force are recommended to Congress as the most certain and

⁵ O'Sullivan, John L., "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, July 1845.

⁶ Clay, Henry, "America Should Not Annex Texas," *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*, (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1996), 211-213.

⁷ Roseboom, 129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

efficient means of bringing the existing collision with Mexico to a speedy and successful termination.⁹

The ensuing war between Mexico and the United States engaged the United States' military in a war that gave the United States one-third of the territory of Mexico and expanded the territory of the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. Whether or not the United States was justified to do this to Mexico is a moot point in 1999. The people of the United States voted in 1844 that the annexation of Texas, Oregon, and California was in the national interest of the United States and the military was the organization to do this.

Despite this debate over what was in the best interest of the United States in the war for expansion of the country, we can learn some important lessons from this episode in American history. First we learned that a professional military was more efficient than the state militia system. After the War of 1812, the United States began to strengthen its professional army, because of the problems associated with the militias during the war. The unorganized state militia system was unable to deal with the problems of serious war and brought the country to the brink of disaster only to be saved by Jackson's heroics at New Orleans and the skillful diplomacy of the country's representation at the treaty negotiations in Ghent, Belgium. However, by the time of the Mexican War, the country had put together a strong enough professional military to defeat the Mexicans, albeit a much weaker military nation than Britain in the War of 1812, within two years. Unfortunately, this lesson also led to the impressive military capabilities of the leaders of both combatants in the American Civil War of 1861-1865.

⁹ Polk, James, "Message to Congress on May 11, 1846," A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 3, (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 323.

The second lesson to be learned from the wars of expansion was that the interests of a nation often change and the actions of the past will sometimes hamper the current national interest. After taking one-third of Mexico's territory in the war, the Mexicans were very bitter toward their northern neighbors. As the United States became increasingly involved with hostile countries in the twentieth century, the protection of the United States' territories began to become part of the national interest. The best way to secure the mainland of the United States was (and still is) to protect the borders of the country against foreign invasion. This can be accomplished in two ways. The first way is to fortify the borders of the country. The second way, and cheaper way, is to have friendly relations with the neighboring countries in order to have them help secure their country as well as your own. However, the bitter relations between the United States and Mexico, resulting in part from the Mexican War, put the United States' national security in jeopardy in 1917 when Germany asked Mexico to invade the United States, and upon Germany's victory, receive the land Mexico had lost to the United States in 1848. Despite the vote for Polk and the mandate to go to war, if necessary, with Mexico in 1844, the national interest of the United States changed. However, the results of the national interest of 1844 hurt the national interest of the United States 73 years later.

Finally, the third lesson to be learned from the wars of expansion was to be ready to deal with the problems associated with expansion. Expansion causes many problems such as settlement of the new land, defense of the new land, and use of the new land. All of these are difficult issues to handle and solve. However, the United States in 1848 was not even ready to deal with the type of government in the new land. Still in 1848, sixty-five years after independence, the nation was unable to deal with the problems caused by

the issue of slavery. In fact, the country's government had just decided to talk about the issue again. From 1836-1844, Congress had a gag order on the issue and would not allow to be talked about on the floors of either house. The problem was obvious, while the country's new territories needed basic problems solved, the government in Washington D.C. could not decide how to handle the issue of slavery in the new territories. While the country temporarily solved the question in the Compromise of 1850, the problems associated with expansion of the Federal Territories eventually caused a split in the Union and a war among the states. One of the main causes of this split was the inability to settle on a way to govern the territories gained from Mexico in 1848.

In conclusion, the role of the military in the wars of expansion was necessary role because the national interest, determined by a vote of the people of the country, demanded action of the Texas problem, the Indian problem and the Mexican problem. It is impossible for us to judge whether or not these interests were good or bad, because the people of the time determined them to be good. However, when deciding what course the current national interest of the country should take, the nation would do wise to look back on its history, even those that some people view as unfortunate, to learn what the possible gains and/or losses will be by following a chosen course of action.

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