

WALT WHITMAN ON THE MEXICAN WAR AND ANNEXATION OF TERRITORY, 1846

Primary Source

The American poet, Walt Whitman, became an enthusiastic supporter of the United States war with Mexico and advocated the nation's expansion to the Pacific coast. The following are two articles excerpted from *The Brooklyn Eagle* in May and June, 1846.

May 11, 1846

Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised! We have reached a point in our intercourse with that country, when prompt and effectual demonstrations of force are enjoined upon us by every dictate of right and policy. The news of yesterday has added the last argument wanted to prove the necessity of immediate Declaration of War by our government towards its southern neighbor.

We are justified in the face of the world, in having treated Mexico with more forbearance than we have ever yet treated an enemy. . . . We have sought peace through every avenue, and shut our eyes to many things which had they come from England or France, the president would not have dared to pass over without stern and speedy resentment. We have dammed up our memory, of what has passed in the South years ago—of the devilish massacres of some of our bravest and noblest sons, the children not of the South alone, but of the North and West—massacres, not only in defiance of ordinary humanity, but in violation of all the rules of war. Who has read the sickening story of those brutal wholesale murders, so useless for any purpose except gratifying the cowardly appetite of a nation of bravos, willing to shoot down men by the hundred in cold blood—without panting for the day when the payer of that blood should be listened to—when the vengeance of a retributive God should be metered out to those who so ruthlessly and needlessly slaughtered His image?

That day has arrived. We think there can be no doubt of the truth of yesterday's news; and we are sure the people here, ten to one, are for prompt and effectual hostilities. . . . Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!

June 6, 1846

The more we reflect on the matter of annexation as involving a part of Mexico, or even the main bulk of that republic, the more do doubts and obstacles resolve themselves away. . . . The scope of our government . . . is such that it can readily fit itself, and extend itself to almost any extent, and to interests and circumstances the most widely different.

It is affirmed, and with great probability, that in several of the departments of Mexico—the large, fertile and beautiful one of Yucatan, in particular—there is a wide popular disposition to come under the wings of our eagle. . . . Rumor . . . states that a mission has been, or is to be, dispatched to the United States, with the probably object of treating for annexation or something like it.

Then there is California, in the way to which lovely tract lies Santa Fe; how long a time will elapse before they shine as two new stars in our mighty firmament?

Speculations of this sort may seem idle to some folks. So do they not, we are assured, to many who look deep into the future. Nor is it the much condemned lust of power and territory that makes the popular heart respond to the idea of these new acquisitions. Such greediness might very properly be the motive of widening a less liberal form of government; but such greediness is not ours. We pant to see our country and its rule far-reaching, only inasmuch as it will take off the shackles that prevent men the even chance of being happy and good—as most governments are now so constituted that the tendency is very much the other way. We have no ambition for the mere physical grandeur of this Republic. Such grandeur is idle and deceptive enough. Or at least it is only desirable as an aid to reach the truer good, the good of the whole body of the people.

Walt Whitman, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, May 11 and June 6, 1846, cited in Archie P. McDonald (ed.), *The Mexican War: Crisis for American Democracy* (Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Company, 1969), pp. 47–48.



Walt Whitman, from the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass*
Steel print, 1854

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