

Examining Perspectives: Opposition to War

Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, an aide to General Taylor, wrote the following in his diary:

I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors.... We have not one particle of right to be here... It looks as if the government sent a small force on purpose to bring on a war, so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses, for, whatever becomes of this army, there is no doubt of a war between the United States and Mexico.... My heart is not in this business... but, as a military man, I am bound to execute orders.

Some newspapers protested the war from the very beginning. Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune* on May 12, 1846:

We can easily defeat the armies of Mexico, slaughter them by the thousands, and pursue them perhaps to their capital; we can conquer and "annex" their territory; but what then? Who believes that a score of victories over Mexico... will give us more liberty, a purer Morality?

Congressman Joshua Giddings, one of a small number of war dissenters in Washington, wrote:

In the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil, or in robbing them of their country, I can take no part either now or hereafter. The guilt of these crimes must rest on others—I will not participate in them.

Other political leaders shared Giddings' views. A Massachusetts Protest of the Mexican War, written in 1847, made the following claim:

Resolved, That the present war with Mexico has its primary origin in the unconstitutional annexation to the United States of the foreign state of Texas while the same was still at war with Mexico; that it was unconstitutionally commenced by the order of the President, to General Taylor, to take military possession of territory in dispute between the United States and Mexico, and in the occupation of Mexico; and that it is now waged ingloriously—by a powerful nation against a weak neighbor—unnecessarily and without just cause, at the immense cost of treasure and life, for the

dismemberment of Mexico, and for the conquest, of a portion of her territory, from which slavery has already been excluded....

Abraham Lincoln was a first term member of the US House of Representatives elected in 1846. On January 12, 1848, he delivered one of the few speeches he made while in Congress. He challenged President Polk's war against Mexico:

The President sent the army into the midst of a settlement of Mexican people who had never submitted, by consent or by force, to the authority of Texas or of the United States, and... thereby the first blood of the war was shed....

[I]f he can show that the soil was ours where the first blood of war was shed—that it was not within an inhabited country, or, if within such, that the inhabitants had submitted themselves to the civil authority of Texas or of the United States,... then I am with him.... But if he can not or will not do this,... then I shall be fully convinced of what I more than suspect already—that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong; that he feels the blood of this war.... As I have before said, he knows not where he is. He is a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man.

The war had just begun when a writer named Henry David Thoreau refused to pay taxes to support the war. While he was in jail, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him. Emerson agreed with Thoreau's position against the war, but thought his protest was in vain. When Emerson visited Thoreau, he asked, "Henry David, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau reportedly replied, "Ralph Waldo, what are you doing out there?"

Two years later, Thoreau gave a lecture entitled "Resistance to Civil Government," later printed in an essay, "Civil Disobedience."

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right.... Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.