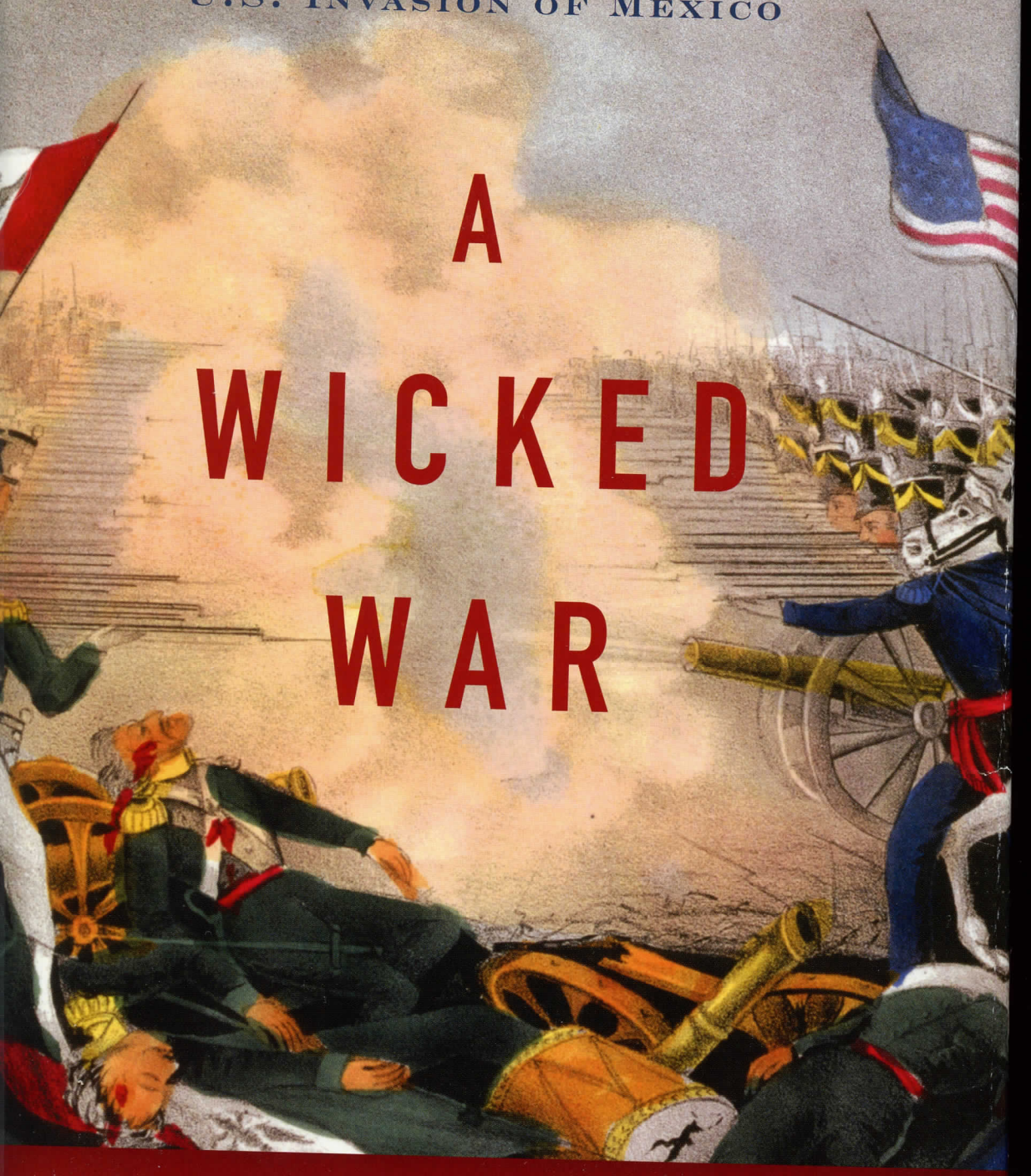
POLK, CLAY, LINCOLN, AND THE 1846 U.S. INVASION OF MEXICO

A WICKED WAR



AMY S. GREENBERG

I do not think there was ever a more wicked war than that waged by the United States on Mexico. I thought so at the time, when I was a youngster, only I had not moral courage enough to resign.

—Ulysses S. Grant, 1879

Introduction

THIS IS THE STORY of five men, four years, and one foreign war. Henry Clay, James K. Polk, Abraham Lincoln, John J. Hardin, and Nicholas Trist were bound together in unexpected political and personal battle during the years 1844–48 as America's war against Mexico unfolded, then stumbled to an end. That conflict, which breached George Washington's injunction to avoid entanglements abroad, was an act of expansionist aggression against a neighboring country. It reshaped the United States into lord of the continent and announced the arrival of a new world power. The U.S.-Mexican conflict also tipped an internecine struggle over slavery into civil war. Though both its justification and its consequences are dim now, this, America's first war against another republic, decisively broke with the past, shaped the future, and to this day affects how the United States acts in the world.

This is also a story about politics, slavery, Manifest Destiny, Indian killing, and what it meant to prove one's manhood in the nineteenth century. It explores the meaning of moral courage in America, the importance of legacies passed between generations, and the imperatives that turn politicians into leaders. And it attempts to explain why the United States invaded a neighboring country and how it came to pass that a substantial number of Americans determined to stop the ensuing war.

This is not a comprehensive history of the U.S.-Mexican War. Military tactics, minor battles, and General Stephen Kearny's Army of the West receive limited coverage in these pages.[1] Nor does this volume fully explore the Mexican side of the conflict.[2] What this volume offers instead is a narrative history of the war that Ulysses S. Grant deemed America's most "wicked," as seen through the eyes of five men, their wives, and their children. Their views are in many cases radically different from our own, their justifications often impure, and the results of their actions sometimes at odds with their intentions. But all were forced to sacrifice what was dear

to them in the name of something greater: justice, morality, and America's destiny. Their experiences help us understand how the war and its unintended consequences shaped the meanings of American identity, ethics, and patriotism.

Two of these characters will likely be unfamiliar. Colonel John J. Hardin was a congressman from Illinois and the first in his state to volunteer to fight Mexico. During his political career he was well known throughout Illinois and Washington, D.C., and an Illinois county seat was named in his honor. His obscurity today is largely the result of a tragic early death on a Mexican battlefield. Hardin has no published biography, and until now few historians have thought his life worth exploring.[3] But his martyrdom at the Battle of Buena Vista made him a national hero, and in the mid-1840s he was Abraham Lincoln's greatest political rival. His death removed a key obstacle from Lincoln's rise to power.

John J. Hardin commands attention not only for his military fame and relationship with Abraham Lincoln but also because he was, in many ways, typical of the men who volunteered to fight Mexico. A self-described patriot, Hardin was both a warrior and a member of the opposition Whig Party from a western state where James K. Polk's Democratic Party held the balance of power. Like thousands of other Whigs, he volunteered to fight despite distrusting both Polk and his objectives. He firmly believed that patriotism knew no party, and that it was the destiny of the United States to expand into Mexico. But like many other soldiers, Hardin lost his faith in America's Manifest Destiny during the course of his service. Although his name is now forgotten, this study will reveal the surprising legacy of Hardin's life and death, which lives on today.

Nicholas Trist is somewhat better known. His name appears in most studies of the 1846 war, although few people know much about the man who defied his president and his party to bring the war to a close. Trist has not commanded much historical attention, but he was one of the best-pedigreed Democrats in America in the 1840s, grandson-in-law to Thomas Jefferson and an intimate associate of Andrew Jackson's.[4] He was an unlikely rebel. As the only man to single-handedly bring an American war to a close, he deserves recognition for his achievement. But his radical actions also demand explanation. This volume attempts to place Trist's evolving perspective on the war in the context of both his experiences in Mexico and personal relationships that long predated his secret assignment to negotiate a treaty with that country.

The literature on Polk, Clay, and especially Lincoln, by contrast, is vast.

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But the following pages offer a different portrait of each of these men than you are likely to find elsewhere. Relatively little has been written about the web of connections among the five main characters in this book. And with one exception, little has been said about the impact of the war on their lives and the lives of their families. That exception, of course, is President James K. Polk. The war was closely identified with the man who started it, so much so that at the time opponents called it "Mr. Polk's War." The war defined Polk as well. It was his great project, the culmination of his life's work, and his legacy to the United States.

James K. Polk tends to inspire strong reactions among his biographers, many of whom have difficulty remaining objective when considering his leadership style and actions. Even his supporters have had trouble justifying his tactics, and other biographers have concluded that familiarity does indeed breed contempt.[5] This study neither deifies nor demonizes him. Polk was a complex character, a deeply conservative man in a surprisingly modern marriage, determined to micromanage a war despite having virtually no military experience, and in many ways an anomaly among southern Democratic politicians. His success was in large part due to his dependence on his wife, Sarah, who was truly his political partner. The childless couple worked harder than anyone else in Washington to advance what they believed to be America's destiny. By placing Polk in the context of his most important relationships, above all his marriage, this study offers a different perspective on both a misunderstood president and a conflict that rightfully should have been known as "Mr. and Mrs. Polk's War."

Henry Clay's biographers have been almost unanimous in their admiration for the greatest American politician who never became president.[6] Clay was widely adored in his own time, and even admirers of his archfoe Andrew Jackson have had difficulty remaining objective in the face of Clay's personal magnetism and remarkable accomplishments.[7] But most of the dramatic events in Clay's political career took place prior to his loss to Polk in the presidential race of 1844. This study takes 1844 as the starting point for considering Clay's accomplishments. Three years after his defeat by Polk, Henry Clay delivered what was perhaps the single most important speech opposing the war. It was an act of great bravery on his part, and an event that has rarely merited a single page in his biographies. Given the length of Clay's career, the oversight is understandable, but the 1847 Lexington address not only changed the course of Clay's career, it also had a dramatic impact on Lincoln, Polk, and the American nation.

Nor will you read much in other volumes about Lincoln and the war with

Mexico. Abraham Lincoln's "Spot Resolutions" opposing the U.S.-Mexican War were the signature position he took during his single congressional term. But scholars have never evinced much interest in Lincoln's early political career. There is exactly one full-length study of Lincoln in Congress, which concluded that his congressional term was a "failure."[8] Historians have debated whether opposing the war cost Lincoln his seat, and if the victory of a Democrat in the 1848 race "could only be interpreted as a repudiation of 'Spotty' Lincoln's views on the Mexican War."[9] They have also differed over why Lincoln adopted his antiwar position in the first place. But scholars have never considered the larger impact of the U.S.-Mexican War on Lincoln's life, or noted that events in Illinois, including his service in the Black Hawk War, may have galvanized him to join the national movement to end the war with Mexico. No one has previously documented how extensively Lincoln's antiwar statements were reported around the nation. The Spot Resolutions brought Lincoln his first taste of the national political acclaim that he deeply craved. And his stance on the war with Mexico ultimately shaped him as a politician and a leader.

This book is the tale not just of five men and their families but also of the rise of America's first national antiwar movement.[10] The fact that there was a national antiwar movement in the 1840s will come as a surprise to most readers. Histories of the U.S.-Mexican War have almost always focused on the conflict's dramatic battles rather than the home front. Although one of the very first histories of the war was written by an antiwar activist (William Jay, the son of *Federalist Papers* coauthor John Jay), much of the twentieth-century scholarship on the war followed the lead of Justin Smith, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for his two-volume *The War with Mexico*.[11] While meticulously researched, Smith's celebratory history of the war was suffused with racism and his desire to justify America's part in the war. For decades before Smith's publication, historians and the public had ignored the war, their ambivalence caused by their inability to fit a war for territory into the history of a freedom-loving people. Smith not only vindicated the war but also drew a lasting and unfair portrait of antiwar opponents as irrational radicals deeply out of step with their nation.

Those few volumes that have examined the home front in detail have focused on the widespread initial enthusiasm for the war and agreed with Smith that, outside New England, Americans were united in their support for the cause. The single monograph to consider the antiwar movement in

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detail concluded that it "had little effect on the war's duration, outcome, or final terms."[12] With a few exceptions, most scholars continue to agree that antiwar criticism was limited because even opponents of the war in some way "accepted" its inevitability. Mexico was weak, the United States was strong, and it was destiny that the American republic would take a continental form.[13]

This volume makes a very different argument. Looking closely at the writings of politicians, soldiers, embedded journalists, and average Americans watching events in Mexico from a distance, it contends that the war was actively contested from its beginning and that vibrant and widespread antiwar activism ultimately defused the movement to annex all of Mexico to the United States at the close of the war. This volume gives voice to the views of peace activists and credit to them for their successes, revealing how politically risky agitation by politicians—including freshman congressman Lincoln and three-time presidential loser Clay—both moved public opinion in the direction of peace and prevented President Polk from fulfilling his territorial goals in 1848.

Nor was antiwar sentiment limited to Polk's political opponents. *A Wicked War* reveals how frequently volunteer and regular soldiers, as well as their officers, expressed their own ambivalence toward the conflict. This was particularly true for those who witnessed the many atrocities against Mexican civilians committed by U.S. troops. America's men volunteered to fight in overwhelming numbers, but once they arrived in Mexico their enthusiasm flagged. America's war with Mexico had the highest desertion rate of any American war, over 8 percent. Some of those deserters chose to fight for the enemy, joining the San Patricio Battalion. Their ambivalence came to be shared by the American people, even in western towns such as Springfield, Illinois, where support for the war once had been overwhelming.[14]

The ultimate annexation of half of Mexico, lands that became California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas, seems inevitable only in retrospect. Indeed, in 1845, Polk's dream of taking California was so audacious he didn't dare share it with the public. The land came at a great price. The U.S.-Mexican War had the highest casualty rate of any American war. Over 10 percent of the seventy-nine thousand American men who served in the war died, most from disease. Mexican casualties are harder to estimate, but at least twenty-five thousand, most civilians, perished in the course of the war.[15]

The war against Mexico did not take place in a vacuum. The narrative that follows reveals just how crucial history, both personal and national, was to the events of the 1840s. A warrior tradition, forged in battle against Britain and the Indian inhabitants of North America, and honed through chattel slavery, set the stage for America's invasion of Mexico and provided the context through which these five characters understood their personal and national destiny. The war between the United States and Mexico was in many ways a predictable development, given the nearly uninterrupted series of wars against Indian peoples fought by the United States government from its earliest days. Widespread racism led many Americans to equate Mexicans with Indians and to conclude that the former were no more deserving of their own land than the latter.

But in another sense the war against Mexico marked a dramatic break in American history. America's president invoked a dubious excuse in order to invade a neighboring republic and pursued a war for territory over the objections of a significant portion of Americans. This was unprecedented. All the land taken from Mexico, historians now acknowledge, could have been acquired peacefully through diplomacy and deliberate negotiation of financial recompense.[16] It should hardly be surprising that Americans had deeply ambivalent feelings about a war they knew would change their country and their lives.

This is an intimate story of a few of those lives: supporters who died to make America great and opponents who sacrificed their careers in order to save America from what they believed to be ruin. The war took a distinct toll on each of the main characters in this story. By speaking against it, Clay willingly antagonized his political base: he effectively gave up any hope of becoming president. For his protests, Lincoln was spurned by his jingoistic constituency and retired from Congress after a single term, his career apparently over. Trist was ousted from the State Department, sank into poverty, and fell out of history. Hardin was needlessly killed leading a poorly timed charge at the Battle of Buena Vista. And Polk, as true a believer in American exceptionalism as any president, worked himself to death in the service of a conflict that left his reputation in tatters. Their experiences in the late 1840s reveal the nobility and often high cost of conviction. They also show the indelible signature of war on a nation's identity and purpose.

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it became apparent that the crowd would number in the thousands. The venue was changed to the new Market House, a cavernous brick building on Water Street.

On a dark and rainy Saturday morning, the crowd began to assemble outside. An immense assembly of men and women thronged the hall, "all ages participated, the father as well as the son—all classes and conditions of society." Many in that Lexington audience still supported the war. Some, no doubt, imagined that the dismemberment of Mexico by the United States was just and right. The vast majority unquestionably supported slavery. They were all ready to hear something remarkable.

Clay was not an original thinker, but he could energize and inspire an audience like few other men in politics. He knew the speech he was about to deliver was among the most important of his career, a speech that could save lives, perhaps change history. The American people still looked to him for guidance. After all, no other politician had proven as skillful as Henry Clay at delivering his nation from a crisis. And almost half of all voters had chosen him over Polk in 1844. Clay knew that many of them felt the loss nearly as acutely as he did. Much was at stake, both for him and for the nation.

At exactly eleven o'clock Clay mounted the podium with the supreme confidence that always accompanied the orator when he was in his element and an erect bearing that belied his seventy years. "The shouts of the assembled thousands" filled the room as General Leslie Combs called the meeting to order and a series of officers was elected, including Robert Todd as vice president. General Combs requested that the audience observe a "perfect silence" during the following address, "as it was probably the last time that" Clay "would ever address a populous assembly." Henry Clay had come before them, Combs said, out of his duty to the country. The "momentous question" of the resolution of the war now presented itself to the American people, and no man who loved his country could remain silent. Clay would not "allow any selfish consideration to palsy his tongue." Clay was there, Combs reminded his audience, because he would "rather be right than be President." The audience roared its approval.[38]

As Clay rose and faced the assembly, a silence descended over the room. Clay began his address on a subdued note. Speaking in measured tones, he noted how the dark and gloomy weather outside the lecture hall perfectly reflected the condition of the country. Anxiety, agitation, and apprehension were the rule, given the unsettled state of the "unnatural" war with Mexico. Clay's voice rose as he bluntly described the manner in which Polk

had provoked an "unnecessary" war of "offensive aggression," laying blame on the president and detailing his many lies and deceptions.

Clay excoriated the president, but he reserved some of his wrath for the congressional Whigs who had capitulated in 1846 and voted in favor of the war. The United States never should have annexed Texas in the first place, since everyone had understood at the time that annexation would result in war. Yet the majority of congressional Whigs had voted in favor of a war declaration with "a palpable falsehood stamped on its face" that Mexico was to blame. "Almost idolizing truth," Clay intoned, "I would never have voted for that bill." And the audience could see that the great man meant what he said. Voting for a bill with a lie at its heart was exactly the kind of thing that the old, opportunistic Clay might have done, had he been in Congress. But not the man who faced them today. His sincere disgust at that vote, if not completely fair, was for the witnesses assembled in the Lexington Market House too evident for doubt.

With increasing intensity, Clay detailed the terrible results of that vote and the "frightful struggle" that ensued. Clay lingered over the mad "sacrifice of human life . . . waste of human treasure . . . mangled bodies . . . death, and . . . desolation." Thousands of Americans had already died, and many more soldiers had been disqualified by a "wild spirit of adventure" from returning to civil society. And whose fault was this? It was Mexico, not the United States, that was "defending her firesides, her castles, and her altars."

Nor was Clay done. Congressional Whigs had agreed to the war because they were afraid of appearing unpatriotic. But "whose hearts," Clay emotionally asked, "have bled more freely than those of the Whigs?" His voice nearly cracking, Clay asked an audience intimately familiar with his own grief, "Who have more occasion to mourn the loss of sons, husbands, brothers, fathers than Whig parents, Whig wives, and Whig brothers, in this deadly and unprofitable strife?" Clay held back his tears, but many in the audience did not. All knew he had lost his son. And it had been widely reported that Colonel John Hardin was Clay's nephew: two dead young men of promise in one family. Clay's losses, and the nation's losses, were nearly unthinkable.

But this address was not primarily about Henry Clay. It was about the country to whose service Clay had devoted his entire long career. And more than the youth of that nation had been lost in the past two years. With a deep and burning indignation, Clay told his audience that the United States had lost its "unsullied character" internationally. Other nations "look upon us, in the prosecution of the present War, as being actuated by a spirit of

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rapacity, and an inordinate desire for territorial aggrandizement." Even God himself must wonder at America's actions. His deep bass voice thundering, Clay leaned into the podium, warning his audience about the dangers of annexing Mexico and citing historical examples to prove that imperialism inevitably led to ruin for the conquering nation. He dwelt at great length on the "direful and fatal" consequences of emulating the Roman Empire, the ill effects on the character of the nation of becoming a "warlike and conquering" power, and the incredible expense of annexing Mexico.

Clay also expressed his reservations about the racial implications of inviting Mexicans to join the Union. "Does any considerate man believe it possible that two such immense countries, with territories of nearly equal extent, with populations so incongruous, so different in race, in language, in religion and in laws could be blended together in one harmonious mass, and happily governed by one common authority? . . . [T]he warning voice of all history . . . teaches the difficulty of combining and consolidating together, conquering and conquered nations." The Moors had failed to hold Spain, and England was struggling to hold Ireland. "Every Irishman hates, with a mortal hatred, his Saxon oppressor," and "both the Irish and the Mexicans are probably of the same Celtic race. Both the English and the Americans are of the same Saxon origin."[39] Appealing to the racist views of his audience, Clay proclaimed that annexing Mexico would doom the United States.

But he had a solution. Because war powers resided with Congress, Congress could end the war. It was up to them to quickly and honorably settle the Mexican boundary issue and then to demand the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Mexico, ending a disgraceful and immoral war without annexing a single acre of Mexico's land beyond the Nueces Strip. And Clay demanded that Polk comply. His audience, swept up in the moment, exploded in applause and implied agreement that Polk would be forced to comply, that they would see to it.

Not everything in this address was as universally pleasing as Clay's demand that Polk be held to account. Clay also addressed the issue of slavery. Although he was speaking in a slave state, to an audience full of slave owners, Clay clearly and sharply disavowed "any desire, on our part, to acquire any foreign territory whatever, for the purpose of introducing slavery into it." Heads turned when he said that, although no voices were raised in dissent. If anyone doubted his position on this subject, Clay added, in a voice of utter seriousness, that he had "ever regarded slavery as a great evil." The fifty enslaved men, women, and children back at Ashland might rea-

sonably have argued otherwise, but no one in the audience that day would have dared. Slavery was a great evil. In the past, Clay had often stated his belief that slavery was wicked. But now he offered no concessions to slaveholding Whigs, and no hope that Henry Clay, if he had anything to do with it, would allow new slave states to be created out of Mexican land. It was a radical stand, a brave stand. Abraham Lincoln wasn't the only man in attendance that day who must have marveled at Clay's courage.

In a series of resolutions at the close of a speech that "carried conviction to every mind," Henry Clay challenged the incoming Thirtieth Congress to investigate and determine the purpose of the war, to loudly oppose the president if he attempted to annex or dismember Mexico, to prevent the extension of slavery into any foreign territory, and to redeem the honor of the nation in the process. His final resolution invited the people of the United States who were "anxious to produce contentment and satisfaction at home, and to elevate the character of the nation abroad," to hold meetings of their own in order to make their opposition to the war dramatically clear. The citizens of America must take upon themselves responsibility for ending the war. They must make their voices heard. Clay's resolutions, including those opposing the extension of slavery, were submitted and unanimously adopted.[40]

The thousands of people in the Market House exploded in applause, rising to their feet and filling the hall with their shouts and roars. Henry Clay had spoken for two and a half hours, but the crowd was energized rather than exhausted, called to action by "the great mass of truths" that Clay so powerfully presented. The speech they had heard was "rich, earnest, and true," and not one they were likely to forget. Certainly, Abraham Lincoln did not. As he and the thousands of others left the hall that afternoon, they filled the streets and homes of Lexington with their praise of the Sage of Ashland, their approval of his resolutions, and their amazement that the seventy-year-old Clay was still at the height of his powers.[41]

Thanks to the wonders of the telegraph, plus a reporter who immediately after the speech rode eighty miles (in a record five hours) to the nearest telegraph office in Cincinnati, Clay's speech and resolutions were in print across the country within days. The speech won immediate acclaim among northern Whigs, many of whom were both delighted and surprised by Clay's clearly stated principles. "He is not afraid to speak out," approved the Boston *Daily Atlas,* while another paper noted, "It is a high exercise of moral courage for Mr. Clay, living in a slave-holding State and addressing an audience composed mostly of the owners of slaves—to bear his testimony

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Nothing about Clay's Lexington speech was radical, even if it was radical for Henry Clay. Almost all of it had been formulated by other Whig politicians in other contexts. But as so often was the case with Henry Clay, it was the way he said something that proved so inspiring. The "free simplicity, sound logic, and manly directness" of Clay's words "attest their truth and crown their excellence," noted one reporter. "The right thinking men of the country of all classes and parties will thank Mr. Clay for thus embodying in words that will not lie, the feeling of their hearts and the convictions of their judgments."[43]

Reactions to the speech in other quarters were less positive. A few abolitionist papers—but only a few—contrasted Clay's Lexington address with his boast in New Orleans a year earlier that he might "capture or slay a Mexican." This was nothing more than a typical Clay flip-flop. "Mould the clay which way you will, 'tis a very clay-god still," punned the *Liberator*.[44]

But Democrats and many western Whigs labeled the speech treasonous. The administration's paper, the *Washington Union*, condemned "the spirit of treason promulgated" by Clay, particularly his assertion that "the war has been brought upon us *by our own act*; and that we and not our enemies, are responsible for its evils and its guilt." It also quoted an army officer who claimed to see "no difference between the men who in '76 succored the British, and those who in '47 give arguments and sympathy to the Mexicans." Democrats in Nashville met to condemn Clay's resolutions as "incompatible with national honor" and "having the direct tendency to encourage the opponents of peace in Mexico to protract the war." The New York *Courier and Enquirer*, a conservative Whig paper, warned that adopting Clay's unpatriotic resolutions would be "suicidal" for the Whigs. Soldiers in Mexico wondered if Clay's stand signified advancing senility, whether "he has arrived at an age for the follies and errors of which he is no longer responsible."[45]

If the Lexington speech improved Clay's standing in New England, it badly damaged it in the South. Southern Whigs concluded that Clay had "done himself great injury in his late speech" and that they would "not rally on Mr. Clay, or *any* Whig who swears by his Lexington resolutions." Whigs in Georgia refused to hold a meeting to so much as discuss Clay's resolutions. Of course, Clay knew before his Lexington speech that his chances of winning the presidential nomination without the support of southern pro-

slavery Whigs were slim to none. He had taken a gamble with his speech. But he had always been a gambling man. If his words helped end a "frightful struggle," then of course he hadn't lost a thing. He was still the man who would rather be right than be president.[46]

Clay's words shook Washington, the nation, and beyond. In London, Britain's foreign minister wrote approvingly about Clay's speech "against an aggressive policy in the conduct of the Mexican War." Clay asked his fellow citizens to join together against war in Mexico, and the people responded. Antiwar rallies inspired by Clay's call to action bloomed from Indiana to New Jersey, Kentucky to Maine. Newspapers as far away as Mexico City reported that Clay's call for meetings "is arousing the masses in all parts of the Union."[47]

Not surprisingly, the "views of Henry Clay were fully sustained" at a "great meeting" in Boston. A "peace" meeting held in the Broadway Tabernacle in New York was widely reported to be "one of the largest and most enthusiastic meetings ever held in that city." In Philadelphia, "hundreds of the most respectable of the citizens" called for a "town meeting" in support of Clay's resolutions, and "thousands went away who were unable to gain admission" when it occurred. The gathering was reported to be "one of the largest and most respectable public meetings ever called together."[48]

While it was primarily the Whigs of Trenton, New Jersey, who endorsed Clay's resolutions by acclamation, citizens of all political parties turned out in Cincinnati to oppose "the causes and character of the Mexican War, as well as its further offensive persecution." The first meeting in Cleveland opposing the war was such a success that antiwar protesters decided to hold another a week later. In New Orleans, agitation caused by the ex-senator's oration was so great that one of the first things a returning soldier wrote about after his arrival in the Crescent City from Mexico was "Clay's antiwar speech." At meetings in cities around the country, thousands of people denounced the war, condemned Polk for starting it, and adopted Clay's resolutions wholesale, "with a fervor of manner and earnestness of purpose that are rarely exhibited."[49]

The antiwar movement was no longer a New England phenomenon. The public meetings in the wake of Clay's Lexington speech proved beyond a doubt that a peace movement was now national. Henry Clay didn't create the movement, but his political stature, authority as a grieving father, and singular speaking abilities gave voice to masses of dissenters and offered a clear path to protest. It was a "great wave," according to a Philadelphia reporter, which "rolled from Lexington, upheaved by the mighty voice of

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Henry Clay," and now "goes onward from us with renewed and more overwhelming force." And while Americans met in support of Clay's "principles, more than to the man," they appreciated Clay more than ever. "Henry Clay sat enshrined in their hearts—but they gloried in him most, because he had spoken forth the truth unshrinkingly. . . . They reverenced him because he had forgotten self in his love of country, and because he valued his country's welfare more than his chances of gain."[50]

Abraham Lincoln bore witness to Clay's courageous and principled speech, and to his dramatic gamble. When as a child he had pored over Clay's biography, and as a young man committed Clay's speeches nearly to heart, did he imagine the real thing would be like this? The oratorical brilliance he might have envisioned, but not the subject matter. Henry Clay had built his career on economic issues, and those issues had become Lincoln's: internal improvements, a strong national bank, tariffs, and credit. These were the issues that Lincoln campaigned on, that inspired him, that drove him to Congress. They weren't the issues that interested voters on the campaign trail in 1846, but still they were his issues. His issue was not the war, and it certainly wasn't slavery. Before his trip to Lexington, Lincoln seemed generally unconcerned about the institution of slavery, viewing agitation to end the "peculiar institution" primarily as a nuisance that unproductively split the Whig Party.

What Lincoln saw and heard that afternoon made him reconsider these positions. The Sage of Ashland, his Prince Hal, had described the horrors of the war with blinding clarity, struck down the president as a liar, and ordered the people to protest a war that they, and Lincoln, knew to be unjust. Speaking in a slave state, Henry Clay had condemned the expansion of slavery, and in no uncertain terms. He had linked the war in Mexico with the slavery issue in a way that few southerners dared. Lincoln could only guess at the reasons Clay had finally spoken out: those of a father still anguished at his son's sacrifice, those of a patriot acting in what he felt were the best interests of his country, those of a righteous man choosing justice before ambition. But he understood the political consequences. By criticizing the war, Clay had jeopardized his political base in the South, which still largely supported it. By condemning slavery in a proslavery state, he had risked devastating voter backlash. It was a great act of political bravery. And Clay had right on his side.

Clay had made it clear that Mexican land must not, and would not, become slave territory. Henry Clay had demonstrated to the assembled thousands, and the many thousands more who would read his words in

their morning papers the following week, that he valued truth and justice more than political office. And in so doing, he had proven that he was no mere politician. He was a leader.

Was this a revelation for Abraham Lincoln? He knew that the war and the extension of slavery were wrong. But had he understood that they were so very wrong that nothing else mattered? William Herndon later said that his law partner "stood bolt upright and downright on his conscience." Was his conscience now alive to the moral wrong of the war? Lincoln saw clearly that his issues in Congress would not be economic ones. In this period of national crisis it was not the time to focus on tariffs. If Henry Clay could attack the war, the president, and the spread of slavery, so could he. Congressman Abraham Lincoln had a new mission.[51]

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On October 13, 1847, the Georgetown, South Carolina, *Winyah Observer* declared the conflict "probably the most unfortunate and disastrous war" in American history. But three weeks later, after receiving news of Scott's capture of Mexico City, the newspaper changed its tune, recommending that the United States annex the entire country and "make Mexico do us justice." With Manifest Destiny seemingly vindicated by the conquest of Mexico, even many of Calhoun's supporters believed that the no-territory position was madness. Aggressive expansionists were happy to endorse Polk's plan to continue fighting if it brought the entire nation of Mexico under the American flag.[9]

Abraham Lincoln's Illinois was the center of western pro-war fervor. His state sent more volunteers to Mexico than any except Missouri. And he was representing "John Hardin's" district, as people annoyingly insisted on calling it. While there were western Whigs who were now willing to oppose the war openly, there were also some, such as George Grundy Dunn, a newly elected Whig representative of Indiana, who refused to speak out against the war because he believed it would cost him his seat. Lincoln knew what was at stake.

Yet Congressman Lincoln, the lone Whig in the Illinois congressional delegation, had been seated for less than three weeks when he was recognized by Speaker Winthrop and offered his first contribution to the antiwar movement. This was his first congressional resolution, a crucial moment in the political life of any representative, and he could have picked a different, less controversial topic. His entire career had been devoted to economic issues. No doubt as he yearned for that congressional seat over the years he had imagined himself addressing the august body about tariffs, or banking, or transportation.

But Lincoln chose not to discuss economics. With a confidence surprising in a newly seated freshman congressman, Abraham Lincoln chose instead, on December 22, 1847, to demolish Polk's claims about the start of the war. He offered a brutally logical discourse on the spot where the war had begun. The boldness of his approach offered a clear rejoinder to Polk: Congress would no longer be bullied into submission.

Mary was most likely in the audience for her husband's first congressional resolution, having left her children in the care of one of the enslaved black women who earned extra wages at Mrs. Spriggs's in order to buy their own freedom. She would have been fashionably dressed, and at least as anxious as her husband. As Lincoln rose to the podium in the elegant red and gold galleries of the House, she would have had a better sense than

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But as Lincoln launched into his discussion of the Nueces Strip and offered a series of eight resolutions that called Polk on what was, in Lincoln's eyes, an obvious lie, they no doubt listened more closely. Lincoln demanded to know the exact "spot" upon which Mexicans troops shed "American blood on American soil." Acting every bit the lawyer he was, Lincoln offered a devastating rebuke to Polk and proved that it had been U.S. troops who began the war by making an unprovoked attack on Mexico. The land in question was Mexican, Lincoln proclaimed, both by historical fact and by occupancy at the time. In an accusatory tone, he asked rhetorically if "the people of that settlement, or a majority of them, or any of them, have ever submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas or of the United States, by consent or by compulsion, either by accepting office, or voting at elections, or paying tax, or serving on juries, or having process served upon them, or in any other way." The answer, all knew, was no.

Lincoln went further. He reminded listeners that the residents of the "contested region" fled "from the approach of the United States army, leaving unprotected their homes and their growing crops." Clearly, then, the "American blood" shed at the Rio Grande, the blood that belonged to "armed officers and soldiers, sent into that settlement by the military orders of the President, through the Secretary of War," could not rightly be blamed on Mexicans. The president, not Mexico, was responsible for their deaths, and for the war.[10]

Lincoln's Spot Resolutions were argued with clarity and delivered with conviction. But they were not particularly novel. Many of Lincoln's ideas and phrases were drawn directly from Henry Clay's Lexington address: that the "spot" in question was "within the very disputed district," that the war resulted from Polk's order that Taylor move his troops to the Rio Grande, and that Polk had never made the purpose of the war clear. Clay's speech, of course, had echoed similar charges made by other Whigs in private and in public. Only the fiercest Democratic stalwarts in Congress ever accepted Polk's claims about "American soil" at face value. Lincoln's approach was unusually lawyerly, pointed, and eloquent, but the grounds of his attack were familiar by December 1848. Lincoln's Spot Resolutions were tabled by Congress and never acted upon. But Lincoln's debut congressional performance was by no means a failure.

During the first month of the session, other Whig congressmen offered

resolutions of their own, some of which came to a vote. Two weeks after Lincoln, George Ashmun proposed a resolution affirming that "the war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the president." Lincoln voted in favor, and the Ashmun Amendment passed, 85 votes in favor, 81 against.[11]

Neither Lincoln's Spot Resolutions nor his vote in favor of the Ashmun Amendment went over well in Illinois. Western Democrats, as well as some Whigs, were inclined to agree with Robert Winthrop about the demands of patriotism in a time of war. William Herndon chastised Lincoln, lecturing his law partner that it was the president's "duty . . . if the country was about to be invaded and armies were organized in Mexico for that purpose, to go—if necessary—into the very heart of Mexico and prevent the invasion." Herndon warned Lincoln that his positions not only were wrong but would be politically costly back home. Indeed, they might leave Lincoln unelectable in the future.[12]

Lincoln dismissed Herndon's concerns and justified his actions not in terms of political expediency but in terms of the demands of truth. "If you had been in my place you would have voted just as I did," he wrote Herndon. "Would you have voted what you felt you knew to be a lie? I know you would not. Would you have gone out of the House—skulked the vote? I expect not. . . . You are compelled to speak; and your only alternative is to tell the *truth* or tell a *lie*. I can not doubt which you would do."[13]

Lincoln refused to lie. He would not back down, he would not "skulk" the issue. In short, the occupant of seat 191 was no tame, spiritless fellow. This was a man who had determined to tell the truth and to bring the war to an end. Rather than back down, Lincoln decided to throw himself further into the controversy that was engulfing his country.

On January 12, Lincoln returned to the podium for his first full-length congressional speech. Once again the packed galleries most likely included an anxious and excited Mary Todd Lincoln. Lincoln began his address by revisiting the question of the spot where American blood was shed, elaborating on his Spot Resolutions, and holding the president to his own standards of truth. Polk, he ordered, must "attempt no evasion—no equivocation" on the issue, since "a nation *should* not, and the Almighty *will* not, be evaded." Was the spot in the United States, or was it not?

As he warmed to his subject, Lincoln's gestures and voice became more animated. The larger issue, he insisted, was Polk's moral stature. What was the state of the president's conscience and soul? As he wrote his address out for publication, he savaged both the president and the man's address to Congress. Polk, Lincoln intoned,

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> is deeply conscious of being in the wrong—that he feels the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him. That originally having some strong motive—what, I will not stop now to give my opinion concerning—to involve the two countries in a war, and trusting to escape scrutiny, by fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory—that attractive rainbow, that rises in showers of blood, that serpent's eye, that charms to destroy—he plunged into it, and has swept, *on* and *on*, till, disappointed in his calculation of the ease with which Mexico might be subdued, he now finds himself, he knows not where—How like the half insane mumbling of a fever-dream, is the whole war part of his late message![14]

In Lincoln's account, Polk was a coward, hiding behind his office in order to wage war against an unoffending neighbor. In the process he had been seduced by "military glory," the chance, at last, to link his own name to war and killing, as had so many prominent Jacksonian Democrats of his generation. Worse yet, the president had seduced thousands of ordinary American men with the "attractive rainbow" of patriotism, revenge, and victory of arms that military service seemed to offer. And it had driven him to a state of madness. Now he could only repent the vast loss of life for which he, alone, was responsible.

Lincoln's condemnation of the president was total, his attack on the man blistering, but other aspects of his speech were more cautious than either Clay's Lexington address or many of the addresses made by Giddings, Adams, Ashmun, or half a dozen other congressional Whigs over the previous year and a half. Lincoln was careful to praise the troops, and he avoided entirely the divisive question of territorial annexation.

At least this was true about the version of the speech he recorded for posterity. Lincoln may have been carried away while delivering the second half of his speech. According to the Democratic Illinois *State Register*, Lincoln actually claimed that "God of Heaven has forgotten to defend the weak and innocent, and permitted the strong band of murderers and demons from hell to kill men, women, and children, and lay waste and pillage the land of the just." It seems highly unlikely that Lincoln would have referred to U.S. soldiers as "demons from hell," but perhaps the influence of Joshua Giddings and other antislavery Whigs at Mrs. Spriggs's and in Congress led him to issue a more sweeping condemnation of the war than he preferred to see in print. Perhaps also, stories of American volunteers scalping Mexican civilians at Agua Nueva brought the horrors of the Black Hawk War to his mind. As a young captain he witnessed wartime atrocities against women

"Mexican Family." According to a Democratic paper in Illinois, Congressman Lincoln referred to Mexico as the "land of the just" in his January 12 congressional speech, and to U.S. soldiers as a "band of murderers and demons from hell" permitted "to kill men, women, and children." Daguerreotype, ca. 1847, 2⅞ × 3 13/16 inches. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, P1981.65.18.

and children, and made the unpopular choice to prevent a revenge killing by his own men. He upheld the sanctity of civilian life even when American volunteers accused him of cowardice. Lincoln knew something about "defend[ing] the weak and innocent." He had, perhaps, earned the right to pass judgment about morality during wartime.[15]

Lincoln's stinging account of the president's "sheerest deception" raised an immediate response. Democrat John Jamieson of Missouri rose after Lincoln, and proclaimed that a patriot never questions his president. "Whether we are in a war that is right or wrong," he argued, wasn't even "a debatable question." All American wars should be upheld by all Americans. And he chastised Lincoln—or, as he called him, the gentleman "from the Hardin and Baker district"—for insulting the memory of his military forebears. "Yes, sir; look back and see what your Hardin did. He was a Whig, to be sure . . . and fell nobly at Buena Vista. You have a Baker, too, from your district, and that Baker went along under Gen. Scott, and he too was in the

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bloody battle, and at Cerro Gordo commanded. . . . Coming from the district that had thus been represented, both here and in Mexico, it is astonishing to me how the gentleman could make the speech here which he has."[16]

But the many newspapers around the nation that chose to report on Lincoln's antiwar oratory suggested that John Jamieson was wrong and that the freshman congressman from the Hardin District was in fact upholding the tradition of patriotic service by recognizing that patriotism, in early 1848, required something other than mindless consent to an endless war; that perhaps conquering a peace required forthright action and considered dissent.