

Abraham Lincoln & John Quincy Adams: Acting Against Evil

by Robert Ingraham

August 23—*Shall evil be allowed to rule over our nation? Shall the Constitutional Office of the Presidency be so far perverted that it no longer bears any resemblance to its original intent? Shall a monstrosity inhabit the White House and drag the nation to its doom?*

Such, clearly, is the challenge we face today, in August of 2015, as Barack Obama lies, blackmails, bullies, kills, and pushes both America and the rest of humanity to the abyss of thermonuclear war. Those with

eyes can see this danger. But seeing is merely passive, an existentialist exercise. What is needed are those with courage to *act before it is too late*.

Events in history never truly repeat themselves, and drawing a direct parallel between the crisis of today, a threat of thermonuclear annihilation which has no precedent in human history, and crises of the past is impossible. However, what is possible, what is most certainly relevant, is to examine the qualities of leadership demonstrated by courageous individuals from our history—



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The War Crisis of 1846-48: The Mexican-American War, here depicted in a lithograph by John Cameron with the aid of Nathaniel Currier.

leadership born from a willingness to act. Such courage, such actions, have accomplished great things before, and such is what is needed now.

I. Leadership and Crisis

One such example occurred fourteen years before the outbreak of the United States Civil War. On May 13, 1846, at the request of the slave-owning President James Polk,¹ the United States declared war on the Republic of Mexico. In his war message to Congress, Polk charged that the Mexican Army, “after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil.” Six months later, in his annual address to Congress, Polk defended the ongoing war by stating that the war was “neither desired nor provoked by the United States;” that Mexico had “commenced hostilities, and . . . forced war upon us;” and that “Mexico became the aggressor by invading our soil in hostile array and shedding the blood of our citizens on our own soil.” In this speech Polk accused opponents of the war of treason, by giving “aid and comfort” to the enemy of the United States.

The truth, much as in today’s long-nurtured plans for thermonuclear confrontation by the British Empire against Russia, is that the desired war with Mexico was years in preparation, with the intent, by the Southern Slave Power, to annex huge sections of that nation’s territory—some went so far as to propose annexing all of Mexico—to the United States for the avowed purpose of opening vast new areas for the expansion of slavery. At the conclusion of the war, President Polk was known to have favored the proposal

by then Senator Jefferson Davis to seize not only California, New Mexico, and Arizona, but the provinces of Tamaulipas, Baja California, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Chihuahua as well.

If the war had proceeded without opposition, and if the plans of the Slave Power had been entirely successful, then the years leading up to 1860 would have been far different in character, and the ensuing history of the United States radically altered. But courage and leadership intervened.



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John Quincy Adams, dubbed “Old Man Eloquent” for his fight against slavery in his terms as Congressman from Massachusetts (1830-1848).

II. Enter John Quincy Adams

John Quincy Adams entered the U.S. House of Representatives in 1831 and would serve there for seventeen years. During those years, Adams devoted all of his energies to one single heroic task—battling, often alone, against the ascendent Slave Power of the Southern states.² This included his eight-year fight against the “Gag Rule” in the House of Representatives which prohibited any discussion of slavery on the floor of the House, as well as his successful 1841 argument before the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Amistad* Case.

Polk’s war message to Congress was delivered on May 11, 1846. Initially, there was widespread opposition in Congress to a Declaration of War, but with Congressmen facing the likelihood of being labeled unpatriotic or even traitors, over the next forty-eight hours resistance to the war drive crumbled, and when the vote for war was taken on May 13th, there were 174 ayes against only 14 nays. At the top of the list of “no” votes was John Quincy Adams.

The Mexican-American war lasted twenty-one

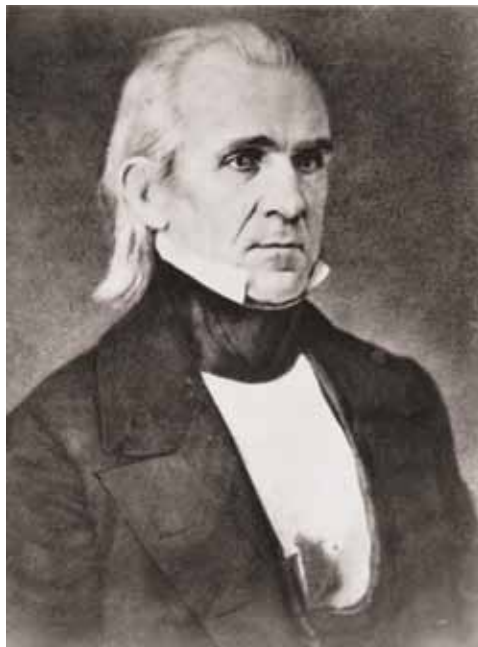
1. James K. Polk of North Carolina, was the last of eight U.S. Presidents to own slaves while in the White House. Andrew Jackson was another, and the remaining six were all from Virginia.

2. Shortly before his death, Adams would write of his seventeen-year battle against the Slave Power in the House of Representatives, that he considered it the only truly great accomplishment of his life. For more on his battles, see Henderson, Denise M., “[John Quincy Adams’ Battles for the American System](#),” *EIR*, Nov. 16. 2007.

months. For that entire period it was Quincy Adams who led the opposition, and who was the most courageous in speaking “truth to evil.” Others joined him or acted on their own, but it was Adams, on the floor of Congress, who took the point. On May 25, 1846, Adams delivered a speech to the House of Representatives proclaiming that the War was a pre-arranged plot to extend slavery, and charging that the sending of U.S. troops to Mexico was a “southern expedition to find bigger pens to cram with slaves.”

At every step of the war, Adams fought to limit the fighting and end the conflict, continually recruiting a steady stream of new allies in the House to the anti-war fight. This had the effect of ending the war much earlier than the Polk administration desired, and limiting the amount of territory seized. Adams also spearheaded the successful effort for passage of the Wilmot Proviso by the House, which would have prohibited the introduction of slavery into any new territory gained from Mexico. Despite his strenuous efforts, the Proviso was defeated in the Senate.

It was also during this period, that for two years, from 1847 to 1849, Adams took under his wing the freshman Congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.



Library of Congress
President James K. Polk (1845-1849)

ery, and it is clear that, for the pre-1846 Lincoln, slavery was primarily a personal and moral matter, not a political issue. The Mexican-American War and his two years in Congress changed all that.

Part of Lincoln’s transformation began earlier in Illinois, a state originally settled by (mostly) slave-owners from Kentucky and Virginia. Even in Lincoln’s time *de facto* slavery (Black Codes) existed in Illinois, particularly in the southern Little Cairo section of the state. However, between 1825 and 1846, thousands of Northerners had emigrated to Illinois via the Erie Canal route, primarily from New York and New England, dramatically changing the culture and political

make-up of the state. By the time of Lincoln’s election to Congress, these Northerners comprised a majority of the state’s population.

As early as 1837, Lincoln had submitted a protest in the Illinois House against that state’s Black Codes, and between 1844 and 1846 Lincoln began to develop deeper ties and relationships to members of the Free Soil movement and the Liberty Party³ in Illinois. By the time he left for Washington, D.C., Lincoln’s recognition of slavery as a *political threat* to the nation had clearly begun to emerge.

III. Enter Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was morally opposed to slavery from a very early age. One incident from his young adulthood demonstrates the depth of his feeling on the subject. After a river trip, with friends and associates to New Orleans, once arrived, he and his companions happened upon a slave auction in progress, and, according to eyewitness accounts, Lincoln was so overcome with horror and moral revulsion that he was reduced to tears and couldn’t speak.

Yet, Lincoln’s early political career was a different matter. Passionately committed to policies of economic development, he rarely publicly spoke of slav-

The Spot Resolutions

On December 7, 1847, President Polk delivered his third annual message to Congress. Once again, he championed the war and accused Mexico of “invading the territory of the United States, striking the first blow, and shedding the blood of our citizens on our own soil.” Lincoln was in attendance.

Fifteen days later, on December 22nd, after only slightly more than two weeks in office, the freshman Lincoln stood to deliver a speech which historians have dubbed the “Spot Resolutions.” In a display of the type of courage sorely needed today, Lincoln directly challenged the veracity of President Polk, while simultane-

3. An abolitionist national political party.

ously attacking the legal basis for the war itself.

Polk had claimed that the Mexican Army had invaded the United States and “shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil.” Lincoln demanded: *Show me the spot* where this occurred. He asked:⁴

First: Whether the spot of soil on which the blood of our citizens was shed, as in his messages declared, was, or was not, within the territories of Spain, at least from the treaty of 1819 until the Mexican revolution.

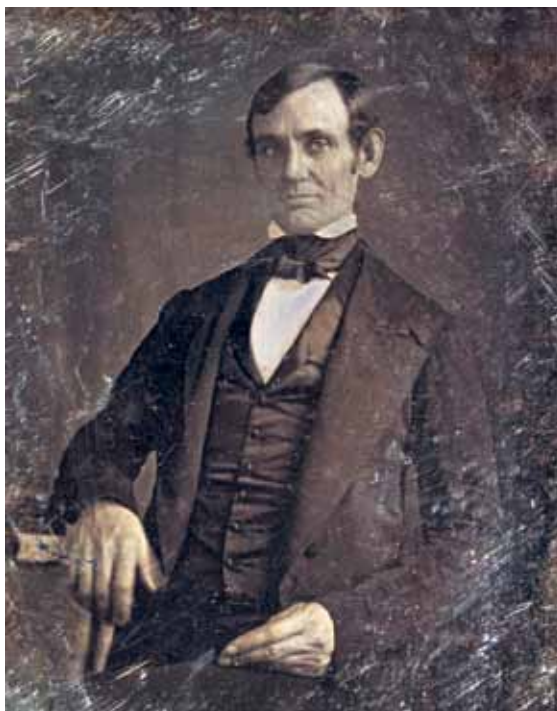
Second: Whether that spot is, or is not, within the territory which was wrested from Spain, by the Mexican revolution.

Third: Whether that spot is, or is not, within a settlement of people, which settlement had existed ever since long before the Texas revolution, until its inhabitants fled from the approach of the U.S. Army.

Fifth: Whether the People of that settlement... had ever, previous to the bloodshed, mentioned in his messages, submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas, or of the United States...

Sixth: Whether the People of that settlement, did, or did not, flee from the approach of the United States Army, leaving unprotected their homes and their growing crops, before the blood was shed, as in his messages stated...

Eighth: Whether the military force of the United States... was, or was not, so sent into that settlement, after General Taylor had, more than once, intimated to the War Department that, in his opinion, no such movement was necessary to the defense or protection of Texas.



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Abraham Lincoln as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1847-1849. The photo was taken by one of his law students.

The “Spot” in question was a small village named Rancho de Carricitos, just north of the Rio Grande in Mexican territory, where on April 25, 1846 American and Mexican troops engaged in an armed conflict. The immediate spark to the conflict was the response of Mexican forces to an invasion by the United States of Mexican sovereign soil.

In order to comprehend the genius and significance of Lincoln’s intervention, some background on earlier events, as well the actual motives of the Polk Administration, are required here.

In 1845, the United States annexed the Republic of Texas. During its short-lived period of independence, Texas had claimed the Rio Grande as

its southern border, but no one else, including both the Mexican and the United States governments, recognized that claim. Historically, the pre-1836 Mexican Province of Texas ended at the Nueces River, about 150 miles north of the Rio Grande, and during the entirety of the existence of the Texas Republic, Mexico claimed this as the boundary, and Texas never stationed troops, collected taxes, established courts, or delivered mail south of the Nueces River. Almost all of the residents of the thinly populated region between the Nueces and Rio Grande were Mexicans, living under Mexican jurisdiction.

In July of 1845, Polk ordered 3,500 American troops to enter Texas and take up positions along the Nueces River. Three months later he ordered them to cross the Nueces and proceed to the Rio Grande. This move into Mexican territory was done by Presidential order, with no Congressional approval. In November of 1845, with U.S. troops occupying the “Nueces Strip,” Polk deployed John Slidell to Mexico to offer the Mexican government \$25 million for Mexico’s recognition of the Rio Grande boundary, as well as for the purchase of

4. What follows are excerpts from the Resolutions.

California and New Mexico.⁵ When, by early 1846, Mexico had made clear that they would not cede or sell any territory, the next step for the Slave Power was to provoke a war.

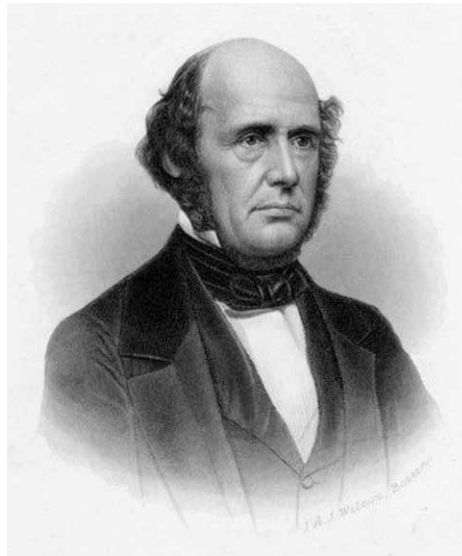
On April 23, 1846 Mexico announced its readiness to fight a “defensive war” to protect Mexican territory. Two days later 2,000 Mexican calvary crossed the Rio Grande to defend Mexican territory, culminating in the clash at Rancho de Carricitos, the “Spot” where American (and Mexican) blood was spilt.

The Power of Speaking the Truth

Beginning with his first War Message to Congress on May 11, 1846, and continuing through to December 1847, President Polk had repeated in almost every public address, official statement, and message to Congress, that the war with Mexico was justified to repel Mexican aggression and to avenge the spilling of American blood on American soil. After Lincoln’s Spot Resolutions speech, he never again made that argument.

Lincoln had both demolished the legal justification for the war itself, and exposed the President as willfully lying to both the Congress and the American people. Representatives of the Slave Power in the House of Representatives prevented Lincoln’s Resolutions from coming to a vote, but neither President Polk nor anyone else from among the Southern war party tried to answer Lincoln’s charges—because they could not answer them.

Twelve days after Lincoln’s Spot Resolutions, on January 3, 1848, the House of Representatives voted 85 to 81 to censure the President, passing a resolution (sponsored by George Ashmun from Massachusetts) which stated that the Mexican War had been “unneces-



George Ashmun, a Whig member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts (1845-1851), who crafted the successful resolution of censure against President Polk.

sarily and unconstitutionally” begun.⁶ Lincoln and Quincy Adams both voted for the Censure. The House directed that a committee of five Senators and five Representatives meet with President Polk “to advise and consult upon the best mode of terminating the existing war with Mexico in a manner honorable and just to both belligerents.”

Nine days later, on January 12th, Lincoln spoke again on the House floor, elaborating the legal validity of the charges contained in his Spot Resolutions, and driving home the point that the President had consistently lied for eighteen months as to the origin and justification for the war. Additionally, Lincoln then proceeded to question

the actual war aims of the Administration. An excerpt from this speech reads:

Let him (Polk) answer, fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with facts, and not with arguments. Let him remember he sits where Washington sat, and so remembering, let him answer, as Washington would answer. As a nation should not, and the Almighty will not, be evaded, so let him attempt no evasion—no equivocation. And if, so answering, he can show that the soil was ours, where the first blood of the 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 for his justification. In that case I, shall be most happy to reverse the vote I gave the other day. . . .

But if he can not, or will not do this—if on any pretence, or no pretence, he shall refuse or omit it, 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

5. Slidell later became a leading figure in the Confederacy who was deployed to London and Paris in an attempt to bring France and England into the Civil War on the side of the South. Polk’s instructions to Slidell demonstrate that Polk knew that the Nueces-Rio Grande Strip was actually Mexican territory. They also reveal that, for Polk and the slave interests, the acquisition of Texas was only a stepping-stone, and the seizure of all or parts of Mexico was clearly the plan from the beginning.

6. Ashmun’s original language stated that the war had been “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States,” which would have represented grounds for impeachment.

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! At one time telling us that Mexico has nothing whatever, that we can get, but territory; at another, showing us how we can support the war, by levying contributions on Mexico. . . .

Having it now settled that territorial indemnity is the only object, we are urged to seize, by legislation here, all that he was content to take, a few months ago, and the whole province of lower California to boot, and to still carry on the war—to take all we are fighting for, and still fight on. Again, the President is resolved, under all circumstances, to have full territorial indemnity for the expenses of the war. . . he insists that the separate national existence of Mexico, shall be maintained; but he does not tell us how this can be done, after we shall have taken all her territory. Lest the questions, I here suggest, be considered speculative merely, let me be indulged a moment in trying [to] show they are not. The war has gone on some twenty months; for the expenses of which, together with an inconsiderable old score, the President now claims about one half of the Mexican territory; and that, by far the better half. . . .⁷

Several days after delivering this speech, in a letter to his law partner William Herndon, Lincoln was explicit as to the threat to the existence to the nation posed by Polk’s actions:

That soil was not ours; and Congress did not annex or attempt to annex it. But to return to

your position: Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation, whenever *he* shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, *whenever he may choose to say* he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure. Study to see if you can fix *any limit* to his power in this respect. . . .

IV. What Courage Can Accomplish

Already censured by the House of Representatives, and facing potentially far worse consequences, Polk soon brought the war to a conclusion. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848 and ratified by the Senate on March 10th, by a vote of 38 to 14. Including Texas, the Treaty represented a loss of 55 percent of Mexico’s 1835 territory to the United States, but a proposed amendment by Jefferson Davis to take even more of Mexico was voted down. A subsequent Senate vote to enforce the anti-slavery provisions of the Wilmot Proviso in all the newly acquired territory was defeated 38 to 15.

The unconstitutional Mexican-American War had been launched as a U.S. war of aggression by the slave interests of the South, and, in one sense, the consequences of that war resulted in a subsequent political domination over the United States by the Slave Power which led directly to the Civil War twelve years later. The relentless post-war expansion of the Slave Power across the United States, including the effects of the 1850 Compromise, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the dissolution of the Whig Party, led directly to crisis of 1860 when the Republic of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton was nearly extinguished.

But!, that is not the whole story. The fight, the courage, the leadership provided by Abraham Lincoln, John Quincy Adams, and their allies during 1846-1848 created new potentials for the nation, new opportunities for final victory, and made possible the reality of the later Lincoln Presidency which saved the nation.

From 1847 on, Lincoln would emerge as a leading national opponent of the Slave Power, and he never looked back. After the conclusion of the war, he used what was left of his brief two-year term in office to escalate the fight against Southern domination. In 1848 there were five separate attempts to revive the provisions of the Wilmot Proviso to halt the spread of slavery

7. The full speech is available [here](#).



What the opponents of the Mexican-American war fought: the spread of slave conditions like this shown in a photo of a cotton field in Texas in the Nineteenth Century.

into the South and West.⁸ Lincoln voted for all of them.

He also joined repeatedly with John Quincy Adams to fight the continuing attempts by the slave interests to “gag” any discussion of slavery in the House. Although the Gag Rule had been repealed in 1844, it was still the uniform practice of Southern representatives to make a motion to table (kill) all individual petitions or bills relating to slavery which came before the House. Lincoln voted several times with Adams against the tabling of such petitions.

On January 10, 1849 Lincoln introduced a bill in the House to completely abolish slavery in Washington, D.C. John Calhoun, although serving in the Senate, used his influence in the House to have the bill tabled. In 1862, as President, Lincoln would sign a law freeing all of the Capital’s slaves, stating at that time, “I have never doubted the constitutional authority of Congress to abolish slavery in this District, and I have ever desired to see the national capital freed from the institution in some satisfactory way. Hence there has never been in my mind any question upon the subject. . . .”

When Lincoln arose, on Dec. 22, 1847, to deliver his Spot Resolutions to the House of Representatives, a decisive change, an intervention, was accomplished.

8. The most serious of these was a bill by Rep. Harvey Putnam of New York, which was defeated 105 to 93.

The ultimate effects of that intervention were not all recognized in 1847, but for Lincoln, his assumption of the leadership in the fight to defeat the Slave Power would change history forever.

1848 to 1860

The real lesson to be learned from the actions of Lincoln, Adams, and others during the Mexican-American War is to understand what can be accomplished if an individual or a group of people simply decides to fight. Don’t watch. Don’t comment. Stand up and fight.

In 1846, the House of Representatives had voted 174 to 14 to declare war against Mexico. Among those fourteen were:

- **John Quincy Adams**
- **Erastus Culver** (New York)—Culver would continue his fight against the Slave Power. In 1850, he, together

with John Jay (the grandson of Washington’s Supreme Court Justice), successfully argued *Lemmon v. New York*, a case which forced Virginia slave-owners who were traveling through New York City to surrender their slaves under a writ of habeas corpus. Later, in 1860, Culver was an honored guest at the Cooper Union speech by Abraham Lincoln, and sat next to Lincoln on the dais.

- **Columbo Delano** (Ohio)—later to become Ulysses Grant’s Secretary of Interior, and a champion of Grant’s “Peace Policy” with the western Indians.

- **George Ashmun** (Massachusetts)—Ashmun would later preside over the 1860 Republican national convention which nominated Lincoln for President.

Fourteen out of one hundred eighty-eight is a small percentage. But those fourteen, together with Lincoln, succeeded in shortening the war, limiting the damage, and defining for the nation both the lies and corruption of President Polk, as well as the true war aims of the Southern slave interests behind the war.

Far more important, by standing and fighting in 1847-1848, Lincoln and his allies set into motion a potential for a far-greater victory, one which would come with the realization of a Lincoln Presidency in 1861. That victory would never have materialized, never even been possible, without the stand they took against an unconstitutional war and a mad Presidency, fourteen years earlier.