**Name:**

**US History**

**Mexican- American War Primary Sources**

**12/1/15**

**25 points**

**Mexican- American War Primary Sources**

**Reading 1:**

Our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

--*John L. O'Sullivan, 1845*  
  
**Reading 2:**

Texas has been absorbed into the Union as the inevitable fulfillment of the general law which is rolling our population westward....It was disintegrated from Mexico in the natural course of events, by a process perfectly legitimate on its own part, blameless on ours....  
  
California will, probably next fall away from...Mexico...imbecile and distracted...The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders....All this without agency of our government, without responsibility of our people--in the natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles....

*--Democratic Review*, 1845

**Reading 3:**

Our commerce with Mexico has been almost annihilated. It was formerly highly beneficial to both nations; but our merchants have been deterred from prosecuting it, by the system of outrage and extortion which the Mexican authorities have pursued . . . and, in official proclamations and manifestoes, has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us, for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime, we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted, even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces..

. . . I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position “between the Nueces and Del Norte.” This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces . . . The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union, and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil . . .

Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced and that the two nations are now at war.  
  
As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

*--Polk's War Message, 1846*

**Reading 4:**

I regard the message as having been put forth to divert public attention from the outrage committed by the President upon our own Constitution, and the exercise of usurped powers, of which he has been guilty in ordering our army to invade a country with which we are at peace, and of provoking and bringing on this war. I am led to this inevitable conclusion from the fact that he dare not rest his justification upon truth. He reminds us of the grievous wrongs perpetrated (as he says) by Mexico upon our people in former years, and alludes to the delay of that government in the payment of debts due our people, and mourns over the loss of our commerce with Mexico; all for the purpose of justifying himself in sending the army to the Rio Grande, and commencing the work of human butchery!...

The President obviously intended to involve us in war with Mexico. No sophistry can disguise that fact. That truth will stand on the page of history in all coming time, to the disgrace of this nation and of the age in which we live . . . Sir, no man regards this war as just. We know, the country knows, and the civilized world are conscious, that it has resulted from a desire to extend and sustain an institution on which the curse of the Almighty most visibly rests. Mexico has long since abolished slavery. She has purified herself from its crimes and its guilt. That institution is now circumscribed on the southwest by Mexico, where the slaves of Texas find an asylum . . . It has therefore become necessary to extend our dominions into Mexico in order to render slavery secure in Texas…

. . . This war is waged against an unoffending people, without just or adequate cause, for the purposes of conquest; with the design to extend slavery; in violation of the Constitution, against the dictates of justice, of humanity, the sentiments of the age in which we live, and the precepts of the religion we profess. I will lend it no aid, no support whatever. I will not bathe my hands in the blood of the people of Mexico, nor will I participate in the guilt of those murders which have been and which will hereafter be committed by our army there. For these reasons I shall vote against the bill under consideration and all others calculated to support this war.

*--Congressman Joshua Giddings, Debate on the Mexican War, House of Representatives, Washington, May 13, 1846*

**Reading 5:**

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.

--*Henry David Thoreau*

**Reading 6:**  
Now we ask, whether any man can coolly contemplate the idea of recalling our troops from the [Mexican] territory we at present occupy...and...resign this beautiful country to the custody of the ignorant cowards and profligate ruffians who have ruled it for the last twenty-five years? Why humanity cries out against it. Civilization and Christianity protest against this reflux of the tide of barbarism and anarchy.

*--New York Evening Post*, 1848

*Questions:*

1. Define "manifest destiny." What forces contributed to the commitment to American expansion?

2. How do newspapers (*Democratic Review*, *New York Evening Post*) Justify American expansion?

3. How does President Polk justify an American declaration of war against Mexico? Do you find his explanation convincing?

5. Why did opponents (*Giddings,* Thoreau)oppose the war (be specific)?

## What criticisms of representative democracy does Thoreau raise in “Civil Disobedience”?

## From: <http://americainclass.org/thoreaus-critique-of-democracy-in-civil-disobedience/>

**Background**

Prompted by his opposition to slavery and the Mexican War (1846–1848), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) wrote “Civil Disobedience” in 1849, but its central question — how should individuals respond to a government that pursues policies they believe to be immoral — still challenges us today.

For Thoreau the goal of any response to unjust policies is to insure that the individual does not, either directly or indirectly, advance them. “What I have to do,” he writes, “is to see… that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.” He maintains that there are two ways to avoid lending oneself to the wrong: resistance to the state and separation from it. His refusal to pay his poll tax to protest slavery and the Mexican War was an act of resistance that landed him in jail for a night. Some time before that act, when he was commanded to pay a tax to support a clergyman, he not only resisted by refusing to pay it, he also proclaimed his separation from the state: “Know all men… that I, Henry David Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any… society which I have not joined.” At the conclusion of “Civil Disobedience” he even claims that democracy would be improved if the state permitted some citizens to live beyond its reach. (We explore this point in the lesson’s second interactive exercise.)

Our chief concern here, however, is not Thoreau’s call for resistance but rather his critique of representative democracy. He bases his analysis on two fundamental assertions. First, he maintains that the individual is the source of all moral authority. “The only obligation which I have a right to assume,” he says, “is to do at any time what I think right.” Second, he contends that it is not enough simply to perceive the right. “How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely?” he asks. He demands “action from principle.” The “perception of right” must be accompanied by “the performance of right.”

We might respond by saying that, in a democratic society, citizens “perform” the right by deciding where they stand on issues and voting according to their principles. Thoreau would disagree: “Even voting *for the right*,” he insists, “is *doing* nothing for it.” [His italics.] As we shall see in our analysis of excerpts from “Civil Disobedience,” his critique of voting goes hand-in-hand with his objections to majority rule and representation. Taken together, they strike, as one critic has written, “at the very core principles of democracy.”1

#### Paragraph 4: Focusing on the tension between the individual conscience and majority rule, this paragraph lies at the heart of Thoreau’s critique of representative democracy.

[1] After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. [2] But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. [3] Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? [4] Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? [5] Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. [6] It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. [7] The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. [8] It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. [9] 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. [10] A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. [11] They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. [12] Now, what are they? [13] Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?

**According to Thoreau, how do governments decide questions of right and wrong?**

**In Thoreau’s view what should determine right and wrong?**

**What two dangers does Thoreau see in paying the law “undue respect”**

**Paragraph 11:** *Majority rule depends, of course, on voting. So what if the right, as dictated by your conscience, appears on a ballot; you vote for it, and it wins. Does that sequence bestow moral legitimacy on government? In the paragraph Thoreau says no.*

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon [a dice game], with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote

**What does Thoreau mean when he says that “the character of the voters is not staked” in voting?**

**According to Thoreau, when is the majority likely to vote for morality and justice?**