

American Anti-Catholicism during the Mexican War

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THE THREE DECADES which preceded the war with Mexico witnessed a steady rise in the percentage of Roman Catholics in the United States. Much of this increase was the result of German and Irish immigration. These people found that their church, while generally distrusted, had been part of America's religious spectrum since early colonial days. This growth alarmed numerous non-Catholic Americans. The Protestant press, which often spent whole pages in analyzing minute theological questions, turned more and more copy over to attacks on Roman Catholicism. Occasionally the exertions to contain Catholic influence boiled over with hysteria. Indeed, if one knows nothing else about Protestant-Catholic relations during the 1830's and 1840's, he likely is acquainted with Samuel F. B. Morse's inflammatory *Foreign Conspiracy*, Maria Monk's "disclosures," the burning of the Ursuline Convent at Charlestown in 1834, and the violent Philadelphia riots ten years later.

In 1846, the United States embarked upon an aggressive war of conquest against Mexico. Mexico was a Catholic nation.¹ What has been termed America's "Protestant Crusade" was in full vigor. Further, the 1840's were a period when church attendance was high, sabbatarianism common, and the ministry an honored profession.² In almost every section of the United States with the exception of New England, historian Justin Smith asserted, "the war spirit rose high, astonishing even the most sanguine."³ Given these circumstances, one wonders just how significant a force was the United States' anti-Catholicism in this war against her Roman Catholic neighbor?

Throughout the conflict there never materialized a national Protestant sentiment directed at transforming the struggle into a Protestant jihad south of the border.⁴ Why no martial, anti-Catholic ideology

¹ Anticlericalism had begun in Mexico. In the eyes of Americans, however, Mexico was a Catholic nation.

² Carl R. Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man* (New York, 1927), 179-180.

³ Justin Harvey Smith, *The War With Mexico* (2 vols., New York, 1919), I, 195.

⁴ Those readers who believe that this is merely an academic question should examine the press of western Europe at this time. A *Punch* cartoon, for example, portrayed a

emerged during the war may be worth exploring.

Some years ago Clayton S. Ellsworth of the College of Wooster, made a comprehensive survey of the attitudes of the American churches toward the Mexican War.⁵ He revealed the wartime opinions of the major Protestant denominations to be as follows: the Episcopalian, Lutheran, Dutch and German Reformed, neutral; the Southern Methodist and Baptist, favorable; both the Old and New School Presbyterian, Northern Baptist, and Methodist, varying from lukewarm to favorable; the Congregational, Unitarian, and Quaker, strongly opposed. These latter held grave reservations about the justice of the war. In particular they were bitter at what they had come to believe was a war commenced by the slave oligarchy for the expansion of their "peculiar institution."

As in American wars before and since, the "render unto Caesar" parable permitted the individual clergyman, whatever his denomination, to sanction the conflict. The intellectual independence of Protestants made impossible any absolute wartime classification. For example, the general silence of the Episcopal Church was broken by Rev. John McVicker, chaplain of Fort Columbus, New York. On the departure of the First Regiment of Volunteers for California, he encouraged them to go forth as apostles, as the "chosen carriers to introduce into less favored lands a higher and purer Christian civilization."⁶

Before exploring the reasons why American Protestantism was not drawn into a militant elimination of Mexican Catholicism, consideration must be given to the articulate minority which did actively visualize an aggressive Protestant "Manifest Destiny." Both John R. Bodo of San Francisco Theological Seminary, and Clayton Ellsworth have found that most southern Protestants, particularly the Methodists and Baptists, were vigorous in their support of the war.⁷ Of these the editor of the *Western Baptist Review* of Louisville, Kentucky, surely ranked

vicious "Brother Jonathan" reclining on George Washington, Oregon, and Texas; while in the background his minions engaged in slaughter, enslavement, and the ravaging of a Catholic Church. *Punch*, XIII (Nov. 27, 1847), 215. The Nov. 13, 1847, London *Times* expressed astonishment that the wealth of the Mexican churches had escaped pillage.

⁵ Ellsworth, "The American Churches and the Mexican War," *American Historical Review*, XLV (1940), 301-326. This is a piece of scholarship of which the author has made full use. Ellsworth, like Ray Allen Billington's comprehensive *Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860, A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938), made no real attempt to analyze why anti-Catholicism was so minimal during the years 1846-1848.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 309, "Memorial Petition of Col. J. D. Stevenson of California" (San Francisco, 1886). Sometimes a church paper printed enthusiastic war reports and a denunciatory anti-war editorial side by side on the same page. *Presbyterian of the West*, April 29, 1847, p. 4.

⁷ Bobo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues: 1812-1848* (Princeton, 1954), 219-220; Ellsworth, "The American Churches," 301 ff.

among the most hysterical. He asserted that unless Mexico was crushed "the yoke of papal oppression would be placed upon every state of this Republic."⁸

The columns of the Louisville *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer* were more typical of the religious organs which came to approve of the war. The announcement of the conflict by this newspaper bemoaned the military "camp as a high school of sin and degradation; the battlefield as the gate which opens into endless perdition."⁹ Yet, it could still hope that out of the conflict "the darkness of popery" would be dispelled and "an effectual door opened for the Bible and the missionaries of the cross."¹⁰ By June this Baptist periodical declared with complete equanimity, "War inevitably originates in wickedness. Were it not for human depravity, there of course would be no war. . . . The genius of the . . . United States is such that it cannot consistently make war upon any people. It can only appear in self-defense."¹¹

Like many other denominational newspapers, the *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer* often devoted one or two columns to the official reports from the scene of the war. But rather than editorialize for a Protestant "holy war," it preferred the traditional Catholic-baiting copy that ranged from attacks on the "man of sin" to diabolical horror stories. The journal once reported that a Mexican nun had seduced an American soldier, tried to gain his assistance in the removal of a dead priest from her cell, and then, in gratitude, attempted to poison him.¹²

Northern and western Presbyterians, though less enthusiastic in their support of the Mexican War than the Southern Methodists and Baptists, succumbed to some of the same emotions engendered by the conflict. In 1846, the *Preacher*, of western Pennsylvania, despaired at the sentimental poems and editorials which glorified the institution of war. Yet, by July of 1847, it felt gratified "to see the interest which friends of an enlightened and liberal Christianity begin to take in this unhappy country . . . Mexico may yet have reason to acknowledge, that the calamity now upon her, has been her greatest good. Already there are openings for the introduction of a pure gospel."¹³

The widely read *Presbyterian Advocate* traced a similar editorial course. It was filled with the typically abusive anti-Catholic journalism found in prowar and antiwar Protestant publications. In March, 1846,

⁸ *Western Baptist Review*, I (June, 1846), 363.

⁹ *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, April 30, 1846.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1846.

¹² *Ibid.*, Jan. 13, 1848.

¹³ *Preacher*, July 21, 1847.

it bemoaned the possibility of a war with England. It believed such an eventuality would only weaken "Protestantism in the face of a vigorous, ever-expansive Roman Catholic threat."¹⁴ The outbreak of fighting did not produce a prompt demand for the elimination of the enemy's church. The June 3, 1846, *Advocate* featured a fascinating travel account of a Mexican Sunday—bullfights, cockfights, dogfights, firecrackers, concerts, tumblers, and pigeon shooting. For an age which observed the Lord's Day with decorum, it is easy to imagine the effect of this vivid description.¹⁵ A week later the paper honored the gallant of both armies and regretted the misunderstanding that existed between them.¹⁶ However, by August, the *Advocate* quoted a chaplain on duty at Matamoros as saying: "It has struck me very forcibly that this is the way that the Lord designs to have all this priest ridden, ignorant and unhappy country evangelized."¹⁷

But for the descendants of John Calvin, such an opportunity was not an unmixed pleasure. As the Presbyterian *Covenanter* put it: "Mexico is a base, priest ridden nation. And needs a scourging about as much as the United States does. And will probably get it. Then, for this is the way of Providence, will come our turn."¹⁸ The Presbyterian *Evangelical Repository* expressed the identical sentiment with an Old Testament touch. "The Sovereign of the universe has his own purposes to accomplish upon the wicked treacherous and idolatrous people of Mexico; and He is making the United States as he made Assyria of old . . . the rod of his anger. . . . But who knows that our turn will not come next."¹⁹ The more benevolently inclined Methodist periodical, the *Christian Advocate and Journal* of New York, questioned the justice of the war but believed that the weakening of Mexico's debased priesthood would be salutary.²⁰

The foregoing expressions may be considered as rather representative of that wing of Protestantism which genuinely visualized new evangelical opportunities south of the Rio Grande. Taken collectively, this minority group failed to burn with anywhere near the intensity sufficient to ignite a holy war.

There appear to be four major reasons why American Protestants in

¹⁴ *Presbyterian Advocate*, March 4, 1846.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1846; for similar invidious travelogues see: *Covenanter*, I (April, 1846), 290, and the *Reformed Presbyterian*, X (Oct., 1846), 255.

¹⁶ *Presbyterian Advocate*, June 10, 1846.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Aug. 5, 1846.

¹⁸ *Covenanter*, I (July, 1846), 383.

¹⁹ *Evangelical Repository*, V (May, 1847), 621.

²⁰ *Christian Advocate and Journal*, Nov., 1846.

the Mexican War did not correlate "defeat Mexico," with "eliminate Roman Catholicism": (1) an exuberant American nationalism and the parallel assumption that Mexican culture was so hopelessly corrupt that it would soon collapse; (2) the diversity of American Protestantism; (3) a respectable tradition of religious toleration abetted by the wartime patriotism of Roman Catholics; (4) and possibly most significant, the trenchant opposition to the institution of war as well as to the expansion of slave soil which it seemed to portend.

The historical import of Reverend Lyman Beecher's *A Plea for the West* (1835) has not been lost upon historians.²¹ Beecher's plea urged greater support in the extension of Christian (Protestant) civilization throughout the trans-Appalachian West. Otherwise, he warned, the vast Mississippi Valley would fall into the hands of Rome.²² Ray Allen Billington has shown that the major missionary societies "were guilty of fostering anti-Catholic prejudice in their eagerness to raise funds for the evangelization of the West."²³ The outstanding student of western home missions, the late Colin B. Goodykoontz, believed that "Fear of 'Popery' was a powerful motive for Protestant home missions." Yet he rightly noted that it was "a fear based more on the fancies of the Eastern religious leaders than on the actual experiences of the majority of the missionaries themselves."²⁴

Non-Catholic westerners were periodic recipients of warnings such as that found in the January, 1847, *Missionary Herald* of Boston. "The efforts put forth by the Man of Sin to disseminate the errors of his faith . . . are worthy of our careful study. . . . Papal missions are undoubtedly multiplying with a rapidity which puts Protestantism to the blush."²⁵ Little wonder that a citizen of eastern New England was perplexed.

They tell us here, at least from some pulpits, that the West is fast becoming the Pope's heritage, and that it will soon be all under his thumb. Some

²¹ Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner first gave Beecher's *Plea* notoriety in his seminal Chicago address, historians have noted its import. For example see: Everett Clinchy, *All in the Name of God* (New York, 1934), 15; Robert Riegel, *Young America: 1830-1840* (Norman, 1949), 266; and Louis B. Wright, *Culture on the Moving Frontier* (Bloomington, 1955), 179.

²² Lyman Beecher was rather typical of the Protestant ministry in his belief that Catholicism and "the despotic governments of Europe" were one and the same. William Warren Sweet, *The Presbyterians: 1783-1840* (New York, 1936), 81.

²³ Billington, "Anti-Catholic Propaganda and the Home Missionary Movement, 1800-1860," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXII (Dec., 1935), 373.

²⁴ Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1939), 234.

²⁵ *Missionary Herald*, XLII (Jan., 1847), 28; Protestant educational societies also operated effectively throughout the frontier districts. Peter George Mode, *Source Book and Bibliographical Guide for American Church History* (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1921), 409.

preachers talk more vehemently against the "man of sin", as they call him, than against sin itself; . . . many are resolving the whole christian character into a cordial hatred of Catholics.²⁸

The *Catholic Telegraph* could not refrain from ribbing Protestants who reported the number of priests as 15,000 when they totalled a mere 761.²⁷

Always pragmatic, and necessarily materialistic, the westerner did not react as the seaboard theocrats would have wished. Instead of being frightened by the power of Rome, his already self-confident nationalism seemed only to have been exaggerated by the reports of Roman Catholic depravity. For many a westerner any attempts in 1846 to arouse a frenetic Protestant crusade must have appeared like assaulting a city ready to surrender from starvation. As one Protestant paper declared: "It has been but a few years since Texas was a province of Mexico, and under the ban of Catholicism. . . . The storm was short, and was succeeded by a glorious day."²⁸ For Mexico the idolatry of Catholicism, if not a "fatal feature," was at best a tragic national handicap.²⁹

To the devotees of Manifest Destiny, anti-Catholicism was secondary in the clash between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin culture. The dominant issue was Americanism, or nativism, as opposed to almost all that was un-American. Historian Louis Wright believes that as late as mid-nineteenth century "the old Americans, meaning the Atlantic stock" regarded themselves as God's elect.³⁰ And, as in the comparison of Catholicism and Protestantism, Latin culture was viewed as contemptible beside the American.³¹ Like most Disciples of Christ publications, the *Christian Record* avoided editorial comment on the war. But even this neutral Campbellite journal could not refrain from addressing a barbed

²⁸ *Western Messenger*, I (Sept., 1835), 227. The Alton, Illinois, *Presbyterian Reporter*, I (May, 1847), 102, voiced a genuine western apprehension.

²⁷ *Catholic Telegraph*, Dec. 11, 1845.

²⁸ *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, June 4, 1846. Rev. S. M. Worcester of Salem, Massachusetts, believed that by the time "the third generation comes it is only here and there that a family remains in the Catholic communion," cited in: Bodo, *Protestant Clergy*, 80.

²⁹ *Presbyterian Herald*, July 9, 1846; *Presbyterian Advocate*, March 4, 1846; *Presbyterian of the West*, March 4, 1847.

³⁰ Wright, *Culture*, 131.

³¹ Richard Henry Dana, who visited California in the 1830's, and Lt. Tunis A. Craven, U.S.N., who went there during the war, typified Yankee opinions of Mexican decadence. Richard Henry Dana. *Two Years Before the Mast* (New York, 1840, 1936), 140, 177-181; John H. Kemble (ed.) "Naval Conquest in the Pacific, Diary of Lt. Tunis A. Craven," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XX (1941), 224.

letter to Catholic Bishop John Hughes of New York. It dared him "compare Mexico to New England—Brazil to these United States—the city of Mexico to that [of] Boston. . . ."³²

Daniel Webster was convinced that America would be debased by the annexation of any of the Mexican populace.³³ In a speech before the Senate he cited an estimation of Mexico by Colonel John J. Hardin, an ex-Illinois Congressman (Whig) recently killed at the battle of Buena Vista.

Imposing no restraint on their passions, a shameless and universal concubinage exists, and a total disregard of morals, to which it would be impossible to find a parallel in any country calling itself civilized. . . . Liars by nature, they are treacherous and faithless to their friends, cowardly and cringing to their enemies; cruel, as all cowards are, they unite savage ferocity with their want of animal courage.³⁴

Almost from the first, trans-Appalachian settlers had encountered a historic Catholic culture. What these Protestant westerners found did not generate an apoplexy equal to that later voiced by Daniel Webster. St. Louis, Missouri, central boom city of the new trans-Mississippi West, had been established by Catholics. It possessed an attractive cathedral, a Convent of the Sacred Heart, and even a Catholic University. But by the time of the Mexican War it was no longer a Catholic community. All across the Old Northwest in the 1830's and 1840's, the revivalistic churches were planting colleges. In nativist eyes the fecundity of Protestant Americans was reassuring.³⁵ From Minnesota to Vincennes, to New Orleans, settlements of French Catholics had long preceded the Protestant Anglo-Saxon. Nevertheless, only in Louisiana had a French enclave been able to leave a really permanent impression.³⁶

Anti-Catholicism could not succeed as a war issue in the eyes of non-Catholic westerners. To a large number of them it seemed patently

³² *Christian Record*, V (Feb., 1848), 250.

³³ *New York Evening Post*, March 30, 1848.

³⁴ *Speeches on the War with Mexico, 1846-1848*. Bound collection of speeches in the Indiana University Library, 23.

³⁵ William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth and Decline* (New York, 1945), 149. Although American Catholics increased rapidly in number in these decades, their priesthood "were for the most part foreign-born and comparatively few of them had become naturalized." Goodykoontz, *Home Missions*, 223.

³⁶ Wright, *Culture*, 169. As Professor Thomas T. McAvoy has noted, American historians still reflect this paradox when they refer to American Roman Catholics of the 1830's and 1840's as a "foreign importation" when actually their roots went back for two centuries. Thomas T. McAvoy, "The Formation of the Catholic Minority in the United States," *Review of Politics*, X (Jan., 1848), 15 ff.

obvious that God had determined that the region should be Protestant. In 1849, the *Home Missionary* affirmed:

God kept that coast for a people of the Pilgrim blood; he would not permit any other to be fully developed there. The Spaniard came thither a hundred years before our fathers landed at Plymouth; but though he came for treasure, his eyes were holden that he could not find it. But in the fullness of time, when a Protestant people had been brought to this continent, and are nourished up to strength . . . God commits to their possession that western shore.³⁷

As Robert Riegel has summed it up: "So far as men thought of the matter, they accepted the proposition that Providence had intended that these areas [America's Far West] would some day be covered by the superior American type of civilization."³⁸ And as a Cincinnati Presbyterian said in 1847, the Apostolic Christianity which would sustain this advance was "Puritanism, Protestantism and True Americanism."³⁹

The mystique of the chosen people is a hallmark of nineteenth-century American romanticism.⁴⁰ Protestant dynamism unquestionably reinforced the spirit of Manifest Destiny. Yet the inherent centrifugalism of American Protestantism militated against a unified, anti-Catholic jihad. Visitors to America were bewildered by the organizational diversity of the non-Catholic institutions. Even before the American Revolution one Massachusetts community is reported to have harbored six mutually independent Baptist churches.⁴¹ By the 1840's the scope and intensity of this fractionalism had in no way lessened. For example, the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the tough cutting edge of so many frontier sagas, had seen their rigid polity and doctrine repeatedly split apart on the shoals of frontier individualism. And as if the success of the Baptists and Methodists in the Mississippi Valley were not enough, a large new denomination, the Campbellite (Disciples of Christ, or Christian Church) competitively burgeoned within their midst. Recall also the dozens of smaller Protestant splinter groups which took root in the

³⁷ Mode, *Source Book*, 134; this same theme was repeated four years later in the same publication, cited in Goodykoontz, *Home Missions*, 271-272.

³⁸ Riegel, *Young America*, 81.

³⁹ Bodo, *Protestant Clergy*, 61-62. See also: Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought: 1860-1915* (Philadelphia, 1945), 147.

⁴⁰ Merle Eugene Curti, *The American Peace Crusade* (Durham, 1929), 125. For a fresh summary of the leading intellectual and humanitarian thought in this age see Henry Steele Commager's provocative essay in his recent *The Era of Reform: 1830-1860* (New York, 1960), especially 13-17.

⁴¹ Clinton Rossiter, *The First American Revolution* (New York, 1953), 68.

American Middle West at this time. Even the staid Protestant Episcopal Church was noisily engaged in a domestic quarrel: the tractarian storm that raged around Cardinal Newman.⁴³

To this bubbling Protestant caldron were added the utopian settlements (sometimes Christian-centered, sometimes not) that poured into the Mississippi Valley during the years 1800-1845. It is true that the Rappites, Shakers, Icarians, and the settlers at Zoar abstained from political activity. Their very presence, however, promoted religious toleration. Similarly, the camp meetings, at which two, three, and even four religious bodies proselyted, strengthened a healthy sense of denominational competition.⁴⁴ A surprising degree of religious *laissez faire* emerged as a corollary to this attitude. In 1846, when Brigham Young was asked to assist in the War with Mexico, he promptly rallied his Mormon Battalion. His parting words to his Mormon volunteers are anything but those of a sectarian zealot eager to see the elimination of Mexican Catholicism. He asked his soldiers to abjure "Contentious conversation with the Missourian, Mexican, or any class of people; do not preach, only where people desire to hear, and then be wise men. Impose not your principles on any people; take your Bibles and Books of Mormon; burn cards if you have any."⁴⁵

At times the pugnacious individualism of western Protestantism even took on sectional characteristics. Some transmontane ministers hotly rebuked their patronizing eastern helpmates for trying to civilize them, and a genuine antimission movement was formed. As one westerner retorted: "Nothing can be more false than the idea that the Valley of the Mississippi is peopled with irreligious characters . . . who are perishing from want of missionary preaching."⁴⁶

Indeed, many thoughtful eastern and western Protestants alike agreed that the degree of Christian strife was unseemly. One correspondent wrote to the *Western Messenger* in 1841, let us "give up *Theological Controversies* once and for all, and turn heart and mind to a *religious and benevolent life*."⁴⁶ The most famous of all humans to emerge from the matrix of the nineteenth-century Protestant Midwest was disgusted at the contemporary religious contention. Although Abraham Lincoln rented a pew in the Springfield First Presbyterian

⁴³ Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York, 1930), 232-233; 258-270.

⁴⁴ Ellsworth, "The American Churches," 324.

⁴⁵ Frank Alfred Golder, *The March of the Mormon Battalion: From Council Bluffs to California, Taken from the Journal of Henry Standage* (New York, 1928), 128-129.

⁴⁶ Bodo, *Protestant Clergy*, 162.

⁴⁶ *Western Messenger*, VIII (March, 1841), 526.

Church, he never joined a church. He felt straight-jacketed by the "long complicated statements of Christian doctrine." Lincoln desired to see a church whose "sole qualification of membership" should be "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself."⁴⁷

By the time of the Mexican War, the diversity of American Protestantism had created a denominational liberalism quite beneficial to Roman Catholics. The social historian must be cautious when he refers to twentieth-century America as a Christian nation. Likewise he must beware of too easily affixing the terms Protestant, Catholic, or non-Catholic to any substantial body of Americans during the Mexican War period. Many a sweating subsistence farmer, a hell-for-leather stage driver, or a calculating steamboat trader had little time for doctrinal disputations. Yet all three would have labeled themselves Christians.

Among those Americans whose Christian convictions were already vague, the martial spirit was vastly more imminent than any denominational connotations which the war might portend. A Campbellite minister who preached in northern Indiana during 1846 voiced his frustration at the way wartime enthusiasm displaced the Lord's work. At Fort Wayne, "as everywhere else . . . we were surrounded with the most unfavorable circumstances. The whole community was electrified with the idea of going to war with Mexico. . . . our meetings were frequently broken up by 'war meetings' . . . by the thunder of cannon, roll of the drum, or the shouting and huzzaing of boys in the streets."⁴⁸

The 1840's recall the romantic temperament, a frame of mind which rested on a prosperous and optimistic national growth.⁴⁹ Americans enjoyed the luxury of military security, even the Mexican enemy seemed distant and unthreatening. To many a contemporary, his country must have appeared like a huge lake. All kinds of problems could be thrown into it. At times the resultant ripples would conflict. Yet, the very enormity of the lake assured a large measure of surface placidity. Within this charitable environment, avows Stow Persons, there was "tolerated a greater variety and degree of freedom in expression than would perhaps be acceptable a century later."⁵⁰ We can understand why Henry David Thoreau's classic "Civil Disobedience" was tolerated in antiwar Massachusetts. Let it not be overlooked, however, that across the pro-

⁴⁷ Luther A. Weigle, *American Idealism* (New Haven, 1928), 186.

⁴⁸ *Christian Record*, IV (Sept., 1846), 72-73.

⁴⁹ Stow Persons, *American Minds: A History of Ideas* (New York, 1958), 205.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 202; Curti, *The American Peace*, 126, also makes special note of wartime dissent.

war West men also felt free to speak out against the Mexican War. Reverend Albert Hale of Springfield, Illinois, condemned the war as unjust and stigmatized the volunteers as "a moral pest to society."⁵¹

America, as constituted in the 1840's, was distinctly not a bundle of withered ideas, easily combustible at the hands of incendiary zealots. It is of course true that just two years before the war with Mexico anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia had taken a toll of Catholic churches, homes, and school buildings. What is often overlooked is the widespread public reprehension which the outrages provoked. The following year when the Native Americans supported an attempt to extend the naturalization period to twenty-one years, scathing remarks were heaped upon them. Congressman Samuel Gordon of New York (Democrat) called the Native Americans a "busy, talking, agitating, fanatical, proscribing" party. Representative Martin Grover, a Democrat allied with a Native American faction, shamed them for their "religious bigotry and religious intolerance."⁵²

Midway in the Mexican War, and as the Irish immigration was mounting to its apex, an Ohio Presbyterian minister openly questioned the reality of any "foreign conspiracy." "Our country is safe enough," he asserted, "if we instruct the whole people, and especially the immigrant portion of them . . . in the true principles of government, teach them the differences between intelligent liberty and mere licentiousness, place in their hands the Bible and the constitution of the Republic."⁵³ Not a few thoughtful Americans felt as did this Ohio clergyman. Concerned though they were over the rise in the number of American Catholics, they could not support the reactionary Native Americans.⁵⁴

The increase of Roman Catholic Americans from 35,000 in 1790 to over a million and a half in 1850, was not the sole reason for the nativist riots of the 1830's and 1840's.⁵⁵ Furthermore, to analyze the anti-Catholicism of the period simply on the basis of those pressure points would be as foolish as to judge white-Negro relations today on the basis of Little Rock and Montgomery. By the time of the Mexican War, the

⁵¹ Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), I, 390-391.

⁵² *Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., Vol. XV, pp. 73-74, 80, 82.

⁵³ W. C. Anderson, *The Public and the Duties of Its Citizens* (Dayton, Ohio, 1847), cited in Bodo, *Protestant Clergy*, 81.

⁵⁴ Abraham Lincoln angrily affirmed that should the Nativists (Know-Nothings) ever control the nation he would "prefer emigrating . . . to Russia, . . . where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy." Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, Springfield, August 24, 1855, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953), II, 320-323.

⁵⁵ Gerald Shaughnessy, *Has the Emigrant Kept the Faith* (New York, 1925), 73, 123.

distribution of Catholic citizens was national in scope. Throughout the 1840's, concluded George M. Stephenson, Roman Catholic immigrants were readily assimilated into the culture of the Mississippi Valley.⁵⁶ Likewise it is noteworthy that in the zone most immediate to the fighting, the Central Southwest, the number of American Roman Catholics was disproportionately large—almost ten times more numerous than their closest competitor, the Southern Methodist.⁵⁷ The West, then, was hardly the environment in which to incite an anti-Catholic crusade.

Some Protestant publications expressed a genuine apprehension at the augmentation to the American Catholic Church which would follow in the wake of the nation's expansion into the Southwest. The eventuality was mentioned by only one Catholic organ and then in ridicule.⁵⁸ Clayton Ellsworth surveyed the four major Catholic diocesan papers which discussed both political and religious aspects of the war and found them unanimously prowar.⁵⁹ When the conflict began American Catholic leaders were holding their Sixth Provincial Council at Baltimore, and, as in the case of the violent nativist riots of 1844, these churchmen refrained from any public declaration.⁶⁰

Although a majority of Protestant churches either openly or tacitly supported the conflict, a minority were outspoken in their opposition. These groups were distinctly not voices in the wilderness. For years the American Peace Society had actively publicized the horrors of war. In 1838, it claimed that more than a thousand ministers had pledged themselves to preach at least once a year on peace.⁶¹ By the 1840's it was not uncommon for Congregational, Baptist, and Methodist bodies to place themselves on record favoring international peace.⁶² Once the fir-

⁵⁶ George M. Stephenson, "Nativism in the Forties and Fifties with Special Reference to the Mississippi Valley," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, IX (Sept., 1922), 185-202.

⁵⁷ Ellsworth, "The American Churches," 320. Numerous Protestants had either married into Catholic families or had had commendable treatment at the hands of the Roman Catholic priesthood. George Wilkins Kendall, coeditor of the New Orleans *Picayune*, who accompanied the disastrous Santa Fe filibuster of 1841, spoke favorably of the priests who eased his imprisonment in a Mexican jail. Although a Protestant he married a Catholic. Noel M. Loomis, *The Texan Santa Fe Pioneers*, (2 vols., Norman, 1858), II, 341-345. In 1847, a Lt. Wipple, held prisoner by the Mexicans, related how a Catholic priest furnished him money, clothes, and "every comfort." Logansport [Logan, Indiana] *Telegraph* (Sept. 11, 1847).

⁵⁸ *Catholic Telegraph*, May 6, 1847, cited in Ellsworth, "The American Churches," 303.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 302-303. Another researcher has found the absence of Catholic editorial comment on the war "astounding." Sister Blanche Marie McEniry, *American Catholics in the War with Mexico* (Washington, D.C., 1937), 13 ff.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶¹ Curti, *The American Peace*, 48.

⁶² Sweet, *The Story*, 398. To a lesser degree Presbyterian organs protested the folly of war. *Oberlin Evangelist* (June 10, 1846); *Presbyterians of the West* (May 21, 1846).

ing began the only Protestant denominations to remain united against the war effort were the Quaker, Unitarian, and Congregationalist.

From Boston, the centuries-old source of "papist" denunciations, the Unitarians and Congregationalists violently attacked everything connected with the Mexican struggle. The *Christian Examiner* felt war to be the real "Pandora's Box of society. Let loose the energies of war upon a land, and you let loose the worst passions of the human heart and the worst miseries of human experience." The journal pitied "poor, feeble, distracted" Mexico, attacked the military profession as "vulgar" and predicted that the "historian of a century hence will . . . refer [to the conflict] as the great moral and political fact of the age."⁶³ From his Boston pulpit Theodore Parker vehemently described President Polk's camp as "Fools they are or traitors they must be." He agreed that God had prescribed Manifest Destiny for the United States, but felt it should not be applied by the instrument of war, but instead by commerce and education.⁶⁴ Like the Quakers, the Massachusetts Unitarians presented Congress with a peace petition some dozens of yards in length.⁶⁵

The glaring intensity of the slave problem continually refracted any bright new Protestant polarization that might have been illuminated by the Mexican War. Many a New Englander had become certain that the South had instigated the war to extend its infamous slave system. Northern rage at the "slave oligarchy" took every conceivable shape.⁶⁶ There was the bitter satire of James Russell Lowell's *Bigelow Papers*, encouraging soldiers to desert.⁶⁷ Another time it was the legislature of Massachusetts unanimously resolving: "That the people of Massachusetts will strenuously resist the annexation of any territory . . . in which the institution of slavery is to be tolerated."⁶⁸ At least one antiwar demonstration in Boston was broken up by soldiers.⁶⁹

Antiwar Philadelphia Presbyterians declared that the object of the war was for "the extension of the slaveholders' power." It was a "popular project of bringing about a peace at the expense of an ocean of

⁶³ E. S. Gannett, "The Mexican War," *Christian Examiner*, XLIV (Jan., 1848), 124 ff.

⁶⁴ Theodore Parker, *A Sermon of War* (Boston, 1846), 7. The Unitarians' greatest pacifist spokesman, William Ellery Channing, died on the eve of the war. To examine how violently he opposed aggressive expansion in the Southwest see Channing, *The Works of William Ellery Channing* (Boston, 1894), 766 ff, 901 ff, 987 ff.

⁶⁵ *Cong. Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 156, 761.

⁶⁶ In this conjunction Chauncey S. Boucher's "In Re that Aggressive Slavocracy," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VIII (1921), is always pertinent.

⁶⁷ James Russell Lowell, *The Bigelow Papers* (London, 1865), 70-71.

⁶⁸ *Speeches on the War with Mexico, 1846-1848*.

⁶⁹ Curti, *The American Peace*, 123-124.

blood, shed for the express purpose of extending the area of slavery."⁷⁰ This was echoed by antislave Ohioans angered that "at the back of a slave holding war making President . . . volunteers . . . butcher innocent Mexicans, and with very few exceptions the ministry are as dumb . . . as the dogs that cannot bark."⁷¹ New England attacks on "popery" did not end during the Mexican War. Their volume was appreciably less, however, than blasts directed at the war in general and slaveholders in particular.

An Ohioan, who in April of 1846 had just returned from a visit to New England, reported that members of the Andover Seminary were "vehement" in their opposition to the extension of slavery. "It was the opinion of the best and wisest people there, that if Texas should be admitted as a slave-holding state, the union between the slave and free states would no longer be desirable."⁷² Even more ominously, the *Evangelical Repository* editorialized: "Should the new territory, which is now a free soil, be converted into slave ground, the separation of the North from the South, and that too, at no very distant day, may be predicted, we think, with almost absolute certainty."⁷³

These dreadful forecasts were not visionary so much as realistic. Just as the Mexican War took shape, and well over a decade before the Union was to be divided, America's largest Protestant denominations commenced to split under the enormous pressure of the slave question. In 1845, Baptist unity fissured along the Mason-Dixon line. A year later, when antislavery Methodists had forbidden a slave-owning Georgia bishop to exercise his office, American Methodism broke apart. These circumstances further tended to weaken the latent anti-Catholicism of the 1840's.

One final aspect of the question remains to be examined. Did the war itself produce any notable cases in which American Catholics acted contrary to the nation's best interests? There were none. Tabulating only those in the regular army, there were over 1,000 Catholics in uniform.⁷⁴ Present in combat were distinguished Catholic officers like Generals James Shields and Bennet Riley, as well as youngsters such as

⁷⁰ *Presbyterian Armory*, III (1847-1848), 32; *Evangelical Repository*, III (April, 1847), 545. See also: *Covenanter*, II (Jan., 1847), 192, and (Feb., 1847), 225.

⁷¹ *Oberlin Evangelist*, April 22, 1847. For similar rebukes to their clergy see: *ibid.*, June 9, 1847, and *Speeches on the War with Mexico, 1846-1848*, Congressman Giddings Address, Dec. 15, 1846, 12.

⁷² *Covenanter*, I (June, 1846), 337.

⁷³ *Evangelical Repository*, VII (April, 1847), 547.

⁷⁴ Michael Williams, *American Catholics in the War: National Catholic War Council, 1917-1921* (New York, 1921), 47.

Lieutenants George Gordon Meade and Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard. Recall that it was a century when United States armies usually mustered a large percentage of foreign-born. Nativist Congressman Lewis C. Levin's measure to restrict recruits to native-born Americans was, therefore, easily voted down.⁷⁵

The formation by the Mexican government of the mercenary San Patricio Battalion succeeded in attracting deserters from the United States Army. At first it seemed to provide credence to nativist claims of Roman Catholic treachery. As it turned out, only seven of the fourteen ultimately hanged for desertion were Catholics. The deserters numbered not only Americans but Irish, Germans, English, French, and Polish.⁷⁶

Because there was such a paucity of difficulties between American Roman Catholic soldiers, and their Protestant comrades-in-arms, anti-Catholic alarmists had to make the most of trivial incidents. For example, when Colonel Childs, U.S. Military Governor of Jalapa, stupidly ordered his men to their knees, heads uncovered, and arms grounded at the passing of the Catholic host, the Protestant press rang with denunciations.⁷⁷ Both Generals Zachary Taylor and Stephen W. Kearny expressed their disgust at Catholic baiting. General Kearny even visited a Catholic Mass. He left feeling the service was "grave and impressive; and more decent and worthy of God's temple than many of the ranting, howling discourses heard at home."⁷⁸

Wisely, men like President Polk and Senator Thomas Hart Benton took positive steps to alleviate the difficulties faced by American Catholics fighting in a predominantly Protestant army.⁷⁹ Early in the war the President appointed two Jesuit chaplains ("employees") not only to serve Roman Catholic soldiers, but to prove to the Mexicans that the United States had no intent "to destroy their churches and make war

⁷⁵ *Cong. Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 605-609, 655, 832.

⁷⁶ Edward S. Wallace, "Deserters in the Mexican War," *Hispanic American Review*, XV (1935), 374-383; Fairfax Downey, "Tragic Story of the San Patricio Battalion," *American Heritage*, VI (June, 1955), 20 ff; Thomas F. Meehan, "Catholics in the War with Mexico," *Historical Records and Studies*, XII (June, 1918), 39-65.

⁷⁷ *Reformed Presbyterian*, XI (Aug., 1847), 184; *Presbyterian Armory*, II (1847-1848), 157. Congressman Goggin of Virginia attacked Col. Childs' blunder on Feb. 1, 1848. *Speeches on the War with Mexico, 1846-1848*, 6.

⁷⁸ General Taylor to Surgeon R. C. Wood, July 20, 1847, in *Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battlefields of the Mexican War* (Rochester, N.Y., 1908), 117; Smith, *The War*, 291-292; *Niles' Register*, Aug. 7, 1847.

⁷⁹ McEniry, *American Catholics*, 36-37. Only a few years before, President Tyler had taken a clear stand in defense of the right of Catholic soldiers to refuse to participate in Protestant services. Isabel M. O'Reilly, "One of Philadelphia's Soldiers in the Mexican War," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, XIII (Dec., 1902), 257-284.

upon their religion." He wanted no war of religious "fanaticism."⁸⁰ Because of these appointments the Presbyterian Reverend William L. McCalla threatened to drive Polk from office. The President chose to ignore this zealot.⁸¹ When Polk approached Bishop Hughes as a possible peace emissary to Mexico City, he received a similar blast from the Protestant right.⁸²

In conclusion it can be seen that there were two related sets of circumstances which dissipated the sentiment of the small Protestant minority that would have welcomed a religious crusade. First of all there was no unified anti-Catholic base from which to launch such a campaign. Every Protestant institution, large or minute, could name a dozen evils, such as slavery, militarism, Mormonism, etc., in addition to the "unnatural monster and beast of Catholicism."⁸³ Throughout the Mississippi Valley, where the war received its greatest support, there existed an extreme Protestant heterogeneity. Coexistent with this religious ferment was a socio-economic materialism often anything but Christian. As one itinerant minister summed it up in 1846, "We found the people much more willing to risk their lives in the uncertain chances of war, upon the plains of Mexico, than to enlist under the banner of the Prince of Peace, and fight for glory undying, and a crown unfading."⁸⁴

Second, the character of America in the 1830's and 1840's was inimical to the undemocratic energies which made for collective fanaticism. The one highly charged emotional issue was the growing antislave movement, and, as noted, abolitionism was a divisive, sectional force. The two decades before the Mexican War are renowned for their political liberalism, economic growth, and romantic national optimism. It may well have been a lucky thing for American Catholicism that this was the period when it came of age. By the late 1840's the Church possessed archbishops, bishops, and a purely domestic apparatus for training its priesthood.⁸⁵ It is significant that the United States dignified a devout

⁸⁰ Milo M. Quaife (ed.), *Polk Diary* (4 vols., Chicago, 1910), III, 104. Naturally the Mexican press tried to exacerbate Protestant-Catholic relations within the invading army.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II, 187-189.

⁸² There is much conjecture over precisely what went on between these men. It is summarized in: McEniry, *American Catholics*, 35-42.

⁸³ To quote the *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, March 25, 1847.

⁸⁴ *Christian Record*, IV (Aug., 1846), 51.

⁸⁵ John Tracy Ellis believes that the wartime role of American Catholics was significant in reducing the 1844 nativist peak. John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago, 1956), 67-68.

Roman Catholic, Roger Taney, as Chief Justice of its highest judicial tribunal.

The Mexican War had pitted a largely Protestant United States against a Catholic Mexico, yet anti-Catholic friction was minimized. America's religious toleration had been tested in the emotions of war. Instead of being hard and brittle, it had proved to be remarkably malleable.