Title: Conflicting Voices of the Mexican War

Grade Level: High School

Objectives:
- Research conflicting perspectives of the Mexican War.
- Conduct “fictional” interviews of key individuals in that war.

National History Standards:
- Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
- Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
- Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities
- Standard 5: Historical Issues—Analysis and Decision-Making
- Era 4:1: United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.

Time: 90–180 minutes with a pre-assigned research project

Background:

President James K. Polk came into office in 1845 determined to acquire territory from Mexico. He believed that obtaining the sparsely populated Mexican land that stretched from Texas to California was critical to the future of the United States. The president hoped to purchase—not conquer—the land, but when Mexico rebuffed his advances, Polk ordered American troops under Zachary Taylor to march to the Rio Grande River, across land Mexico claimed. Violence erupted, and Polk asked Congress to declare war. Many Americans, including Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln, opposed the war. Polk, however, prevailed.

President Polk planned a complex campaign. He sent one army under Stephen Kearny to capture New Mexico and then march on to California. Commodore John D. Sloat assaulted California from the sea. Zachary Taylor attacked the main Mexican force from the north with a second army. Battles were hard and marches long.

Despite losses in New Mexico, California, and on its northern front, Mexico refused to surrender. To finish the war, President Polk followed the advice of his general in chief, Winfield Scott, and sent an army to capture Mexico City. He chose Scott himself to make an amphibious landing at Veracruz and then follow the path Hernando Cortés took centuries earlier when he defeated the Aztecs. Scott planned and executed a brilliant campaign, in which he consistently defeated larger forces through superior tactics and bold maneuvers. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 ended the war.
“Now Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States ... and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that ... the two nations are now at war.”

—President James K. Polk, 1846

“People of the United States! Your Rulers are precipitating you into a fathomless abyss of crime and calamity! Awake and arrest the work of butchery ere it shall be too late to preserve your souls from the guilt of wholesale slaughter!

—Horace Greeley, prominent war opponent and editor of the New York Tribune, 1846
Materials:
- Online Video—Jose Maria Tornel y Mendivil, Mexican secretary of War, 1837
  http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson4a.asx
- Online Video—George Ballentine, English volunteer for the US, 1853
  http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson4b.asx
- Online Video—Juan Batista Vigil y Alarid, acting governor of New Mexico, 1846
  http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson4c.asx
- Online Video—Ulysses S. Grant, American soldier, 1885
  http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/video/Lesson4d.asx
- Access to library for extra research

Lesson:

Play the first-person accounts from the Mexican War on the online videos to introduce the class to different perspectives on the war. Have the students discuss those perspectives and consider how various groups felt about the war. Then ask them to split up into pairs and choose one perspective of the Mexican War to research.

For their research project, students choose either an individual or a group of people impacted by the conflict. Individuals could include those from the videos as well as the following: President James Polk, General Zachary Taylor, General Winfield Scott, President Antonio López de Santa Anna, Mexican general Mariano Arista, or Robert E. Lee (like Grant, then a rising young officer in the U.S. Army). Another possibility is Ramon Alcaraz, a Mexican writer who reflected on the war after its conclusion. Henry David Thoreau and William Tecumseh Sherman both provide American perspectives on the war. Groups include American politicians, Mexican leaders, Mexicans in the conquered territories (especially New Mexico), American soldiers, and Mexican soldiers.

Students will search through library reference materials and biographies for information about their chosen individual or group. Students will then create five to ten specific questions about the war to ask their individual or group; and they will research the most likely answers to those questions. Taking on the role of interviewer and interviewee, the student pairs will perform their interviews before the class, which will thereby develop a deeper understanding of different sides of the Mexican War.

Broadside for recruiting volunteer fighters
National Museum of American History
Map of the United States (detail), 1839 Courtesy of Library of Congress
Bibliography

General

**Section I: War of Independence**

**Section II: Wars of Expansion**

**Section III: Civil War**

**Section IV: World War II**

**Section V: Cold War/Vietnam**

**Section VI: September 11 and Its Aftermath**
Americans at War, produced by The History Channel
An introduction to the themes of the exhibition

War of Independence
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Lydia Minturn Post, Long Island housewife, 1776
- James Collins, teenage soldier, no date
- Doonyontat, Wyandot chief, 1779
- Elijah Churchill, recipient of the first Purple Heart, 1783

Mexican War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- José María Tornel y Mendívil, Mexican secretary of war, 1837
- George Ballentine, English volunteer for the United States, 1853
- Juan Bautista Vigil y Alarid, acting governor of New Mexico, 1846
- Ulysses S. Grant, American soldier, 1885

Civil War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Louis Myers, Third West Virginia Infantry, 1862
- William G. Christie, Minnesota soldier, 1863
- Eugenia Phillips, spy for the South in Washington D.C., 1861
- Spottswood Rice, African American Union soldier, 1864

World War I
World War I Overview, produced by The History Channel

World War II
World War II Cartoons, produced by The History Channel
World War II Overviews in the Newsreel format, produced by The History Channel:
- From World War I to World War II
- The North Atlantic and North African Theater
- The European Theater
- The Pacific Theater
The USO in World War II, produced by The History Channel
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- George Hynes, U.S. Army, a last letter home, 1942
- Robert Morris, U.S. Coast Guard, fighting in Italy, 1943
- Robert Sherrod, journalist, the beach at Tarawa, 1943
- Ann Darr, Women Airforce Service Pilots, 1997
- Daniel Inouye, Medal of Honor recipient, 2000

Vietnam
Excerpt from Huey Helicopter—Air Armada, The History Channel documentary, 2002
First-Person Accounts, produced by Arrowhead Film & Video:
- Hal Moore, commander of a Seventh Cavalry Regiment battalion, 2003
- Fred Castleberry, veteran of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division, 2002
- Clarence Sasser, recipient of the Medal of Honor, 2004, (produced by Pyramid Studios)