

LEQ Exemplar

One of the prompts from 2015:

“Evaluate the extent to which the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) marked a turning point in the debate over slavery in the United States, analyzing what changed and what stayed the same from the period before the war and the period after it.”

Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is well known for its defense of freedom of conscience. However, what is less well known is what specific circumstances led Thoreau to write it. It was, in fact, a response to the Mexican-American War and the widely held belief in New England that the war was fought to advance the interests of slave holders. The Missouri Compromise, which years before codified a balance between free and slave states, was tenuous. The war, which took place from 1846-1848 during the Polk administration, was a relatively short conflict that ended in enormous territorial gains for the US, including much of the present day American southwest, but also disrupted this balance. [CONTEXT] As Thoreau’s protest demonstrates, it also marked a turning point in the national debate over slavery. Some have argued that the war did not alter the economic tension over slavery between the North and South; however, by adding the question of new territories and control of the Senate into the debate, the Mexican-American War led to the beginning of political disunion between the North and South. [Thesis- note how “complexity” requirement is built in]

Both before and after the war, Northern and Southern economic interests were diverging from each other, leading to competing economic systems. [CLAIM] It is certain that Northern textile mills relied on Southern cotton, but other Northern industries did not. Moreover, small

farmers in the North viewed Southern slave labor as an unfair advantage- this was expressed after the war with the advent of the “Free Soil” Party in the 1850s, a group which primarily consisted of white farmers who decried competition with slave labor. Additionally, both before and after the Civil War, immigrants flocked to the North for job opportunities and avoided the South. Hence, the Irish Potato Famine in the late 1840s led to a swelling of the Northern Irish population, and immigrants ballooned the Northern population in general. The Mexican-American War did not fundamentally change the competing economic systems of the North and South.

Yet, it did change the territory on which this debate over slavery played out, and led to the beginning of political disunion. [CLAIM] The war opened up vast new territories for white American settlement. Many Southerners viewed this new land as ripe for plantations, while Northerners wanted territories without slavery. Hence, the Wilmot Proviso introduced in Congress at the beginning of the war was a Northern attempt to prevent the establishment of a slave-based economy in any new territory gained. This is also clearly demonstrated over the crisis that ensued after the war over the status of California. After the state applied for statehood, a heated debate broke out over whether or not it would become a free or a slave state. Both the Wilmot Proviso and the ensuing debate over California led to talk among Southern extremists of secession from the Union.

Secession became more likely because the Mexican-American War also led to the dissolution of long standing political compromises. [CLAIM] The Missouri Compromise had for years kept a balance in the Senate between free and slave states. The Compromise of 1850, which replaced it and settled the California question, gave the North a numerical advantage in

the Senate. Moreover, the Compromise's promise of a stronger Fugitive Slave Act was almost immediately contested by Northern states, leading to accusations of betrayal by Southerners and the rise of "Fire Eaters," otherwise known as secessionists. None of this would have happened without the addition of new territory in the west, which in turn was caused by the Mexican-American War.