

## **Prompt:**

**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 to the period after it.**

## **Long Essay Rubric and Color Coded Scoring:**

### **CONTEXTUALIZATION:**

1 POINT- Response must relate the topic of the prompt to broader historical events, developments, or processes that occur before, during, or continue after the time frame of the question.

### **THESIS:**

1 POINT – Presents a thesis that makes a historically defensible claim and responds to all parts of the question. The thesis must consist of one or more sentences located in the introduction.

### **EVIDENCE & SUPPORT FOR ARGUMENT:**

1 POINT – Provides specific examples of evidence relevant to the topic of the prompt. (Minimum of 2)

1 POINT – Cannot earn without first point

Supports an argument in response to the prompt using specific and relevant examples of evidence

### **HISTORICAL THINKING SKILL: Analysis and Reasoning**

1 POINT – Uses historical reasoning (in this case CCOT) to frame or structure an argument that addresses the prompt.

1 POINT – Cannot earn this point without earning the first point

- To earn the second point, the response must demonstrate a complex understanding, which must be part of the argument and not merely a phrase or reference. This could include:
  - ✓ Explaining nuance by analyzing multiple variables
  - ✓ Explaining both similarity and difference, both continuity and change, or multiple causes, or both causes and effects
  - ✓ Explaining relevant and insightful connections within and across periods
  - ✓ Confirming the validity of an argument by corroborating multiple perspectives across themes
  - ✓ Qualifying or modifying an argument by considering diverse or alternative views or evidence

Historical Evidence/Specific Factual Information – any underlined words or phrases

### Essay Sample #1:

From the founding of the United States and the incorporation of a fugitive slave law and the three-fifths compromise in its Constitution, the debate over slavery divided the nation. The Missouri Compromise in 1820 was effective at lessening some of the sectionalism in the United States. With the election of James K. Polk came the ideas of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion. These ideas of nationalism and individualism put the debate of slavery on hold for a while, but only until the Mexican-American War. The war renewed the debate over slavery especially concerning westward expansion, and introduced ideas such as popular sovereignty that led to increased sectionalism and ideas of secession.

The Mexican-American War's direct result, from the Treaty of Guadalupe, was the Mexican Cession and the retention of Texas in the United States. This expanded the United States massively and, coupled with the acquisition of the Oregon Territory from Britain, encouraged westward expansion. With expansion came a vital question: would the new states be slave or free? This threatened to tip the balance between slave and free states established in the Missouri Compromise. Texas was admitted as a slave state and Oregon a free state, but there was still the Mexican Cession to take care of. The new territories escalated the debate between pro and anti-slavery groups. Eventually, the dispute would be partially resolved by the Compromise of 1850, admitting California as a free state but passing a new Fugitive Slave Law. The admission of ex-Mexican territories in the Union threatened to divide the Union itself.

Many new ideas were formed after the Mexican-American War to deal with the renewed debate over slavery. Though Manifest Destiny was mostly gone, its idea that the white America was destined to rule the world was not. This contributed to southern reinforcement of slavery as a positive good, even for the slaves themselves. In the north, the Mexican-American War inspired civil disobedience and increased activism by abolitionist groups. More and more northerners rejected the idea of slavery as a necessary evil. Finally, the controversial policy of popular sovereignty was started to deal with admitting states from the Mexican Cession, e.g. New Mexico. This fuelled sectionalism and even violence in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Acts.

It was inevitable, after a tense compromise lasting for 30 years that ideas of secession would rise. However, the Mexican American War expedited these ideas. The compromises made in the aftermath of the war led southerners to feel increasingly threatened by the federal government fearing that slavery may be abolished altogether. Before the Mexican-American War there was an uneasy peace between north and south. After, northern abolitionists such as John Brown clashed with advocates for slavery, with politicians like Stephen Douglas arguing to preserve the Union. The Mexican-American War did not change the nature of the debate over slavery, but it did highlight many southern concerns and accelerated sectionalism.

It would be impossible to pin the slow descent into civil war on only one event between 1820 and 1861, but the Mexican-American War would be one of the largest logs that fueled the flames of secession and sectionalism. It brought an issue present from the foundation of the country back into national prominence, indirectly leading to massive debate over Dred Scott v. Sanford. Bloody Kansas, and Uncle Tom's Cabin. In the end, the war did not mark a turning point in the slavery debates, it merely turned it westward and faster.

## Essay Sample #2

The Mexican-American War would mark a turning point in American history truly like no other. It was one of the reasons why the US in the mid-1800s eventually fought the Civil War to become unified once again and form one of the world's superpowers in present days. Ever since the American Revolution and the Constitution of the United States was drafted, slavery was going to be an issue simply because it was forced out of talks for over 30 years. Yet in the mid-1800's, the issue started to emerge once more with the policy of Manifest Destiny and imperialism. As the US expanded across North America the dispute over whether new territory would be slave or free spurred huge conflicts. The Mexican-American War, which resulted in a large chunk of land being added to the US, was no exception. Although it marked a turning point in the debate over slavery that would lead to the Civil War, it alone was not the only cause as state rights was another issue.

Besides being a controversial war and a demonstration of blatant imperialism, the US victory in the Mexican-American War resulted in massive territory going to the US. Initially beginning as a conflict over the border of Texas, Polk quickly turned it into a larger conflict that resulted in the exchange of Texas and the south west for a small payment by the United States. As this was a period of western migration the territories' populations quickly rose resulting in their applying for statehood. This was the start of the conflict.

Up to this point, political power in the US was fairly equally divided between slave states and free states. Both had equal representation in the Senate. Yet the notion of new states severely threatened the balance and it was for that reason that the Mexican Cession was a turning point for slavery. Compromise was attempted. With the Missouri Compromise before the War in 1820, a dividing line was created at 36° 30'. The Compromise of 1850 also attempted to appease the conflict but failed as well when the north largely ignored the Fugitive Slave Act. This conflict created deep resentments between parties and eventually the Civil War was started. These changes that were started due to the Mexican Cession directly marked an increase in the tension between the north and the south. Yet, the things that did not change also seemed to contribute to the ultimate Civil War.

The conflict of state nullification and the existence of slavery were all things left unchanged by the Mexican-American War. Slavery continued until the Civil War and it even continued to grow due to the war. Slavery's expansion depended on more territory being added to the Union as the people had already formed strong opinions on the topic. The war did not ease sectional conflicts but it also did not change the theory of nullification, which was a reason for such conflicts. It did not break up the class structure set in the south, and it made a stronger risk for losing their economic and cultural system. Thus, although the Mexican-American War added to the conflict, the conflict already had existed for nearly one hundred years.

Historians looking back on the Mexican-American War for a country ignoring its largest issue with a war that only furthered that issue. Although some may view it as an escalation of the issue of slavery it was the final push needed to cause the Civil War. No other event demonstrated the tension in the political sphere that attempts at dividing up this land between free and slave states. Yet other way, the war changed the way of the world forever, and made the United States the 50 states that it is today.

## **Personal Reflection**

1. What score do you believe sample #1 received out of 6? Why?
  2. What score do you believe sample #2 received out of 6? Why?
  3. What were the strengths of your essay?
  4. What will you work on for next time?