Westward Expansion: War Begets War Alternate

1. Many people loved James Polk for what he achieved. Many hated him. Either way, he got a lot done. Polk accomplished the largest expansion of American territory since the Louisiana Purchase. He also established a treasury system that would last decades. He also started a War with Mexico, and many people believe his actions led to the Civil War.
2. Polk was elected to the presidency when he was 49. He was elected when he promised to conquer all the western lands and settle them. First on his list was bringing Texas into the USA. He finished the process of annexing Texas that John Tyler had begun. The result was strained relations with Mexico. Mexico believed that the United States had effectively just stolen a large part of its northern territories. Even though Mexico was angry with the USA, Polk tried to purchase the majority of California from Mexico. This was to provide a western base for expansion, as well as a trade gateway to Asia.
3. Mexico refused to meet with Polk's ambassador. In response, Polk hoped to force the Mexicans negotiate. He threatened military action. Polk ordered the army down to the Mexican border in Texas. Tensions soared as American and Mexican troops eyed each other at close distance. Eventually shots were fired. No one knows who fired first, or where. What was certain was that American soldiers had been killed and Polk had a golden opportunity before him.
4. Claiming that the Mexicans had attacked, Polk asked Congress for a Declaration of War in the spring of 1846. A few congressmen like a young Abraham Lincoln argued against declaring war. Most people enthusiastically approved. Congress voted, and suddenly, the US was at war.
5. The war moved swiftly and well for the United States. By summer, the territory of New Mexico was under American control. Soon, an army under the command of Zachary Taylor could claim complete control of the territory around the Rio Grande River, and by 1847 Mexico City had been surrounded and then captured by General Winfield Scott. The war was effectively over, to the humiliation of the Mexican government.
6. In the meantime, President Polk was negotiating with Great Britain. Britain claimed some western territories through Canada. America claimed some of those same lands. Specifically, there was disagreement about the northern border between Canada and the United States. Polk was aggressively pushing to claim all of the Oregon Territory up to the southern tip of the Russian Territory in Alaska at the 54th parallel of latitude. Some Americans wanted to fight Britain again, but in the end, Polk compromised. The United States claimed land up to the 49th parallel, which is still our border with Canada.
7. The remaining question was: what next? Mexico had been conquered, and a substantial portion of the Oregon Territory was in U.S. hands. Some people argued for the complete annexation of all of Mexico. They wanted it all to be a territory of the United States. Polk disagreed. He was content to sign the peace treaty that actually ended the war. In exchange for peace and a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Mexico City and all territories south of the Rio Grande (as well as a large multi-million dollar payout,) Mexico surrendered claim to California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming. The path of the United States to the Pacific Ocean was clear. Polk even made an offer to buy the island of Cuba from Spain. Resistance from abolitionists in Congress stopped him, because Cuba would have entered as a slave territory. Also a lack of interest from Spain killed the deal in its early stages.
8. Fantastically, Polk's very successes led to his party's defeat in the next election. (He had vowed to serve only a single term, so he did not run again.) Before the war, the Whigs had been vocal opponents of the Mexican-American War. They claimed it was an immoral invasion and an aggressive act. Now that the popular war was over, they nominated the General and war hero Zachary Taylor as their nominee for president. They won the election easily. This was the second time a Whig had been elected. Harrison had been the first, but had died before he could accomplish anything. America had just undergone a dramatic expansion. What would the new president do about it, and about the most important question of the day: when these new territories became states, would they be slave or free?
9. When Taylor was inaugurated in 1849, the question of how to divide the new territories was already causing stress in Congress. He hoped to let the new territories immediately enter the Union on their own as States. He was hoping if this went quickly, the debates in Congress could be avoided. He hoped that if there was no debate, there wouldn’t be a major fight. California (which was in the midst of a huge population boom due to gold being discovered,) was eager to enter the Union, and had already adopted a state constitution that outlawed slavery. This made the Southern slave states very nervous.
10. Southern states continued to threaten secession whenever discussions about the new lands would erupt. The arguments in Congress grew especially loud when Taylor proposed also allowing New Mexico to enter as another new and slave-free state. Sadly, Taylor would never have a chance to resolve the overall question about slavery. After eating some possibly contaminated food, he fell ill and died in the summer of 1850. In his place would be Millard Fillmore, one of the worst Presidents in history.
11. Once again, the Whigs had lost an elected President to a premature death. Once again, the new President was hostile to overall Whig goals. Fillmore was very much in favor of the South. He opposed any effort to restrict slavery. Instead of trying to prevent Congress from dealing with the slavery issue, he endorsed the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise of 1850 would actively reopen the debate about slavery in the new territories. Catastrophe would follow.
12. The Compromise of 1850 was designed to give each side some of what it wanted. The first was to admit California as a free state, satisfying northern abolitionists. Another was to give New Mexico territorial status, but not admit it as a state. This postponed the slavery debate for another day. To make the South happy, they passed the Fugitive Slave Act. The Fugitive Slave Act forced federal officers to assist slave owners seeking escaped slaves. This meant that the police in New York would be forced to help catch slaves, even though slavery was illegal in New York. Finally, the slave trade would be abolished in Washington D.C., so no one could sell slaves there, but slavery would still be permitted. For the time being the debate over slavery stopped. It was a time bomb, waiting to go off in the future. In the end, the only large accomplishment of Fillmore's tenure in office was to send Commodore Perry with a small fleet to Japan. They went there to force Japanese to open their borders to trade at gunpoint. That wouldn't even actually happen until after Fillmore was no longer President. The election of 1852 resulted in the election of Franklin Pierce to the Presidency. It was on Pierce’s watch that the fighting that would lead to Civil War began.

Answer the following questions using the SARs format.

1. What caused the Mexican-American War?
2. What happened because of the Mexican-American War?
3. Besides Mexico, what other territories did the Polk administration take over, and from who?
4. What was the major problem Zachary Taylor experienced when trying to add in the new territories?
5. Why was the Compromise of 1850 needed?
6. What did the Compromise of 1850 do?