



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# THOMAS CORWIN

### CREDITS:

Starring George Rose, John Colicos, Lester Rawlins, John Howard, and H.M. Wynant. Written by Don M. Mankiewicz. Directed by Michael Ritchie.

Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the American desire for territorial expansion (Manifest Destiny).
- To discuss the issue of morality in a war of aggression.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### BACKGROUND:

When James K. Polk entered office in 1845, as America's eleventh President, the territory of the United States had not expanded in a quarter of a century. Our land area stood at 1,788,000 square miles. During Polk's four-year term it was increased by 1,204,000 square miles.

The platform of the Democratic Convention in 1844 stated:

"That our title to the whole of the Territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable; that no portion of the same ought to be ceded to England or any other power, and that the reoccupation of Oregon and the reannexation of Texas at the earliest practicable period are great American measures, which this Convention recommends to the cordial support of the Democracy of the Union."

"Cordial support" was soon forthcoming, as the annexation of Texas was approved by joint resolution of Congress and signed by Polk's predecessor, John Tyler, three days before he left office.

Texas statehood in 1845 enraged Mexico, and when Polk's emissary attempted to negotiate with the Mexicans for the territories of New Mexico and California they would not even see him.

When Mexican and American soldiers clashed in disputed territory on April 25, 1846, Polk had a pretext for gaining by war what he could not achieve through negotiation.

Whig outcries against the war were somewhat tempered by the fact that America's successful generals in the field, Zachary Taylor, "Old Rough and Ready," and later Winfield Scott, "Old Fuss and Feathers," were both Whigs.

There was some vocal criticism, however. Henry Clay in a speech against war appropriations said: "This is no war of defense, but one of unnecessary and of offensive aggression."

Henry David Thoreau went to jail for not paying his taxes that would support the war. But "Manifest Destiny" excited the population, and most Americans, even if privately ashamed, remained publicly silent. Years later, Ulysses S. Grant said that he believed that Polk wanted and planned for war to be provoked, and that the annexation of Texas was an act of aggression. He added: "I had a horror of the Mexican War...only I had not moral courage enough to resign... I considered my supreme duty was to my flag."

### SYNOPSIS:

We see Whig Senator Thomas Corwin, a former governor of Ohio and possible candidate for the President in 1848, unable to resolve his doubts about the honorable premises of the Mexican War. He is first critical of his Whig colleagues who question the sincerity of Polk's motives and pronouncements. Corwin believes that the President should be supported in the war effort and be given every benefit of doubt.

Many months later with war still raging, we see Corwin, now convinced beyond a doubt of Polk's insincerity, refuse to vote for war supplies, thereby dashing his chances for the presidency and subjecting himself to scorn and ridicule.

In 1861 Corwin was appointed by Abraham Lincoln, another opponent of the Mexican War, to be minister to Mexico.

#### VOCABULARY:

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

sporadic	caucus	protract
reconciliation	indecently	apprehension
forbearance	reticent	stalemate
reiterated	speculative	despotic
Whig	integrity	indemnified
vindicate	flimsy	flagrant
invoke	assess	usurped
annexation	temperate	ascertain
cogently	ridicule	scourge
burden of proof	obstruction	transgressor

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. On April 25, 1846, two companies of American soldiers are attacked by Mexican troops. Where were the American troops? Why? Why did the Mexicans attack them?
2. With Polk's declaration of war, Corwin felt firmly obligated to support the president and the war by voting money to supply the troops. What reasons did he give for this unqualified support? Do you agree with him? Explain.
3. The fears and predictions of Senator John Davis turned out to be painfully prophetic, yet he was ridiculed and ignored, especially by Corwin, when he advanced his ideas. Why was Davis so ineffective? How do you feel about Corwin's techniques for rebutting Senator Davis? Explain.
4. What, according to Corwin, was the difference between questioning the integrity of "Speaker" Polk, and challenging the honesty of "President" Polk? Do you agree with Corwin's approach?

Did events during the administration of Richard Nixon alter the way Americans view their presidents? Explain.

5. General Santa Ana was "allowed" to return to Mexico from Cuban exile by President Polk. What was Polk's strategy? Was it successful?
6. What did the slavery issue have to do with arguments against territorial expansion? Study the Compromise of 1850 to find out how this issue was "resolved."
7. When Webster and Corwin discuss prospects for a Whig Presidential victory in 1848, why are the potential candidacies of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster rejected? What reasons does Webster give for advancing the candidacy of Corwin? Who got the Whig nomination? How did he do? Explain.
8. What two pronouncements of Polk's convince Corwin to speak out in opposition to the war and vote against the supply bill? What was the response from fellow Whigs?

#### ACTIVITY:

Divide the class into two groups and designate one group as supporters of the Mexican side and the other as supporters of the American side.

Give all class members several days to conduct research into the causes and justifications of the American War with Mexico. Hold an informal debate where both sides present arguments and rebuttals.

#### FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:

1. Webster says: "Wars are never ended...once begun they must be won or lost...we permitted it to begin, now we must permit it to be won." Study the Vietnam War, probably the most unpopular war in American History. Was Webster's argument used as a justification in Vietnam? Do you agree with Webster's statement?
2. Examine the U.S. Constitution. Who is empowered to "declare" war? Who, in practice, is most likely to make war? Why? Does the system appear to work? Give reasons. Find out how

American involvement in Korea and Vietnam began. How was it sustained?