

YOUNG HICKORY:
THE LIFE AND PRESIDENCY OF JAMES KNOX POLK

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In May 1844, Democratic Party leaders met in Baltimore to nominate their candidate for the presidential election to be held later that year. They passed over leading contenders, including Martin Van Buren, Lewis Cass, John C. Calhoun, and Thomas Hart Benton, and instead nominated James Knox Polk, a relatively unknown former Congressman from Tennessee.¹ Many people thought Polk's political career was over following his second failed bid to win reelection as Governor of Tennessee just nine months before.² The nomination of this "dark horse" candidate—which surprised no one more than Polk himself—was met with ridicule and derision by the opposing Whig Party.³ "Who is James K. Polk?" they jeered.⁴ The Whigs considered Polk no match for their candidate, Henry Clay, a popular and influential politician from Kentucky. Even Clay, in a moment of "arrogant candor," expressed regret that the Democrats had not selected a candidate "more worthy of a contest."⁵ The Whigs should not have been so smug. Buoyed by the popularity of the Democrats' expansionist platform, Polk won the election by a narrow margin.⁶ At age 49, he became the

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11th President of the United States, the youngest man up to that time to be elected to the position.⁷

For the next four years, Polk tirelessly devoted himself to achieving *each and every one* of the goals he set during his presidency. Yet, despite his many accomplishments, Polk did not escape his four years in office with his reputation unscathed. Despite America's victory in the Mexican War, the Whigs, led by Abraham Lincoln, harshly criticized Polk for his role in the outbreak of the war, which led to his censure by the House of Representatives in 1848.⁸ Several years later, Ulysses S. Grant concurred with Lincoln's assessment of Polk in his memoirs, referring to the Mexican War as "the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."⁹ These attacks on Polk negatively affected history's view of him. However, attitudes about him began to change in the 20th century, as presidential historians took a fresh look at Polk's accomplishments, and consistently included him in their rankings of America's "great" or "near great" presidents.¹⁰ As a result, many Americans were again asking, "Who is James K. Polk?"

I. Polk's Background and How it Influenced him as President

James K. Polk was born on November 2, 1795 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, a place "where men lived simply on the fruits of their own labor without expectations of easy wealth and dealt honestly with each other on a basis of rough equality and mutual respect."¹¹ Polk was the first of 10 children. His father, Samuel Polk, was of Scots-Irish descent, and was a slaveholder, a successful farmer, and a surveyor. His mother, Jane Knox Polk, was the great-grandniece of Scottish Reformation leader John Knox.¹²

Polk's childhood was marked by several distinct influences that would later affect him as President. Significantly, Polk's grandfather, Ezekial, and his father Samuel, were staunch supporters of Jefferson's Republican philosophy, which undoubtedly influenced Polk's later political views. As one historian notes, "As Polk grew into adulthood, everything he had grasped about the conflict

between Federalist and Republican values seemed to reinforce a basic and logical argument that the country would be better served if national government was the declared servant of all the people (or all those who were not slaves) and was barred from acting chiefly as the agent of the rich and powerful constituencies.”¹³

While the Polk family may have agreed on politics, they did not agree on religion. Polk’s mother, Jane, was a devout Presbyterian. Raised under the influence of her strict Presbyterianism, Polk derived a rigid self-discipline that would govern his actions throughout his life.¹⁴ His father, however, was not deeply religious. During Polk’s baptism ceremony, Samuel Polk refused to affirm his belief in Christianity. As a result, the Reverend James Wallis refused to baptize the infant Polk.¹⁵ Perhaps due to this religious tension within his family, Polk was not known to “speak on his religious commitment” during his presidency, nor is there anything in his presidential diary to suggest “that he prayed for guidance or heavenly intervention in his life—not even during the war with Mexico.”¹⁶

When Polk was 11, he and his family moved to the Duck River region of Middle Tennessee. There, the family grew rich, with Samuel Polk turning to land speculation and becoming a county judge and respected civic leader.¹⁷ His family’s desire for land and the success they encountered after moving west no doubt influenced Polk’s later commitment to the large-scale expansion of the nation’s borders during his presidency.

During his childhood, Polk suffered from extremely poor health. As a result, his early education was delayed “in consequence of having been very much afflicted.”¹⁸ When he was 17, his illness was diagnosed as urinary stones, which required major surgery.¹⁹ His father sent Polk to Philadelphia in the back of a covered wagon to be operated on by Dr. Philip Syng Physick, who was known as “the father of American surgery.”²⁰ However, Polk’s pain became so severe during the journey that his father instead turned to Dr. Ephraim McDowell of Danville, Kentucky to perform the surgery. Polk was awake during the incredibly painful surgery, in which a sharp instrument called a “gorget” was forced through his pros-

tate and into his bladder to remove the urinary stones.²¹ Despite excruciating pain, the surgery was a success, although it may have left Polk sterile, as he never had children.²² One historian concludes that surviving this encounter gave Polk the characteristics of “courage, grit, and unyielding iron will” that he later displayed in dealing with his opponents as President.²³

After he was cured of his bad health, Polk was determined to get a proper education. Following his recovery from the surgery, he enrolled at a Presbyterian school near his home. A year later, his father agreed to send him to the more distinguished Bradley Academy, located in Murfreesboro, a small town near Nashville. Polk excelled at his new school, where he was adjudged “the most promising boy in the school.”²⁴

In 1816, Polk was admitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He majored in mathematics and the classics, “subjects he felt would best discipline his mind.”²⁵ At the University of North Carolina, Polk joined the Dialectic Society, one of the school’s debate clubs, where he honed both his debate and leadership skills. Polk held a succession of offices in the Dialectic Society, and twice was elected as its president.²⁶ Polk’s participation in the Dialectic Society led to an interest in a career in law and politics. According to historian Walter R. Borneman, “it was here that he learned to speak, write, and formulate an argument.”²⁷

II. Polk’s Character and Personality

With respect to his character and personality, Polk was a man who was true to his beliefs, and who never seemed in doubt. As one historian notes, “On the first day when he strode onto the floor of the Tennessee House of Representatives, there was about him a moral certitude and self-righteousness that he carried to the White House.”²⁸ Others have been less charitable of Polk’s character and personality, referring to him as “colorless, methodical, plodding [and] narrow”²⁹ and a “stern task-master.”³⁰

Polk's adversaries often poked fun at his stiff and humorless demeanor. For example, John Quincy Adams once wrote in his diary that Polk "has no wit, no literature, no point of argument, no gracefulness of delivery, no elegance of language, no philosophy, no pathos, no felicitous impromptus; nothing that constitutes an orator, but confidence, fluency, and labor."³¹

Nonetheless, even Polk's detractors would surely agree that he was extremely disciplined and hard-working. He routinely worked 12-hour days, and rarely delegated responsibilities to others. "I have never in my life labored more constantly or intensely," he once said of his presidency. "I am the hardest working man in the country."³² Polk's strong work ethic, self-discipline, and confidence would allow him to accomplish much during his presidency. In *A Country of Vast Designs*, author Robert W. Merry sums it up best:

Small of stature and drab of temperament, James Polk was often underestimated by Whig opponents and sometimes by his own Democratic allies, despite his early political accomplishments in Congress. He struck many as a smaller-than-life figure with larger-than-life ambitions. But he harbored an absolute conviction that he was a man of destiny, and his unremitting tenacity ultimately produced a successful presidency.³³

III. Polk's Non-Government Career

After graduating from the University of North Carolina with honors in 1818, Polk returned to Tennessee to study law. Polk never envisioned the law as a permanent career choice, but rather as a means to an end. His participation in the Dialectic Society had spurred an interest in politics, and for Polk, the law provided the most obvious path into the political arena.³⁴

To gain admission to the bar in Polk's day, it was necessary to study cases under the guidance of a licensed practitioner. Polk was accepted to study under Felix Grundy, a prominent Nashville trial lawyer and experienced politician. Grundy had moved to Tennessee from Kentucky, where he had served both as a representative to the United States House of Representatives and as

chief justice of the Kentucky Supreme Court.³⁵ Grundy quickly became Polk's first mentor, and the two men would remain close friends and political allies in the years to come.³⁶

After completing his law studies with Grundy, Polk was admitted to the Tennessee bar in June 1820.³⁷ He established a law practice in Columbia, Tennessee. His first case involved defending his father against a public fighting charge. He was able to secure a dismissal of the charge for a fine of \$1 plus costs.³⁸ Polk's law practice was successful, since there were many cases regarding the settlement of debts following the Panic of 1819. In the courtroom, Polk was described as "wary and skillful, but frank and honorable [and] in addressing a jury he was always animated and impressive in manner."³⁹

Despite his busy law practice, Polk still found time for socializing. During this time, he met Sarah Childress, the daughter of a wealthy and respectable family from Murfreesboro. While the details of their courtship are largely unknown, a favorite story among historians is that Andrew Jackson encouraged their romance:

Supposedly, Polk asked his mentor, Jackson, what he should do to advance his political career. Jackson advised him to find a wife and settle down. Asked if he had anyone in particular in mind, Old Hickory replied, "The one who will never give you trouble. Her wealthy family, education, health and appearance are all superior. You know her well." It took Polk only a moment to suggest what should have been the obvious. "Do you mean Sarah Childress?" he asked. "I shall go at once and ask her."⁴⁰

Polk and Sarah Childress were married on New Year's Day 1824. Polk was 28 years old; Sarah was 20. They remained married until Polk's death in 1849.⁴¹ By all accounts, their marriage was a true love match, and Sarah was an "ideal mate" for Polk.⁴² As John Seigenthaler notes in his biography of Polk, "Sarah's personality—outgoing, vivacious, and witty—was a natural complement to her husband's formal reserve. She brought out the best in him."⁴³

IV. Polk's Government Career

In 1819, during the time Polk was studying law under Felix Grundy in Nashville, Grundy was elected to the Tennessee state legislature. He suggested that Polk accompany him to Murfreesboro, where the legislature was to meet, and seek election as clerk of the state senate. In September 1819, Polk was elected clerk of the Tennessee state senate. He was paid the sum of \$6 per day to manage the paperwork of the senate, which was viewed as a very generous wage, since legislators received only \$4 per day.⁴⁴ Polk quickly established a reputation as “a diligent and effective senate clerk.”⁴⁵ He was reelected in 1821, and remained in the post until 1822.⁴⁶

In 1822, Polk resigned his position as clerk of the state senate to run for the Tennessee state legislature. He won the election, defeating the incumbent, William Yancey, and became the new representative of Maury County, Tennessee.⁴⁷ In 1825, Polk ran for the United States House of Representatives for Tennessee's sixth congressional district. He campaigned vigorously, traveling throughout the district to court voters. Polk's opponents said that at 29 years old, he was too young to serve in the House of Representatives.⁴⁸ However, Polk proved them wrong and won the election.

Polk's congressional career lasted 14 years. Elected to the House of Representatives seven times, Polk learned campaigning techniques and strategies that would serve him well with the voters.⁴⁹ He was a loyal supporter of the policies of his mentor and fellow Tennessee Democrat, Andrew Jackson, who was elected the seventh President of the United States in 1828. Jackson was known as “Old Hickory”—as in “tough as hickory”—a nickname earned during the early days of the War of 1812.⁵⁰ Polk's support for Jackson's policies was so strong that he was nicknamed “Young Hickory” after his mentor.⁵¹

In 1833, after being elected to his fifth term in Congress, Polk became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.⁵² In this position, Polk was at the center of the major domestic

policy debate over the nation's banking system. Throughout the crisis, Polk remained loyal to the position of his mentor and now-President Andrew Jackson, and was an outspoken critic of the Second Bank. After the Ways and Means Committee undertook an investigation of the bank at Jackson's request, the majority of committee members found no evidence of wrongdoing. Polk, however, issued a minority report that contained a stinging criticism of the bank, and recited a long list of justifications for removing federal deposits from it.⁵³ Polk would later deliver a speech on the floor of the House, in which he railed against the Bank and its head, Nicholas Biddle, calling them "despotic."⁵⁴

In June 1834, Speaker of the House Andrew Stevenson resigned to become minister to Great Britain, leaving the position open. Polk ran against John Bell of Tennessee for the post. After 10 ballots, Bell won, handing Polk the first defeat of his political career.⁵⁵ However, in 1835, Polk ran against Bell for Speaker, and this time Polk won. A master of rules and procedures, Polk was an effective Speaker of the House.⁵⁶ He was the first Speaker to "promote openly a president's agenda," first endorsing the policies of Andrew Jackson, and then those of his successor, Martin Van Buren.⁵⁷

The two major issues during Polk's term as Speaker were slavery and the economy, following the Panic of 1837.⁵⁸ As discussed in more detail herein, both of these issues, particularly slavery, would continue to plague Polk throughout his political career.

In 1839, concerned that the rival Whig party was becoming increasingly popular in his home state of Tennessee, Polk left Congress to return home and run for the governorship.⁵⁹ He defeated the incumbent Whig, Newt Cannon, yet after serving only one two-year term, Polk twice failed to be reelected.⁶⁰ Although his rivals assumed Polk's political influence had peaked, he continued to look for opportunities to revive his political career, and remained close to Andrew Jackson.⁶¹

In 1844, delegates to the Democratic Convention—who had not forgotten Polk's dedication to the Democratic Party over the years—viewed Polk as a potential vice presidential candidate.⁶²

However, when the party's leading presidential contenders, Martin Van Buren and Lewis Cass, failed to gain sufficient support to win the nomination, the deadlocked convention needed a compromise candidate. Polk was put forth as a "dark horse" candidate, and after nine ballots, the Democratic Convention unanimously nominated Polk as its presidential candidate for the election to be held later that year.⁶³

Challenging the well-known Whig candidate Henry Clay in the 1844 election, Polk promised to actively encourage America's westward expansion. He favored the annexation of Texas and the acquisition of the Oregon territory.⁶⁴ Although critics expressed concern that aggressive expansionism might lead to war with Great Britain or Mexico, a majority of American voters accepted Polk's vision, and in 1844, they elected him the 11th President of the United States by a slim margin. He was 49 years old, the youngest person up to that time to be elected president.⁶⁵

After receiving his party's Democratic nomination in 1844, Polk announced that if he were elected President, he would not seek a second term.⁶⁶ Aware that the Democratic Party had been splintered into bitter factions, Polk hoped that by promising to serve only one term if elected, his disappointed Democratic rivals would unite behind him, believing they had another chance at the nomination in four years.⁶⁷

True to his campaign pledge, at the end of his first term, Polk left office and returned to Tennessee in March 1849. However, he did not have much time to pursue a career after leaving the presidency—either in the public or private sector—since he died of cholera on June 15, 1849 in Nashville, Tennessee, only three months after leaving office.⁶⁸

V. Polk's Literary and Other Achievements

Many people find Polk's election as President somewhat baffling, since he lacked the charisma of many of his fellow presidents. In addition, while Polk garnered praise for his oratorical

skills—earning him the nickname “Napoleon of the Stump”⁶⁹—he had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime. As one historian points out in his tongue-in-cheek essay on Polk, his most notable achievement was likely his utter lack of achievement:

The trouble with Polk was that he never did anything to catch the people’s eye; he never gave them anything to remember him by; nothing happened to him. He never cut down a cherry tree, he didn’t tell funny stories, he was not impeached, he was not shot, he didn’t drink heavily, he didn’t gamble, he wasn’t involved in scandal.⁷⁰

Similarly, in accounting for the fact that so few Americans are familiar with Polk, another historian remarked that “men are remembered for their unique qualities, and Polk had none.”⁷¹

Nonetheless, while Polk never wrote his memoirs and had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime, he did keep a detailed diary during his presidency. It was discovered—along with a collection of his other personal correspondence and papers—in the attic of his widow, Sarah, after her death in 1896.⁷² The diary was first published in four volumes in 1910, and reprinted and abridged in later editions. Today, it is recognized as “one of the most valuable documents for the study of the American presidency,” since it provides a “rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of the decision-making process in the White House, and offers insight into the day-to-day administration of the government during one of the most critical and exciting periods in American history.”⁷³

VI. Polk’s Philosophy of Life

While Polk may not be well known among modern Americans or easily remembered for any significant literary or other achievements, in truth, he was a man of action who accomplished a great deal. His philosophy of life consisted of the belief that individuals should fix their sights clearly on their goals, and pursue them “with undeviating resolution.”⁷⁴

In keeping with this philosophy, early in his administration,

Polk articulated four specific goals that he believed would make his presidency meaningful, and would “address the immediate and long-term economic and expansionist needs of the nation.”⁷⁵ First, he would lower the tariff. This action would “set the tone of his administration, and send the message to the nation’s working agrarian middle class that this was their administration, not subservient to the powerful eastern industrialists.”⁷⁶ Second, he would establish an independent treasury, which would bring an end to the financial control of the nation’s funds in private banks. Third, he would acquire Oregon from the British; in Polk’s view, the “time had come” and “western expansion demanded it.”⁷⁷ Finally, he would acquire California from Mexico. Polk believed that America should be “a continental nation, stretching from ocean to ocean.”⁷⁸ It was—to borrow a phrase coined by journalist John L. O’Sullivan in the summer of 1845 to describe the national goal—our “Manifest Destiny.”⁷⁹

For the next four years, Polk worked hard to achieve each and every one of his goals. During his presidency, he rarely left Washington. He insisted that presidents who took their duties seriously could never take vacations. He once observed that “No President who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure.”⁸⁰ He also spent as little time as possible engaged in socializing, preferring to delegate the responsibility of fulfilling the social and ceremonial obligations of his office to his First Lady, Sarah.⁸¹ To Polk, attending White House social functions was “time unprofitably spent,” and he avoided them whenever possible.⁸²

VII. Polk’s Philosophy of Government

Polk’s philosophy of government was shaped by the programs and policies of his mentor, Andrew Jackson. Like “Old Hickory,” Polk or “Young Hickory,” as he was known, championed states’ rights and a strict interpretation of the Constitution, and maintained that the federal government did not have the authority

to interfere in the nation's economic affairs or in the practices of the individual states.⁸³ In his Inaugural Address, Polk confirmed his view that "the Government of the United States is one of delegated and limited powers," and that he intended to refrain from the "exercise of doubtful or unauthorized implied powers."⁸⁴ Polk stood behind this position in 1846, when he vetoed legislation that would have provided federal financing for canals and other means of transportation, based on his belief that the federal government did not have the authority to fund state infrastructure.⁸⁵

Like Jackson, Polk also believed that the President was "the only officer of the government elected by all the people; that he should be President of all the people, and that it was his responsibility to heed the voice of the people and carry out the popular will."⁸⁶ Polk viewed himself as "a humble servant of the people,"⁸⁷ working on behalf of the national interest. He felt it was his responsibility to introduce legislation and veto congressional actions that favored only singular or sectional interests. In his Inaugural Address, Polk stated that he would oppose "any policy which shall tend to favor monopolies or the peculiar interests of sections of classes [that] operates to the prejudice of their fellow citizens."⁸⁸

Polk's governmental philosophy of putting the nation's interests ahead of special interest groups extended to his views on tariffs. Like the Jacksonian Democrats before him, Polk opposed protective tariffs, and supported non-protective tariffs "sufficient only to fund government obligations."⁸⁹ As he stated in his Inaugural Address, the federal government had no "right to tax one section of the country, or one class of citizens, or one occupation, for the mere profit of another."⁹⁰ He further claimed that to protect one group, such as manufacturers or industrialists, at the expense of another, like the working and agrarian classes, "would be unjust."⁹¹

Finally, Polk endorsed a philosophy of government that supported western expansion. He favored the protection of Americans in distant territories, especially farmers.⁹² He further believed that Texas should be brought into the Union, as well as

the Oregon territory.⁹³ Given his expansionist views, Polk was also determined to acquire California from Mexico.⁹⁴

VIII. How Polk Handled the Major Crises of his Presidency

The most significant crises of Polk's tenure as President arose in the area of foreign policy. One such crisis was the dispute between the United States and Great Britain over the Oregon boundary. Since 1818, both countries had jointly controlled the territory.⁹⁵ Previous administrations had offered to divide the region along with the 49th parallel, which is approximately the present day border between Washington State and British Columbia.⁹⁶ However, the British refused, and instead wanted the demarcation line to be along the Columbia River, which would have moved the United States' interests southward, to about the present border between Washington and Oregon.⁹⁷ The Democrats' platform called for *all* of Oregon to come within the jurisdiction of the United States, and demanded that the British abandon their claims to this territory all the way north to the 54th parallel. They shouted the slogan "54° 40' or Fight," a battle cry for the entire Oregon territory.⁹⁸

Although the Democratic platform asserted a claim to the entire region, Polk offered to compromise by dividing the territory at the 49th parallel, the same proposal that had been offered by his predecessors.⁹⁹ When the British rejected this proposal, Polk abruptly broke off negotiations, and reasserted America's claim to the entire region.¹⁰⁰ James Buchanan, Polk's Secretary of State, warned that, "If the president's views were carried out—demanding land north of the forty-ninth parallel—we would have a war" with Britain.¹⁰¹ Buchanan warned Polk that the American people would not support him in a war over the Oregon territory, but Polk disagreed.¹⁰²

In his first annual message to Congress in 1845, Polk continued to take a strong stance on Oregon. He asserted that America's claim to the Oregon territory "cannot be abandoned

without a sacrifice of both national honor and interest.”¹⁰³ He then went a step further, invoking the principles of the Monroe Doctrine: “Alluding to past British and French influences in Texas and warning those governments away from any similar intrigues in Oregon, California, or anywhere else in North America, Polk became the first American President to reaffirm the Monroe Doctrine as a basic tenet of American foreign policy.”¹⁰⁴

As months wore on with no resolution, Polk decided that the time had come to prepare the nation for the possibility of war. As he explained to one congressman: “The only way to treat John Bull is to look him in the eye...if Congress faltered or hesitated in their course, John Bull would immediately become arrogant and more grasping in his demands.”¹⁰⁵ Then suddenly, the British backed down, and inquired whether the United States would consider a proposal to set the border line at the 49th parallel, the same resolution initially offered by Polk. While some members of Polk’s cabinet continued to advocate a position of “54° 40’ or Fight,” others took a more dove-like approach. In the end, Polk was not prepared to wage war with the British and agreed to compromise.¹⁰⁶ The territory acquired by the United States would later form the states of Washington and Oregon and parts of Idaho and Wyoming.¹⁰⁷

War could not be avoided, however, when it came to the acquisition of California. The war with Mexico over this territory was the most severe crisis of Polk’s term, and would become the defining event of his administration.

After Polk’s election, Congress passed a joint resolution admitting Texas into the Union, which the Republic of Texas accepted later that year, after Polk took office.¹⁰⁸ This move angered Mexico, which had offered Texas its independence on the condition that it not attach itself to any other nation.¹⁰⁹

Following the Texas annexation, Polk turned his sights on acquiring California. In 1845, Polk sent diplomat John Slidell to Mexico to attempt to purchase New Mexico and California for \$30 million.¹¹⁰ However, the Mexican government, still angry over the annexation of Texas, refused to receive Slidell, citing a problem

with his credentials. In 1846, Slidell returned to Washington. Polk regarded the dismissal of his diplomat as an insult, which left America no choice but “to take the remedy for the injuries and wrongs suffered.”¹¹¹

In the interim, shortly after becoming President, Polk had promised to support the Texas Republic’s claim to the Rio Grande as its boundary with Mexico, even though such claim was somewhat suspect.¹¹² Following Texas’ annexation in June 1845, Polk demonstrated his intent to uphold this pledge by ordering General Zachary Taylor to move troops from Louisiana into Texas, and directing additional naval troops to the area. Taylor and his men settled on the south bank of the Rio Grande, near present-day Brownsville, Texas. The Mexican army asked Taylor and his troops to retreat across the river, but Taylor refused, and instead ordered the American naval ships to blockade the mouth of the Rio Grande.¹¹³ In response, the Mexicans attacked Taylor’s men, killing 16 American soldiers. The next day, Taylor reported the incident to Washington, stating that “hostilities may now be considered commenced.”¹¹⁴

On May 11, 1846, Polk called for a declaration of war, stating that “Mexico had passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil.”¹¹⁵ While some in Congress challenged Polk’s assertions in light of the dubious nature of the boundary claim, Congress overwhelmingly approved the declaration of war, despite opposition from anti-slavery Whigs, led by John Quincy Adams.¹¹⁶

After two years of costly and deadly fighting, the war ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under this Treaty, the United States added 1.2 million square miles of territory to its borders, including the land that would form the states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming.¹¹⁷ When all was said and done, Mexico’s size was cut in half, while that of the United States increased by more than a third. The Treaty also recognized the annexation of Texas, and acknowledged the United States’ control over the disputed Rio Grande territory. Mexico, in turn, received \$15 million for the

territory it ceded to the United States.¹¹⁸

Not everyone agreed with Polk's handling of the war. While the war had begun with a "flourish of national patriotic fervor" and a series of military victories, enthusiasm for the war quickly waned as it "dragged on for almost two years, casualties mounting, costs accelerating until Whig opposition in Congress, once a murmur, ultimately became an orchestrated concert."¹¹⁹ Abraham Lincoln, then a young congressman from Illinois, argued that blood was spilled on "disputed" territory, and challenged Polk to tell Congress exactly "the spot" where blood had been spilled.¹²⁰ Following its conclusion, the Whigs denounced the war as an immoral act of aggression, and in 1848, the House of Representatives voted to censure Polk for starting the war.¹²¹

It is easy for critics to argue with the benefit of hindsight that the war was unjust and should never have been fought. Yet, given the history of animosity that existed between the United States and Mexico, it is doubtful that the United States would have succeeded in its quest to acquire California and the rest of the southwest territory through negotiation alone.

IX. Polk and the Slavery Issue

If Polk failed anywhere in his desire to fulfill his expansionist goals, it was not in seeking a declaration of war from Congress, but rather, in failing to confront the slavery issue that his expansionist impulses brought to the fore. Western expansion reopened a furious debate in America over the issue of allowing slavery into the new territories. Yet, Polk failed to anticipate the catastrophic consequences that the slavery issue would have for the nation. Instead, he viewed it as an aggravating "side issue" that detracted from more "important political objectives—such as preventing concentrations of power in government and commerce, keeping tariff rates just high enough to sustain a prudent national government, [and] finding some means of maintaining currency stability without resorting to a nefarious national bank."¹²² As one historian

notes:

Polk failed to understand the deadly combination of the slavery and expansion issues until the explosive results were beyond his control... Before he became President, he shared the convictions of many southerners about slavery—that it was a practical necessity, though in many respects deplorable, and that it was a local matter and so should have no connection to national politics or international diplomacy. The ominous interjection of slavery into the Texas question during 1843 and 1844 seems to have made little impression on him.¹²³

Although Polk was a slaveholder, he never had been an aggressive defender of the institution. On the one hand, since his father and grandfather both owned slaves, he had grown up with slavery and accepted it as a fact of life. On the other, he understood the injustice of the institution. In his first speech on the floor of Congress, Polk referred to slavery as a “common evil” and “an unfortunate subject,” and acknowledged that slaves were “human beings.”¹²⁴ Yet he never made any effort during his political career to seek a cure for this “common evil.”¹²⁵ Instead, he declined to become embroiled in the slavery controversy, and insisted that the abolitionists who attacked the institution of slavery were motivated primarily by political and anti-Southern considerations.¹²⁶ He opposed the Wilmot Proviso, which was intended to bar slavery from the new territories, and his own idea to extend the Missouri Compromise line west and prohibit slavery below the 36th parallel was largely ignored.¹²⁷ As a result of Polk’s failure to understand the depth of popular emotion over the expansion of the South’s “peculiar institution,” the slavery issue was unresolved at the end of Polk’s term in office, and instead, would ultimately be settled on the battlefields of the Civil War.

X. Polk’s Relationship with the American People and Congress

Polk was not particularly popular with either the American people or Congress. While Polk viewed himself as a “humble servant” of the people,¹²⁸ the American people did not feel any particular affection towards Polk. Prior to his presidential nomination, he was virtually unknown to the general public. Moreover,

“lovable, or even likable, he was not.”¹²⁹ Instead, Polk was “formal, stiff and humorless,”¹³⁰ and was both a workaholic and something of a loner, and becoming President did nothing to change these traits or enhance his popularity with the American people. He much preferred the solitude of his office to ceremonial events, and relied on his wife, Sarah, to deal with visiting dignitaries, as well as the public.¹³¹

Polk was even less popular with Congress. In his dealings with Congress, Polk “exercised a degree of control unique in the period between Jackson and Lincoln, when Congress usually dominated the executive.”¹³² He was a micromanager, who was determined to direct and monitor the affairs of government.¹³³ He employed several strategies to accomplish this task and impose his will on Congress. Among these, he frequently dispatched cabinet members to lobby support for his administrative measures among their friends in Congress, and denied patronage to those congressmen who failed to vote for bills he wanted enacted. He also drafted editorials and articles that appeared in the party newspaper, the *Union*, which were designed “to exert the pressure of public opinion” on his fellow Democrats in Congress.¹³⁴

As with many other Presidents, Polk’s influence over Congress was most effective early in his term. In 1846, he enjoyed several major congressional victories, including approval of a treaty resolving the Oregon boundary dispute, overwhelming support of his request for a declaration of war against Mexico, and as discussed more fully below, a lowered tariff, and the establishment of an independent Treasury Department.¹³⁵

During the second half of Polk’s term, several factors, including “the increasing unpopularity of the Mexican War, the Democratic loss of the House, and the incubus of the slavery question” often frustrated his efforts with Congress.¹³⁶ For example, in August 1846, when he requested an appropriation from Congress of \$2 million, to be held in reserve for negotiations with Mexico to end the war, the House amended the bill to add the Wilmot Proviso, which required that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist” in the territory acquired from Mexico.¹³⁷

The Senate rejected this proposal, and Polk dubbed the proviso “mischievous and foolish,” but it continued to plague him for the rest of his administration, “poisoning the atmosphere and obstructing much useful legislation.”¹³⁸

XI. Polk’s Imprint on U.S. and World History

Despite his shortcomings, Polk left behind a great record of accomplishments during his one term in office. In fact, historians have consistently ranked Polk among the “great” and “near-great” Presidents in their polls of the greatest American Presidents, for his ability to outline his goals and achieve each and every one.¹³⁹ Domestically, he lowered the high tariffs that had been imposed in 1842 under the Tyler administration. Polk believed that low tariffs were crucial for the success of the agricultural sector. In 1846, he secured passage of the Walker Tariff Act (named after Treasury Secretary Robert Walker) by a narrow margin, which provided for one of the lowest tariffs in United States history.¹⁴⁰ The Act was a success, in that it stimulated trade and brought much-needed revenue into the Treasury.

A second major accomplishment of Polk’s domestic economic policy was the establishment of an independent or constitutional Treasury for the United States, under which government funds were held in the Treasury rather than in banks or other financial institutions.¹⁴¹ All payments by and to the government were to be made in specie. The independent Treasury restricted the use of funds as a basis for reckless speculation, which had been a hallmark of the state banks. This independent Treasury system remained the dominant element of American banking until 1913, when it was replaced by the Federal Reserve Act.¹⁴²

The most significant achievements of Polk’s administration occurred in the area of foreign policy. His administration not only completed the annexation of Texas, but also settled the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain, and fought a victorious war with Mexico. Under Polk, the United States expanded its territory

by more than 1.2 million square miles, whose value was immediately established following the discovery of gold in California.¹⁴³

The continental expansion was a remarkable achievement that forever altered the geography of the country. In less than four years, Polk had added more territory to the Union than any other president except Thomas Jefferson, thereby fulfilling the nation's "Manifest Destiny" to expand across North America to the Pacific Ocean.¹⁴⁴ Yet this was not the only long-term impact of Polk foreign policy successes. As historian David M. Pletcher concludes in his appraisal of Polk:

The victories of the Mexican War also won the grudging but genuine respect of Europe. Britain withdrew most of its political influence from Mexico and a few years later, in the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, agreed to share influence in Central America. The broad frontage on the western coast eventually made the United States a force in Pacific affairs. In effect, the United States was promoted to a second-rank power whose views must be consulted in all international questions relating to the northern half of the New World.¹⁴⁵

Not bad for a relatively young nation and its even younger president.

XI. How Polk Changed the Power of the Presidency

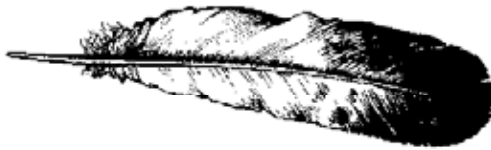
During his term, Polk greatly expanded the executive powers of the presidency, particularly its war powers and its role as commander-in-chief. As President, Polk was determined to be his *own* man, who made his *own* decisions. As he told his friend, Cave Johnson, before his inauguration: "I intend to be *myself* the President of the United States."¹⁴⁶ Even his mentor Andrew Jackson was annoyed to discover that he could not exert influence over the course of Polk's administration.¹⁴⁷

Polk was not afraid to exercise the powers of the presidency, such as the veto power, as demonstrated by his veto in 1846 of legislation that would have provided federal financing of canals and other means of transportation, based on his belief that the federal government did not have the authority to fund state infra-

structure.¹⁴⁸ When it came to exercising war powers, Polk did not hesitate to act aggressively, and he never wavered about whether to approach Congress to seek a declaration of war against Mexico.¹⁴⁹ Polk was also “the first President to define and implement the full powers of his office as commander-in-chief.”¹⁵⁰ He was a “hands on” leader, who made many of the tactical decisions involving the Mexican War himself, despite having no formal military training.¹⁵¹ For all these reasons, Polk is widely considered to be the most assertive chief executive prior to the Civil War.¹⁵²

Polk left behind an impressive legacy of leadership. As former President Harry Truman aptly stated, Polk “exercised the powers of the Presidency...as they should be exercised...[He knew] exactly what he wanted to do in a specified period of time and he did it, and when he got through with it, he went home.”¹⁵³

Yet, Polk’s tireless pursuit of his ambitious goals took its toll on his health. He left the presidency in a state of exhaustion, and became ill on his journey home, dying of cholera three months after leaving office.¹⁵⁴



¹ John Seigenthaler, James K. Polk (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003) p. 84

² Walter R. Borneman, Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America (New York: Random House, 2009) p. xvii

³ Seigenthaler, p. 3; Robert W. Johannsen, "Who Is James K. Polk? The Enigma of our Eleventh President," Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center 14 February 1999, <http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/scholarworks/display.asp?id=502> (accessed December 7, 2009)

⁴ Seigenthaler, p. 92

⁵ Terry D. Billhartz and Alan C. Elliott, Currents in American History: A Brief History of the United States vol. 1 (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007) p. 80

⁶ Robert W. Merry, A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009) p. 110

⁷ David M. Pletcher, "James K. Polk," in The Presidents: A Reference History 3rd ed., edited by Henry F. Graff (New York: Thomson Gale, 2002) p. 155

⁸ Seigenthaler, p. 146

⁹ Merry, p. 474

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 473; Borneman, p. 352; Seigenthaler, p. 154

¹¹ Paul H. Bergeron, The Presidency of James K. Polk (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987) (Hereafter cited as Bergeron, "The Presidency") p. 10

¹² Borneman, p. 6

¹³ Seigenthaler, p. 11

¹⁴ Johannsen, p. 3

¹⁵ Ann Graham Gaines, James K. Polk: Our Eleventh President (Mankato, Minnesota: Child's World, 2009) p. 7

¹⁶ Seigenthaler, p. 14

¹⁷ Borneman, p. 7

¹⁸ Seigenthaler, p. 19

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19

²⁰ Borneman, p. 7

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

²² Seigenthaler, p. 19

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 20

²⁴ Borneman, p. 8

²⁵ Johannsen, p. 3

²⁶ Borneman, pp. 9-10

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8

- ²⁸ Seigenthaler, p. 1
- ²⁹ Allan K. Nevins, ed., Polk: The Diary of a President: 1845-1849 (New York: Longman's Green, 1952) p. xi
- ³⁰ Thomas M. Leonard, James K. Polk: A Clear and Unquestionable Destiny (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2001) p. 43
- ³¹ Seigenthaler, p. 53
- ³² Johannsen, p. 5
- ³³ Merry, p. 242
- ³⁴ Borneman, pp. 9-10
- ³⁵ Seigenthaler, pp. 22-23
- ³⁶ Borneman, p. 10; Seigenthaler, p. 23
- ³⁷ Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 10
- ³⁸ Borneman, p. 11
- ³⁹ Seigenthaler, p. 24
- ⁴⁰ Borneman, p. 13
- ⁴¹ Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 11
- ⁴² Seigenthaler, p. 117
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 26
- ⁴⁴ Borneman, p. 11
- ⁴⁵ Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 11
- ⁴⁶ Seigenthaler, p. 25
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 25
- ⁴⁸ Borneman, pp. 23-24
- ⁴⁹ Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 12
- ⁵⁰ Borneman, p. 10
- ⁵¹ Seigenthaler, p. 4
- ⁵² Borneman, p. 34
- ⁵³ Leonard, pp. 21-22
- ⁵⁴ Seigenthaler, pp. 52-53
- ⁵⁵ Borneman, p. 34
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 35
- ⁵⁷ Seigenthaler, p. 57
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 57
- ⁵⁹ Leonard, pp. 30-31
- ⁶⁰ Bergeron, "The Presidency," pp. 13-15
- ⁶¹ Leonard, p. 34; Borneman, p. 84
- ⁶² Seigenthaler, p. 68
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 84
- ⁶⁴ Borneman, p. 125
- ⁶⁵ Johannsen, p. 1
- ⁶⁶ Seigenthaler, p. 92
- ⁶⁷ Borneman, pp. 112-115; Leonard, p. 39

⁶⁸ Borneman, p. 344

⁶⁹ They Might Be Giants, "James K. Polk," Audio CD, A User's Guide to They Might Be Giants (Elektra/Wea, 2005)

⁷⁰ James Thurber, "Something about Polk," Wisconsin Magazine of History 50, vol. 2 (Winter 1967) p. 146

⁷¹ Johannsen, p. 4

⁷² Ibid., p. 2

⁷³ Ibid., p. 2

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp.4-5

⁷⁵ Seigenthaler, p. 102

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 102

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 102

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 102

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 102

⁸⁰ Borneman, p. 164

⁸¹ Leonard, p. 44

⁸² Johannsen, p. 5

⁸³ Leonard, p. 45

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 45

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 49

⁸⁶ Johannsen, p. 5

⁸⁷ Leonard, p. 44

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 44

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 45

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 45-46

⁹¹ Seigenthaler, p. 113

⁹² Leonard, p. 50

⁹³ Seigenthaler, p. 122

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 103

⁹⁵ Borneman, pp. 154-155

⁹⁶ Seigenthaler, p. 123

⁹⁷ Borneman, p. 161

⁹⁸ Seigenthaler, p. 123

⁹⁹ Borneman, p. 162

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 163-164

¹⁰¹ Seigenthaler, 124

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 124

¹⁰³ Borneman, p. 169

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 168

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 169

¹⁰⁶ Seigenthaler, p. 127

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 128

¹⁰⁸ Borneman, p. 148

- 109 Leonard, p. 80
 110 Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 71
 111 Ibid., p. 71
 112 Leonard, p. 148
 113 Ibid., p. 157
 114 Ibid., p. 157
 115 Ibid., p. 147
 116 Ibid., p. 160
 117 Pletcher, p. 165; Borneman, p. 308
 118 Leonard, p. 178
 119 Seigenthaler, p. 132
 120 Ibid., pp. 144-146
 121 Ibid., p. 146
 122 Merry, p. 130
 123 Pletcher, p. 167
 124 Seigenthaler, p. 86
 125 Ibid., p. 86
 126 Johannsen, p. 4
 127 Seigenthaler, pp. 148-149; Merry, p. 453
 128 Leonard, p. 44
 129 Seigenthaler, p. 155
 130 Johannsen, p. 4
 131 Leonard, p. 44
 132 Pletcher, p. 156
 133 Borneman, p. 352
 134 Paul H. Bergeron, "Polk and Economic Legislation,"
Presidential Studies Quarterly 15, vol. 4 (Fall 1985) (Hereafter
 cited as Bergeron, "Economic Legislation") p. 782
 135 Pletcher, p. 156
 136 Ibid., p. 156
 137 Seigenthaler, p. 148
 138 Pletcher, p. 157
 139 Seigenthaler, p. 154; Borneman, pp. 352-352; Merry,
 p. 473
 140 Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 186
 141 Pletcher, p. 153
 142 Seigenthaler, p. 122
 143 Pletcher, p. 166
 144 Ibid., p. 166; Merry, p. 477
 145 Pletcher, p. 166
 146 Borneman, p. 151
 147 Seigenthaler, p. 112
 148 Leonard, p. 49

- ¹⁴⁹ Borneman, p. 354
¹⁵⁰ Johannsen, p. 6
¹⁵¹ Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. xii
¹⁵² Borneman, pp. 353-354
¹⁵³ Johannsen, p. 7
¹⁵⁴ Leonard, p. 196

Bibliography

Bergeron, Paul H., "Polk and Economic Legislation," Presidential Studies Quarterly 15, vol. 4, Fall 1985, pp. 782-795

The author examines Polk's domestic economic policies, a topic that typically receives little attention in comparison to Polk's foreign policy achievements. Domestically, Polk was strongly committed to tariff reform and the establishment of a constitutional or independent Treasury. Bergeron's essay examines how Polk worked to achieve both measures. This essay appears in a professional publication that targets readers interested in the presidency. I incorporated information from this essay into my discussion of Polk's domestic economic policy successes.

Bergeron, Paul H., The Presidency of James K. Polk
 Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987

Bergeron demonstrates how Polk was one of the strongest chief executives to occupy the White House. He details Polk's accomplishments, and also explains how, despite his many achievements, Polk failed to attract the kind of popular support or recognition accorded to other Presidents. Drawing upon the vast literature written about Polk, as well as entries from Polk's personal diary and papers, Bergeron provides a balanced assessment of Polk's presidency. This book is targeted to adult readers looking for an unbiased account of Polk, and I relied upon it for many of the details of Polk's life.

Bilhartz, Terry D., and Alan C. Elliott, Currents in American History: A Brief History of the United States vol. 1, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007

This book provided background information for my research paper. The source material I used came from the chapter entitled, "In the Name of Manifest Destiny: The War with Mexico and the Acquisition of the American West."

This book is a historical text that is intended to be used as an educational guide for high school students.

Borneman, Walter R., *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* New York: Random House, 2009

In his biography of Polk, Borneman provides a detailed and thoroughly researched account of our eleventh President. He describes Polk's extensive political career, and refutes the popular notion that Polk was a "dark horse" candidate. This book is targeted to an adult audience, and is a "must read" for anyone interested in American history in general and Polk's presidency in particular. This was one of the main sources for my research paper, because of its well-documented and thorough portrayal of Polk's life and his presidency.

Gaines, Ann Graham, *James K. Polk: Our Eleventh President* Mankato, Minnesota: Child's World, 2009

This biography of Polk is targeted towards young readers, and is part of the "Our Presidents" series. It provides a concise and easy to understand review of how Polk was able to achieve much during his one-term presidency. I incorporated some of the basic factual information on Polk from this book into my research paper.

Johannsen, Robert W., "Who Is James K. Polk? The Enigma of our Eleventh President," *Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center* 14 February 1999, <http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/scholarworks/display.asp?id=502> (accessed December 7, 2009)

These comments about Polk, delivered during the 10th annual Hayes Lecture on the Presidency, provide a well-crafted summary of Polk and his presidency. I was able to incorporate many of Johannsen's teachings into my research paper.

Leonard, Thomas M., *James K. Polk: A Clear and Unquestionable Destiny* Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2001

This book is a well-researched biography that analyzes Polk's political career, with a specific focus on his role in western expansion. Leonard provides a critical assessment of Polk's aggressive foreign policy measures, and theorizes that Polk's handling of the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain and the Mexican War were motivated by forces far more complex than "Manifest Destiny." His narrative of Polk

is accessible to both high school students and adults who are interested in learning more about United States history, foreign policy, and the American territorial expansion of the 1840s. This is one of the main sources I relied upon in my research, particularly Leonard's extensive use of quotes from Polk's Inaugural Address and his First Message to Congress in 1845.

Merry, Robert W., A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009

Merry, a journalist and editor-in-chief of the Congressional Quarterly, offers a thoughtful and detailed analysis of Polk's presidency. Relying on a broad range of sources to support his arguments, Merry depicts Polk as a controversial figure and a visionary, who steadfastly clung to his expansionist view and extended America's influence across the continent. Merry concludes that given his many accomplishments, Polk's presidency has been underrated. I used Merry's book primarily to corroborate much of my other research on Polk.

Nevins, Allan K., ed., Polk: The Diary of a President: 1845-1849 New York: Longman's Green, 1952

Nevins offers an edited version of Polk's diary, which provides valuable insight into our 11th President. At the beginning of the book, Nevins provides a general overview of Polk and his administration that is both informative and unbiased. This book was useful in my research because it provided me with a better understanding of Polk's character and personality, as well as a first person account of his presidency.

Pletcher, David M., "James K. Polk," in The Presidents: A Reference History 3rd ed., edited by Henry F. Graff, New York: Thomson Gale, 2002

This profile of Polk is an entry from a historical reference guide about the Presidents by historian David M. Pletcher. It is both informative and well-researched, and includes an appraisal of Polk's presidency, as well as information about his leadership skills in handling the Mexican War. This article proved very useful during my research in connection with analyzing the successes and failures of Polk's presidency.

Seigenthaler, John, James K. Polk New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003

Seigenthaler's biography of Polk is concise and informative, and proved invaluable during my research process. It is part of "The President's Series," edited by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and does an excellent job of explaining the issues confronting Polk during his presidency. However, the book does have a somewhat liberal bias that becomes readily apparent to the reader. This is one of the sources that I referred to frequently in writing my research paper.

They Might Be Giants, "James K. Polk," Audio CD, A User's Guide to They Might Be Giants Elektra/Wea, 2005

The song "James K. Polk," featured on this collection of songs by the musical group, They Might Be Giants, has become something of a cult classic. There is no editorializing in the song; instead, the composers take a bunch of historical facts about Polk and set them to music. With catchy lyrics such as "Austere, severe, he held few people dear/His oratory filled his foes with fear/The factions soon agreed/He's just the man we need/To bring about victory/Fulfill our Manifest destiny," this hit tune provides a memorable summary of Polk's accomplishments that is suitable for musical fans of all ages. I relied on this song's lyrics to support the fact that Polk was known as "Napoleon of the Stump" for his oratory skills.

Thurber, James, "Something about Polk," Wisconsin Magazine of History 50, vol. 2, Winter 1967, pp. 145-146

Thurber's humorous essay about Polk claims he was a man who was not known for any significant accomplishments. I incorporated information from this essay into my research on Polk's literary and other achievements.