JAMES K. POLK: TERRITORIAL EXPANSIONIST AND THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis argues that through President James K. Polk's leadership style (micro-managing domestic/foreign issues), his understanding of bureaucracy, and dominating his Cabinet, enabled Polk to achieve what his predecessors could not. Furthermore, Polk's leadership and administrative style foreshadowed, and perhaps provided a precedent for the modern American presidency. To demonstrate Polk's leadership style, two areas must be examined. First, explain Polk's keys to success while in office, in particular his leadership style in relation to his policies. President Polk's direct involvement in domestic and foreign issues enabled him to achieve his four administrative goals: tariff reduction, creation of an Independent Treasury, settlement of the Oregon Territory between the U.S. and England, and acquiring California. For example, he pushed economic legislation in Congress (Independent Treasury), and micro-managed the Mexican War to accomplish territorial objectives. Secondly, examine the departure that President Polk made from previous administrations in regards to administrative skill. Compared to preceding administrations, President Polk was an excellent leader who firmly managed his Cabinet. He consulted his Cabinet on policy questions, but the final decision was his to make. Furthermore, he knew precisely what he wanted to accomplish as president, and he understood the political channels he needed to consult to achieve his goals.

For Pat Blubaugh, my Dad who taught me the importance of history at an early age, and inspired me to pursue a career in history.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1830s and 1840s, ineffectual leadership plagued the United States. Beginning with Martin Van Buren in 1837 and finishing with John Tyler in 1845, the nation lacked a strong executive who could respond to domestic and foreign crises. Van Buren proved inept at handling the Panic of 1837, and Tyler could not solve territorial disputes and governance questions between Mexican and the U.S. citizens, and Great Britain and the U.S. over the Oregon Territory. In 1844, the populace elected a little known politician from the Volunteer State, James K. Polk. A dark horse Democratic candidate, Polk defeated Whig standard bearer Henry Clay in a close race. Polk considered this victory as a mandate, given to him by the people, to govern the country through strong leadership.[1]

Coming to the White House in 1845, James K. Polk had a vision for both the country and the office of the presidency. As a Jeffersonian/Jacksonian, Polk supported westward expansion, and believed a nation should focus its attention on agricultural development, an increase in land allowed this possibility. As author Louis Mayo explains, while in office, he revealed to Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft his desired objectives. These were: the settlement of the Oregon question with Great Britain, the acquisition of California and a large district on the coast, the reduction of the Tariff to a revenue basis, the taxes on imported goods would sustain the government, protect industry in the north, and prevent cost increases on goods in the south, and permanent establishment of an Independent Treasury, or, as he liked to call it, a Constitutional

[1] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 686-688.

Treasury.[2] His goals for the nation focused on expanding the country westward, and placing the U.S. on a course for financial stability. The creation of an Independent Treasury prevented corrupt banks from acquiring money, leaving the Treasury in control to disburse funds, and the reduction of the tariff promoted trade which acquired revenue for the federal government, and protected the interests of the populace.

To accomplish these objectives, Polk understood that strong leadership was required. This thesis argues that through his leadership style (micro-managing domestic/foreign issues), his understanding of bureaucracy, and dominating his Cabinet, enabled Polk to achieve what his predecessors could not. Furthermore, Polk's leadership and administrative style foreshadowed, and perhaps provided a precedent for the modern American presidency. To demonstrate Polk's leadership style, two areas must be examined. First, explain Polk's keys to success while in office, in particular his leadership style in relation to his policies. President Polk's direct involvement in domestic and foreign issues enabled him to achieve his four goals. For example, he pushed economic legislation in Congress (Independent Treasury), and micro-managed the Mexican War to accomplish territorial objectives. Secondly, examine the departure that President Polk made from previous administrations in regards to administrative skill. Compared to preceding administrations, President Polk was an excellent leader who firmly managed his Cabinet. He consulted his Cabinet on policy questions, but the final decision was his to make. Furthermore, he knew precisely what he wanted to accomplish as president, and he understood the political channels he needed to consult to achieve his goals.

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[2] Louise Mayo, *President James K. Polk The Dark Horse President* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2006), 67.

James K. Polk also had a vision of the presidency. Author Paul Bergeron states that Polk did not conform to the Whiggish notions about weak or limited presidents who yielded to a vigorous and dominant legislative branch. Polk witnessed the ineffectiveness of the administrations that followed President Andrew Jackson, and vowed to be an assertive president like his mentor, Old Hickory. Furthermore, Polk set out to dominate the nation's capital in just about every respect possible. He knew, as all effective presidents have known, that the office is more than an enumeration of constitutional duties and prerogatives.[3] Indeed, the presidency is whatever the occupant can make of it (within constitutional bounds, of course).[4] Author Bernard Devoto in his book *1846- The Year of Decision* explained that before James K. Polk entered the office, Congress dominated the nation's capital from 1837 to 1845 by initiating legislation on various issues. After Polk left the presidency in 1849, Congress dominated again until Abraham Lincoln entered office in 1861.[5] Under Polk's leadership, the executive and not the legislative branch initiated bills, similar to the Jackson administration.

Throughout Polk's political career, he fostered a close relationship with Andrew Jackson, the founder of the Democratic Party; this affiliation is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. The connection with Jackson greatly shaped how Polk viewed the office. Polk shared the opinion of Jackson that the country required a strong executive to accomplish both domestic and foreign goals. According to Robert Morgan, the election victory provided Polk his chance to define the office. When Polk won the election for president in 1844 by a very slim margin, he quickly let it be known that he would be president, not a mouthpiece or lieutenant for anyone else. "I intend to be myself President of the United States," Polk wrote his friend Cave Johnson on December 21,

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[3] Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Norwalk: The Easton Press, 1987), xi.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Bernard Devoto, *The Year of Decision- 1846* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 7-8.

1844. He was ready to move into "the house that Jackson built," but once there he meant to be the sole lord and master.[6] Polk shared Jackson's belief that the president, popularly elected by all the people, could judge the national interest better than representatives/senators from individual states. Once elected, the president acted on behalf of the people. Although he was appreciative of Jackson for the support during his political career, he intended to define his administration.

During his one term as president, national and international affairs presented Polk with numerous opportunities to demonstrate his leadership style and his vision for both the country and the presidency. The Mexican War was Polk's greatest administrative challenge. During the conflict Polk appointed officers, seized control of War Department functions, and President Polk directly involved himself in all aspects of the war including planning and the peace process. The breadth and detail of Polk's instructions to his commanders is staggering. They included, for example, delineating the exact numbers of troops needed for the Santa Fe and Chihuahua campaigns, declaring what sort of soldier was best suited for conquering California, and castigating staff officers and military professionals for not seeing early on that pack mules would be more useful for transportation in Mexico than horse-drawn wagons that required fine roads.[7] Meanwhile, President Polk contested criticism made by opponents of his administration over his methods for steering the country to war, and overall handling of the conflict.

The Oregon settlement, lowering the tariff, and establishing the Independent Treasury further defined the way Polk saw his role as president and allowed him to fulfill his vision for the U.S. Although these goals were not entirely new, his skill as an effective administrator permitted him

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[6] Robert Morgan, *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2011), 204.

[7] John Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition: Polk and Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 136.

to accomplish the objectives. Previous administrations proved unable to settle domestic or foreign issues due to political intrigues among cabinet members. For example, President Jackson used indirect advisors known as the "Kitchen Cabinet" to accomplish goals when appointed cabinet members were unwilling to do Jackson's bidding. Jackson's successor, President Martin Van Buren, proved unable to handle the economic woes of the turbulent 1830s, and he accomplish few objectives during his presidency. By contrast, Polk's cabinet stayed intact allowing the president to wage congressional wars, diplomatic wars, and patronage wars.[8] Polk's cabinet could voice their opinions openly in meetings without fear of being replaced by the president. Although friction occurred between the president and his cabinet over the Oregon settlement, Polk promoted an environment where opinions of cabinet members were valued. Also, compared to Martin Van Buren, Polk's decisive decision making defined his administration. Although both Van Buren and Polk were Jacksonian Democrats and reputable politicians, Polk's strong administrative skill and ability to manage his cabinet allowed Polk to succeed where Van Buren failed on domestic and foreign issues.

Although there is a vast amount of scholarship on James K. Polk, this thesis contributes a few new elements to existing historiography. The thesis explains how his bureaucratic skill and innovative usage of presidential power allowed him to accomplish his four main goals. He used presidential persuasion with cabinet members and Congressmen when he needed support for his domestic and foreign initiatives. Furthermore, he steered the country to war, then demanded a declaration of war by Congress, a power reserved for the legislative branch. Also, Polk's leadership style enabled him to succeed where his predecessors failed. As president, Polk acquired territory as a result of the Mexican War, and the establishment of an Independent

[8] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 49.

Treasury outlasted President Martin Van Buren's creation of the same system. James K. Polk's decisive style defined an era of weak presidential leadership.

Historiography

Historians have written extensively on Polk's presidency. Authors such as Sam Haynes in his book *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Pulse* explain the very secretive and at times shrewd politician. Haynes describes President Polk's humorless, micro-managing, and hard-working personality that defined his administration. During the next four years there would be many more occasions when critics of the president would point to his penchant for disingenuousness, if not outright deception. Haynes continues, to his political enemies, the Tennessean exhibited a "trait of sly cunning which he thought shrewdness" that would ultimately earn him the sobriquet "Polk the Mendacious."[9] Though he lacked the talents that modern day presidents are evaluated on (oratory skills, public persuasiveness), no one could question his devotion to the office. Authors Paul Bergeron, John Seigenthaler, Louise Mayo, and John Pinheiro agree that James K. Polk worked long hours; the physical toll of the job severely affected Polk's health. The country required much from the executive during his one term, and writers on Polk explain his indefatigable work ethic and devotion to the presidency.

Scholars agree his lack of charisma forces historians to review not only his administration, but his personality as well. While he accomplished much during his term, he rarely traveled or made speeches to the general public, making it difficult to gauge public approval of his administration. Compared to modern day presidents where public appearances were crucial, Polk viewed such

[9] Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 79.

appearances as a waste of time. Unlike his mentor who served during the "Age of the Common Man", Polk placed little value in developing a connection with the general population. This deficiency of appealing to the American people diminishes both Polk's achievements and reputation, thus, to the general public he is a largely forgotten president. Furthermore, historians must discuss the likeability factor when writing on Polk. In Polk's opinion, as a one-term president, his time was better spent in political in-fighting rather than courting public support. He determined the nation required an executive committed to the job, not public appearances. While Polk lacked charisma, his devotion to the office, detail oriented mind, and outstanding bureaucratic skill enabled him to achieve success while president.

Paul Bergeron argues in *The Presidency of James K. Polk* that because Polk was a Jeffersonian/Jacksonian, his commitment to expansion was no surprise. In regards to Oregon, Polk firmly believed in the Monroe Doctrine. The doctrine prohibited European intervention in the western hemisphere, therefore, Polk planned to remove any European nation from the territory and lay claim to the entire area for the U.S. Similar to Jackson, Polk despised the British. In Polk's opinion, England had no business meddling in America.[10] As Bergeron discusses, although he did not intend on going to war with England over Oregon, he understood the political force necessary to acquire the area. By using a belligerent tone, Polk induced England to cede the territory without a war between the two nations. Bergeron explains that from the beginning of his presidential campaign, Polk vowed to solve the Oregon dispute. Once in office, he settled the matter while searching for a way to acquire land from Mexico.[11]

[10] Ibid., 80.
[11] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 114.

Author John C. Pinheiro in *Manifest Ambition: Polk and Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War* explains Polk's leadership during the Mexican War. From the beginning of the conflict, Polk planned to micro-manage the war. His direct involvement clashed with his Whig generals: Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, who believed their military success on the battlefield could lead to presidential success in the upcoming 1848 election. Polk disliked the presidential ambitions of his generals, but he needed their cooperation in order to win the war.[12] Although the Mexican War lasted less than two years, the struggle between Polk's leadership and his generals had a lasting effect. Ultimately Zachary Taylor won the 1848 election, and Whigs and northern Democrats criticized President Polk over his war policy. This clash between Polk and his commanders served as a precursor for future executive/military conflict in American wars. Problems occurred between the president and generals during the Civil War: Lincoln and commanders of the Army of the Potomac, and the Korean War: Harry S. Truman and Douglas MacArthur. John Pinheiro's contribution to scholarship on Polk's leadership during the Mexican War is critical to this research.

There is another common theme found in scholarship on James K. Polk, his relationship with Andrew Jackson. Walter Borneman in his book *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America,* and John Seigenthaler in *James K. Polk* devote adequate time discussing his affiliation with Andrew Jackson. The close relationship between Jackson and Polk heavily influenced Polk's political views. As president, Polk was an expansive minded leader. Certainly his support for Jackson's expansion polices influenced him. Historians such as Louis Mayo and Sam W. Haynes argue that Polk's vision for the country during his presidency resembled that of Jackson's image of the nation. Both understood that a growing nation required adequate land for

[12] Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition*, 59.

an increasing population. Polk served in the House of Representatives on the Ways and Means Committee, and as Speaker of the House during Jackson's tenure. While there, he learned how to write bills and garner support for legislation.[13] Their relationship began prior to Polk's arrival to the positions. While in Washington, President Jackson depended on the young Polk to rally support for his policies such as the nullification crisis in South Carolina and the Bank War that occurred over the re-chartering process.[14]

During Polk's presidency, he continued Jackson's dream of establishing an Independent Treasury, and expanding the nation to the Pacific. One of the many commonalties they shared was the abhorrence towards greed and the power the U.S. Bank possessed over citizens. They also agreed that internal improvements (construction of roads and bridges) were not the job of the national government, but of the states. The close association between Polk and Jackson explains the political and economic philosophy they both shared; historians have written extensively on this fact. To understand Polk's perspective of the country and the presidency, one must recognize the immense influence Jackson had on him. Stylistically, the two were polar opposites, but both shared similar political opinions. Where Jackson was brash, Polk was more calculated in his political decision making. Nevertheless, both understood it took an assertive president to lead the country.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 of the thesis discusses the early development of Polk's political philosophy, but also discusses his acceptance of Jacksonian ideals which were similar to Jeffersonian ethics. Long before James K. Polk was introduced to Andrew Jackson; it was Polk's father Samuel who

[13] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 29-30.
[14] Ibid.

had a profound effect on his political philosophy. Growing up in Tennessee during the "Jeffersonian Revolution" in the early 1800s, Samuel Polk indoctrinated his son with Jeffersonian ideals: agrarian society, individual liberty, and self-reliance. Jefferson championed limited government; the Polk family, especially Samuel and James subscribed to this notion.[15] However, Jacksonian principles of democracy, expansion, and presidential leadership shaped Polk during his extensive political career as Polk and Jackson developed a close relationship, which the chapter describes. Their affiliation is critical because to understand Polk's view of the presidency (strong executive), Polk's support of Jackson must be discussed. They agreed that expansion was necessary for a growing nation, and that because the president was elected by the entire populace, it was the executive that should act on behalf of the people, not Congress.

Additionally, Chapter 1 discusses Polk's political career from his beginnings as a senate clerk, then a U.S. Representative, to Speaker of the House, Governor of Tennessee, and culminating in his 1844 presidential election. Chapter 1 demonstrates that these various positions allowed Polk to hone both his bureaucratic and leadership skills. Polk benefited immensely from this training and it served him well during his presidency. His practice drafting legislation and holding chair positions on committees prepared him for the strenuous challenges he faced during his administration. Furthermore, Chapter 1 briefly explains the two party system in American politics. As a Democrat, Polk opposed the American System of the Whig Party. Whigs supported internal improvements, a strong central bank, and high tariffs on imported goods.[16] Polk's Jeffersonian/Jacksonian mindset placed him in direct opposition with the Whig Party on all issues. He believed the U.S. Bank to be corrupt (see Jackson's Bank War), internal

[15] Ibid., 15.
[16] John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 79.

improvements should be left to the states, and high tariffs were detrimental to the economy of southern states.[17]

Chapter 2 examines President Polk's economic philosophy, his major domestic accomplishments: establishing the Independent Treasury and lowering the national tariff, and his settlement of the Oregon dispute between the U.S. and England. As John Seigenthaler explains in his book *James K. Polk*, to Polk, the struggle over fiscal politics remained between federalism and republicanism, Hamiltonian versus Jeffersonian, the common man against the elite.[18] As a political ally of Jackson, he remembered the corrupt bargain that cheated Jackson out of the 1824 election, and the power the U.S. Bank possessed within politics during Jackson's presidency. President Jackson instructed Polk on the role the government should play in the economy: low tariffs, a treasury outside of the national bank. These principles guided Polk during his own term in office.[19]

Chapter 2 demonstrates Polk's leadership style, but it also explains his ability to master administrative challenges. The year 1846 proved to be a critical year in Polk's administration for both domestic and foreign objectives. Upholding Jeffersonian/Jacksonian principles, Polk used their doctrine to guide him on economic matters. Polk's strong leadership and micro-managing efforts included obtaining support from Congressmen on the measures, which secured passage of both domestic bills: Independent Treasury and the tariff. The tariff, which emphasized the value of imported goods over the quantity, generated revenue for the federal government, and the Independent Treasury stood until 1913 when President Woodrow Wilson replaced it with the

[17] Ibid., 29.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

Federal Reserve.[20] Polk's domestic accomplishments were a prime example of direct involvement by the president. As mentioned, he did not subscribe to the notion that Congress initiated legislation; he had a vision for the country that he wished to enact. He obtained information about the treasury and the tariff, and promptly garnered support from party members. Polk's tireless efforts were not limited to domestic issues, but foreign matters as well.

Chapter 2 discusses Polk's strong leadership during the Oregon question, and the method he used to acquire the land from Great Britain. As a Jacksonian, Polk firmly believed in expansion and the Monroe Doctrine. During the presidential campaign, Polk pledged to expand the country westward, and he was prepared to affirm the Monroe Doctrine to remove any foreign powers meddling in the U.S. Polk's belief in the doctrine was present during the settlement of the Oregon territory. Despite criticism from cabinet members and radicals who wanted the entire area, Polk needed to act. Placed in a contentious position, Polk needed to decide whether to resolve the dispute peacefully, or declare war on England.

Chapter 2 explains Polk's direct involvement in foreign matters and further describes his skill as a strong administrator. For nearly three decades, the U.S. jointly shared the Oregon territory with Great Britain. Now in office, Polk prepared to acquire the sole title of the region.[21] As early as December of 1845, Polk showed interest in resolving the issue. Working with Secretary of State James Buchanan and representatives from the British government, Polk sought to determine the line in which to divide the territory.[22] England was reluctant at first to meet Polk's demands of dividing at the 49th parallel; Polk struck a bellicose tone with England. Radical U.S.

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[20] Ibid., 122.
[21] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 68.
[22] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 114-115.

politicians developed the motto 54' 40' or Fight!, but Polk had no intention of going to war.[23] Using diplomatic channels, the two nations created an agreement. By June of 1846 the treaty was signed between the two nations dividing the area at the 49th parallel.[24] If Polk's tactics with Oregon avoided war, his strategy with Mexico did not.

Chapter 3 explains the actions by the Polk administration during the Mexican War. Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836, but questions remained if Texas could join the U.S. Mexico argued that Texas was still a possession of Mexico, while the U.S. stated Texas was a republic free to be admitted into the Union. Assuredly disagreements occurred between Mexico and the U.S. over Texas. To admit Texas into the Union required congressional approval, this was their constitutional authority. The friends of annexation argued that through the exercise of this power, Texas could be admitted to statehood without a treaty, even though it remained a foreign country. Such an act of Congress would require only a simple majority in each house, a much more attainable goal than the two-thirds of the Senate needed to ratify a treaty.[25] The Tyler administration annexed Texas, but it was under Polk's administration that Texas joined the Union in 1845. Furthermore, the Polk administration wished to acquire more territory from Mexico to fulfill the Democratic commitment to Manifest Destiny, the notion that Providence intended the U.S. to establish a continental nation. Similar to Oregon, Polk consulted his Cabinet on how best to handle relations with Mexico. Sending diplomats down to Mexico, Polk wished to offer up to $25 million for the territory and settle any disputes between Mexico and the U.S. Unlike Oregon, Polk used diplomacy first with Mexico to resolve disagreements. However,

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 133.
[25] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 698.

when the Mexican government rebuffed diplomats sent by Polk, the president took matters into his own hands.[26]

Chapter 3 examines President Polk's leadership style during the Mexican War, and proves his assertive role in the Mexican War and administrative ability allowed Polk to achieve his westward expansion goals. In May of 1846, ordering General Zachary Taylor to cross the Nueces River with his troops, Polk forced Mexico's hand. With the support of Congress, Polk declared war on Mexico, but did not reveal his true intentions of acquiring vast amounts of land.[27] Despite this fact, Polk prepared to micro-manage the war from the start. Unlike President James Madison during the War of 1812, Polk involved himself in every intricate detail. He involved himself in the planning process, supplying the troops and other War Department functions once he deemed his Secretary of War William Marcy unable to fulfill the tasks. President Polk wanted to prosecute a short war to avoid criticism, but also to accomplish his expansive objectives. The war officially ended in February of 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but the method in which Polk steered the country to war caused criticism by administration opponents and modern historians. Strong leadership was required to acquire land, but his unorthodox strategy consistently draws disapproval from historians.

The final chapter assesses Polk's presidency, the implications of Polk's domestic and foreign accomplishments, his legacy in relation to presidential power, and the transformation the presidency underwent during Abraham Lincoln's innovative usage of federal power. Utilizing evaluations by contemporary historians, this chapter critically examines Polk's presidency in light of the current analysis. Also, the final chapter examines Polk's administration during a

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[26] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 144.
[27] John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's war: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 3.

transitional period in the presidency. Today, charisma is necessary for anyone elected president. When Polk was elected in 1844, he did not possess the characteristic, but was still an effective leader because of his skill as an administrator. He knew what he wanted to accomplish in four years and he had an excellent grasp of governmental operations while president.

Next, a discussion is made about Polk's accomplishments and their consequences. Although a largely forgotten president, Polk's four main accomplishments affected America both positively and negatively. His domestic achievements placed the U.S. on stable financial grounds by lowering the national tariff and creating an Independent Treasury. Serving as Speaker of the House during the Panic of 1837, Polk witnessed the severe economic situation that plagued the United States. Polk vowed to protect the well-being of American citizens during his presidency. Polk's expansion policies had both positive and negative effects. By settling the Oregon question and acquiring territory ceded by Mexico following the Mexican War, Polk expanded the country westward which accommodated the growing population.

However, Polk's expansion policies also had a negative effect. Abolitionist Charles Sumner believed that "The Mexican War has hastened by twenty or thirty years the question of slavery."[28] As the war drew to a close, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted with a telling prophesy: "The United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us."[29] Both abolitionists and pro-slavery supporters were keenly aware of the national discussion on westward expansion and slavery. Unfortunately, President Polk deemed expansion a priority over the slavery question. Twelve years after Polk left office, the U.S. fought a violent and bloody Civil War to settle a question Polk did not solve.

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[28] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 205.
[29] Ibid.

The final topic of the conclusion is James K. Polk's presidential legacy and its impact on the development of executive power. In terms of successes, Polk accomplished every goal he set for his administration, an impressive feat. As author Sam W. Haynes describes, Polk was secretive, manipulative, and at times duplicitous. However, Polk's supporters admired him while his critics detested not only his personality but his policies as well. Unlike future presidents who asked for a declaration of war from Congress, President Polk forced Congress to declare war on Mexico. As a result, Polk expanded and at times abused presidential power during the conflict. Polk's use of federal power had a lasting effect on the office. President Abraham Lincoln further strengthened the executive branch during his tenure in office.

Similar to Polk, Lincoln believed the nation required a strong executive during wartime. While Polk and Lincoln were from different political parties, both were war sitting presidents. Both Chief Executives steered the United States to victory in war, and both played a vigorous role in determining grand strategy.[30] As Polk did during the Mexican War, Lincoln studied military strategy during the Civil War. Both presidents were active in military planning despite little personal experience in military affairs. Also, following the outbreak of war, both presidents faced a Congress deeply divided on the subject of war, and the war aims of the Chief Executives. Although Polk did not live to see the Civil War, Polk's direct involvement in the Mexican War greatly influenced how Lincoln saw his role during the Civil War. President Lincoln studied Polk's War Message and his actions during the Mexican War. Although Lincoln vehemently opposed "Mr. Polk's War," he examined the strong role Polk played in the conflict.[31] Once in office, Lincoln used executive authority in ground-breaking ways.

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[30] Mark E. Neely Jr., "War and Partisanship: What Lincoln Learned from James K. Polk," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981): 209.
[31] Ibid., 204.

After Polk left the presidency in 1849, the nation was plagued by four consecutive failed administrations. The country spiraled into chaos over the slavery question, paying little attention to the issues of Polk's time (bank issues/internal improvements). As Paul Bergeron notes, the 1850s and 1860s would seem strange to Polk had he lived during the period. During the 1840s, banking issues and internal improvements were the main topics, by the 1850s and 1860s, slavery became the main concern.[32] Polk's leadership style transformed the country and the presidency, yet historians still discuss the effects Polk had on both. Overall, historians provide a favorable assessment of Polk's job performance (accomplishing all four goals), but give a negative opinion on his methods (war with Mexico). It is debatable whether historians appreciate the changes caused by Polk; nevertheless, he profoundly influenced mid-19th century America.

[32] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 207.

CHAPTER 1: JAMES K. POLK'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND RISE TO THE PRESIDENCY

Before one can discuss James K. Polk's presidency, it is necessary to explain his political thinking and political career before his ascendancy to the White House. Using Jeffersonian and Jacksonian principles to guide his actions, Polk built a reputable political career that spanned nearly twenty-five years before his ultimate election to the presidency. Jeffersonian ideals informed Polk about conceptions of democracy, and Jacksonian ethics explained the assertive role of the president in foreign and domestic issues. Furthermore, both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian expansionism heavily influenced Polk's actions as chief executive. His career began as a senate clerk in Tennessee, he served seven terms as a Representative of the Volunteer State, became President Andrew Jackson's political ally in Congress, was elected as Speaker of the House twice, and governor of Tennessee once. During Jackson's administration, Polk served on the Ways and Means Committee and assisted Jackson on the struggle to destroy the Bank of the United States, and the suppression of nullification in South Carolina. He advanced politically because of his indefatigable work ethic which defined his entire political career.

Each election victory was a calculated move by Polk in order to position him for a presidential bid. During an era when Americans viewed ambition as disingenuous, Polk made certain to convince voters he was merely performing a duty bestowed upon him. By acting reluctant to accept political positions, he appeared as a reluctant public servant, not a power hungry politician. Even when Polk received the nomination at the 1844 Democratic National Convention in Baltimore, he seemed shocked at the idea that he was a presidential hopeful. Initially he went to the convention as a candidate for Vice President. Polk believed he could provide a winning ticket with Martin Van Buren. Van Buren could garner northern votes, and

Polk would deliver southern and western votes. However, Polk's consecutive defeats in the race for the governorship in Tennessee in 1841 and 1843 prevented Van Buren from selecting Polk. To Polk's surprise, the delegates failed to nominate Van Buren, and on the 9th ballot, the representatives selected James K. Polk to break the gridlock at the convention. Although astonished by the nomination, Polk hesitantly accepted the convention's decision. Despite all of Polk's professed reluctance during his career, an ambition raged inside Polk from his early years.

Growing up in Tennessee during the "Jeffersonian Revolution" of the early 1800s, Polk was indoctrinated by his father Samuel in Democratic politics. Samuel strongly supported Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800, and Jefferson's subsequent victory ushered in a new era within America. As a youngster James came to accept the family belief in an "agrarian America whose self-reliant citizens expected little of their government except for the guarantee of individual liberty."[33] President Jefferson believed the U.S. government could serve as a model abroad. Social unrest and corruption which occurred in Europe were antithesis to Jeffersonian ideals. While Jefferson supported the French Revolution, he believed that corrupt politicians needed to be removed from office. Their abuse of power caused social strife. In Jefferson's view, expansion of the federal government only benefited the elite and led to increased corruption, a vice that governments must seek to avoid.[34] Polk's early exposure to Jeffersonian principles molded his understanding of democracy and, the struggle between the elite and the common man.

Growing up in the United States, Polk recognized as Jefferson had, the exploitation of citizens by European governments. Strong governments displayed a natural tendency, he believed, to

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[33] Louise Mayo, *President James K. Polk The Dark Horse President* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2006), 9.
[34] Ibid., 9.

abuse their power, promoting the interests of a privileged few. Only by resisting the temptation to increase its authority, Polk believed, could a responsible government guard against such evils.[35] Furthermore, before Jefferson was elected president, Jefferson strongly opposed the Federalist vision for the nation. While serving as President George Washington's Secretary of State, Jefferson opposed the establishment of a national bank, resisted assumption by the federal government of states debt from the Revolutionary War, and denounced the Federalists as elitists. The Polk family recognized the merits of Jeffersonian ethics; a young James K. Polk quickly accepted its credo. With a political philosophy in mind, it was time for Polk to decide on a profession.

Samuel Polk desired his young son to enter a career in commerce, but young James demonstrated little interest. Instead, Polk desired a formal education and attained his degree at the University of North Carolina. James suffered poor health from an early age, but his commitment to education did not waver. The years Polk lost to illness had not been wasted, however, for they gave him a mental toughness and a resolute will that others lacked. With zeal not uncommon among late-starters, Polk sought to make the most of his college education. His self-discipline and tireless diligence enabled him to outshine those who possessed greater innate ability.[36] He excelled in various subjects, improved his rhetorical skills by joining the debate team, and graduated at the top of his class in 1818. His rigorous work ethic in school prepared him well later in life.

After Thomas Jefferson, one of the earliest influences in Polk's life was Felix Grundy. Grundy, a U.S. Representative of Kentucky and lawyer, provided significant guidance to Polk.

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[35] Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 15.
[36] Ibid., 11.

Polk served a legal apprenticeship with Grundy during his early years. The young Polk learned much from Grundy and immersed himself in Grundy's law library. Similar to Andrew Jackson, Polk wanted to practice law, and earned admission to the Tennessee bar in 1820. Polk's affiliation with Grundy extended beyond law practices. Accompanying Felix Grundy to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Grundy was elected to the state legislature, and the Tennessee senate elected Polk as its clerk. Thorough and methodical, Grundy's young protégé was ideally suited for the work. The position offered Polk an invaluable apprenticeship, enabling him to study the inner workings of the political process at close hand and giving him the chance to work with some of the state's leading lawmakers.[37] That Polk performed his job effectively and with precision was evidenced by his reelection without opposition when the next legislature convened in 1821. In the process, he learned the full gamut of parliamentary procedure and legislative routine.[38] From his early beginnings in politics, Polk performed meticulously in all of his undertakings. His early experience as a senate clerk foreshadowed the way he approached the presidency. As president, Polk's diligence while in office could not be disputed by even his enemies. Moreover, it is reasonable to subsume that his experience as a clerk introduced him to the bureaucratic skill necessary to succeed in politics where other chief executives had failed.

As Polk began his rise into politics, another Tennessee native garnered national attention. The victor of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson became a household name following the War of 1812. Known as "Old Hickory" because hickory bends but does not break, Jackson's military successes extended beyond New Orleans. He led successful military excursions against Native American incursions into Georgia and Spanish supporters in Florida. With enough saber rattling, Jackson

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[37] Ibid., 13.
[38] Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 11.

forced the Spanish government to cede the territory to the U.S. Following the victory in Florida, despite the illegality of Jackson's military adventures, President James Monroe appointed Andrew Jackson as military governor, a short-lived position. By the 1820s, with his military fame growing, Jackson turned his attention to other political opportunities.

At that same juncture, Polk too was seeking to broaden his horizons in politics. In a letter to his brother William H. Polk, James K. Polk stated, "I am a candidate for the House of Representatives in the Tennessee Legislature and am opposed by the former representative Yancey."[39] The incumbent representative did not mount an effective campaign against Polk, who won by a comfortable margin. Although Polk had been elected a senate clerk in Tennessee, election as a state representative marked his first major political victory. While Polk celebrated his victory, Andrew Jackson prepared his bid for the U.S. Senate.

It is difficult to determine when Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk crossed paths, but ultimately during Jackson's campaign for the U.S. Senate, the two met. Jackson looked to oust incumbent John Williams from his U.S. Senate seat, but he needed political support. Two other men, Pleasant M. Miller and John Rhea, sought the nomination, but neither had the backing to defeat Williams. With his political career and presidential aspirations hanging in the balance, Jackson entered the race. Polk was close to the Williams faction, but Polk understood his political fate might be tied to Jackson's. Jackson's rising national popularity could not be denied, and Polk believed supporting Jackson might benefit his political career. On October 1, 1823, Polk voted for Andrew Jackson to become Tennessee's next United States senator. Polk's vote was not the deciding one, but in a relatively close 35-25 race, it was an important one. Senator

[39] James K. Polk to William H. Polk, September 24, 1822, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume 1, 1817-1832* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), 16.

Andrew Jackson was soon on his way to Washington, and his presidential prospects were suddenly taken seriously in other parts of the country. As for James K. Polk, after his vote for Jackson, there was never any doubt but that he was Old Hickory's boy.[40]

Andrew Jackson was reluctant at the thought of becoming a senator, mainly because he had his sights set on a higher office, the presidency. As the 1824 presidential election neared, Jackson was not the only one seeking a higher office. In 1824, after helping Jackson to the U.S. Senate, Polk announced his candidacy for Congress. The main issue of his political race with Andrew Erwin revolved around the role of the federal government regarding internal improvements. Polk took a firm stand against internal improvements and supported his opinion in Jeffersonian language that Jacksonian Democrats later embraced. Jefferson believed that if a president or Congress had the authority to grant "internal improvements," it would dangerously empower his administration to reward friends and punish enemies.[41] Polk carried this political belief for the rest of his career. On Election Day, 90 percent of white men in the Columbia district of Tennessee turned out and gave Polk a clear margin of victory: 3,669 votes for Polk to 2,748 for Erwin.[42] Polk secured his second major political victory; unfortunately, his soon-to-be mentor suffered a different fate.

More than a dozen candidates entered their name for the presidency in 1824. At this time, nominating conventions did not exist, leaving it to individual regional candidates. Four names emerged: New England's John Quincy Adams, Georgia's William H. Crawford, Kentucky's Henry Clay, and Tennessee's Andrew Jackson. When the results were counted, the Electoral College vote stood at Jackson, 99; Adams, 84; Crawford, 41; and Clay, 37. While Jackson

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[40] Borneman, *Polk*, 17-18.
[41] John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 34.
[42] Ibid., 35-36.

jumped out to an early lead in electoral votes as well as the popular tally, he did not possess the 131 votes needed to win the election. None of the candidates in 1824 had won the required number of the Electoral College votes; thus, the choice for president fell constitutionally to the House of Representatives, which was to select among the top three candidates in the Electoral College.[43] As Speaker of the House, Henry Clay could have used his political influence over the House of Representatives to gain the presidency if he had finished in the top three. Instead, Clay struck what came to be called a "corrupt bargain" with John Quincy Adams. Standard historical interpretation concludes that Adam's eventual victory was the result of dishonest maneuvering and vote buying within the House of Representatives. For example, Adams is believed to have promised Henry Clay the Secretary of State position in exchange for his influences over the votes of four key western states: Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Ohio.[44]

Watching all of this from his seat in the Tennessee legislature, James K. Polk could not imagine that twenty years later Henry Clay's actions in the disputed election of 1824 would still play a part in his own campaign for the White House. "So you see," raged Old Hickory after Clay's maneuver, "the Judas of the West has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver- his end will be the same. Was there ever witnessed such a bare faced corruption in any country before?"[45] The defeat enraged Jackson, and he vowed to return to the race in 1828.

James K. Polk, a newly elected U.S. Representative and strong supporter of Jackson, voiced his opinion in Congress on both the "corrupt bargain," and the Federalist mindset that informed and well-educated elected representatives should control the government. In Polk's mind, this elitist method endangered the nation. Making his first speech in Congress, Polk asserted that

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[43] Jeffery A. Jenkins and Brian R. Sala, "The Spatial Theory of Voting and the Presidential Election of 1824," *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct., 1998): 1157-1158.
[44] Ibid., 1158.
[45] Borneman, *Polk*, 22.

when it came to selecting the president, the people took precedence over Congress. When a matter as important as the presidency is at stake, he said, members of Congress might be subject to the influence of bribes or venal patronage. Furthermore, the reference cut close to the bone of the "bargain." As he said it, Polk looked into the faces of members who had voted to reject the will of the people in favor of the will of Henry Clay.[46] Similar to Jackson, Polk believed that majority rule should govern, not the elite minority which the Federalists supported. Polk went a step further suggesting that the power of the House of Representatives to elect the president should be revoked. In a letter to Andrew Jackson in 1826, Polk stated,

> "I prefer the district system to any other, but if it cannot be established as the Uniform mode throughout the Union, such are my well settled convictions from short observation here, of the absolute importance, not only to the purity, the honor and the dignity of Congress, but it is to be apprehended to the duration and harmonious operations of the Government itself, that this important election should in no count devolve upon Congress."[47]

Polk's letter to Jackson and statements before Congress signified his continued support for Old Hickory and Jeffersonian ideals. When Edward Everett of Massachusetts hinted at the threat posed by a military chieftain elected by an overwhelming majority, Polk came to Jackson's aid. "Some military chieftain? Yes sir! By some military chieftain whose only crime it was to have served his country faithfully at a period when that country needed… his services."[48] Polk believed that Jackson faithfully served during the War of 1812, and despite his unorthodox actions in Florida against the Spanish, Polk thought Jackson served the nation well. With his profound statements before Congress, Polk prepared to vote down any legislation proposed by the Adams administration.

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[46] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 38.
[47] James K. Polk to Andrew Jackson, April 3, 1826, *Correspondence Volume I*, 38.
[48] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 38.

Although John Quincy Adams belonged to the Democratic-Republican Party (Thomas Jefferson's creation), Adams shared commonalities with the soon to be National Republican Party. Adams firmly believed in Clay's American System, in which the federal government spent money on internal improvements, such as road and bridge construction. In his first inaugural address, Adams called for an energetic domestic policy that included a national university, a scientific observatory, and a network of roads and canals to facilitate the development of the nation's interior. In his first message to Congress, he even spoke favorably about a national road from Washington to New Orleans.[49] Adams's stance on internal improvements was the antithesis of Polk's principles on the proper role of government. Polk won election to the House of Representatives opposing a candidate who favored federally-funded internal improvements. While a representative, Polk's ultimate goal centered on restoring Jackson to the presidency. From the debacle of the1824 election, Polk fostered a close relationship with Jackson, which over the years provided him various political opportunities and advantages. In Old Hickory, Polk found a mentor who guided him well throughout his political career.

Over the next four years, Polk consistently voted against President Adams's agenda. While Congress funded two canal projects the Delaware and Chesapeake and the Chesapeake and Ohio, and supported 109 survey projects, continuing animus against the "corrupt bargain" of 1824 prevented President Adams from accomplishing many of his goals. Democrats loyal to Andrew Jackson, and to a large extent the nation, decried such corrupt politics and political maneuvering. As the 1828 election loomed, the nation awaited Jackson's return to the presidential race, as did James K. Polk.

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[49] Pamela L. Baker, "The Washington National Road Bill and the Struggle to Adopt a Federal System of Internal Improvement," *Journal of the Early Republic*. Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 448.

In 1827, James K. Polk secured his second term in the U.S. House of Representatives defeating Lunsford Bramlett. After his victory, Polk prepared to support Jackson in any way possible. Historians view the 1828 election as one of the biggest smear campaigns in U.S. political history. Jackson, running on the inaugural Democratic ticket, accused Adams of corrupt dealings in the election four years prior. Jackson attacked the American System as wasteful and a detriment to national prosperity. Adams, now on the National Republican ticket, took a different approach. Not only did he and his supporters attack Jackson's gambling habits, and brash personality, but he also challenged the legitimacy of Jackson's marriage to Rachel Robards. A Cincinnati newspaper discovered information on their marriage. It charged that the couple was guilty of bigamy and adultery. It was true that, around 1790, Andrew and Rachel had lived "in sin" for perhaps three years before she was legally divorced from the abusive Lewis Robards.[50]

Polk recognized the criticisms against Jackson as an opportunity to serve his political patron. Informing Jackson how Jefferson handled allegations by the elder Adams, Polk wrote, "Treat everything that has or may be said, with silent contempt. Any notice from you would only give importance to their slanders. Leave it as heretofore to your friends, at least until the election is over."[51] Despite the veracity of the allegations about Jackson's marriage, Adams's strategy backfired during the national election. In convincing fashion, Jackson won 176 electoral votes to Adams's 83. Before reaching the White House, however, his wife Rachel died. Jackson blamed not only Adams for Rachel's death, but also Henry Clay, who he believed to be the person behind the bigamy charges. Nevertheless, Jackson became the 7th U.S. President, and the first Democrat elected.

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[50] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 41.
[51] James K. Polk to Andrew Jackson, September 8, 1828, *Correspondence Volume I*, 196.

As Jefferson's victory in 1800 ushered in a new era, so too did Jackson's election. Jackson represented the "Common Man," as evidenced by the celebration at the White House which was overrun by loyal Jackson supporters from the general populace. Jackson prepared to assert himself as a strong executive and represent the democratic majority over the elite minority while in office. His victory ushered in a new view of U.S. government, in which the president, solely elected by the general populace, would lead the nation. Over the next eight years, Jackson's administration faced numerous domestic challenges ranging from Indian Removal Policy, nullification, and the Bank War, and a recalcitrant cabinet that motivated Jackson to use informal advisors known as the "Kitchen Cabinet." During this tumultuous period, Jackson could always turn to fellow Tennessean James K. Polk, who was more than willing to assist the administration. Polk tied his political future to Old Hickory, who in turn provided ample political opportunities for the promising politician. Furthermore, during his presidency Jackson showed Polk the strong role the president should play while inhabiting the White House, and how to dominate a cabinet. Introduced to Jeffersonian principles of an agrarian society at a young age, now it was Jacksonian ideals which guided Polk's vision of presidential leadership.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 served as one of the more controversial policies of the Jackson administration. Jackson's Indian policy effected Indian tribes all over the country, but the ones with the most at stake were the Five Civilized Tribes of Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole.[52] Similar to Thomas Jefferson, Jackson shared a vision of westward expansion. Indian Removal held the place in Jackson's vision that internal improvements occupied in that of John Quincy Adams: the key to national development.[53] President Jackson

[52] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 342.
[53] Ibid., 347.

made his opinion on the removal policy clear during his First Annual Message to Congress in 1829. Jackson explained, "This emigration should be voluntary, for it would be as cruel as unjust to compel the aborigines to abandon the graves of their fathers and seek a home in a distant land. But they should be distinctly informed that if they remain within the limits of the States they must be subject to their laws."[54] However, if the tribes refused to relocate, Jackson was prepared to use force. He continued, "Submitting to the laws of the States, and receiving, like other citizens, protection in their persons and property, they will ere long become merged in the mass of our population."[55] Despite reservations from politicians, the Jacksonian majority in the Senate passed the Removal Bill by a party-line vote, 28-19. In the House (where Polk served as a Representative), the Indian Removal Bill only barely passed, 102 to 97. The president signed Indian Removal into law on May 28, 1830.[56] As James K. Polk would do during his presidency, Jackson embraced westward expansion as a necessity for a growing nation. President Jackson asserted his right to act on behalf of the nation; he believed on national issues, his countrymen required him to lead. Unfortunately, as Polk discovered during his tenure in office fifteen years later, certain political decisions can detract from overall accomplishments.

Following Andrew Jackson's controversial action, James K. Polk prepared to commit himself to Jacksonian values. Certain principles differentiated Jacksonian Democrats from their opponents. While they supported the western demand for territorial expansion as a way to guarantee economic advancement, they opposed federal internal improvements that they felt caused corruption and waste.[57] Jackson's 4th Annual Message to Congress further defined his stance on internal improvements. Jackson stated, "Being solemnly impressed with the conviction

[54] Andrew Jackson, "First Annual Message," December 8, 1829. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29471. Accessed January 21, 2013
[55] Ibid.
[56] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 352.
[57] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 27.

that the extension of the power to make internal improvements beyond the limits I have suggested even it be deemed constitutional is subversive of the best interests of our country."[58] In Jackson's mind, states should handle funding for developments. For example, with the help of Polk initiating debate in Congress in 1830, Jackson vetoed Henry Clay's Maysville Road Project in Clay's home state of Kentucky.[59] Jackson found his man in Polk who continued to achieve political success of his own.

The elections Polk encountered for his seat in the House were rather easy. Polk's identification with Jackson helped make all his subsequent races for his congressional seat relatively easy. The opponents he faced could not meet the rigorous demands of campaigning. In the elections of 1829 and 1831 he did not face any opposition.[60] The majority of the elections Polk ran in were either unopposed or the competition did not organize an effective campaign. For example, Polk easily won races in 1833 and 1835, and faced no opposition again in 1837. It is easy to assume that Polk's success was contingent upon his mentor's achievements, but that is an understatement of the strong work ethic he brought to office. Polk campaigned tirelessly when he faced opposition. Vowing to 'work harder' than the other man became his motto. Polk's loyalty and success in politics earned him a spot in Jackson's inner circle which consisted of his "Kitchen Cabinet" and Secretary of State and future Vice President Martin Van Buren. Polk's affiliation with Jackson offered political opportunities.

One of the first challenges to Polk's loyalty to Andrew Jackson occurred over the Nullification Crisis in South Carolina. As one of Jackson's ablest floor managers in the House, Jackson took Polk off the Foreign Relations Committee and reassigned to Ways and Means,

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[58] Andrew Jackson, "4th Annual Address," December 4, 1832, *James K. Polk Public Papers: Outgoing Correspondence*, Reel 57, (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).
[59] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 28.
[60] Ibid., 26.

where he could be of greater service to the administration. As a member of the most important committee in the House, Polk would be expected to play a prominent role in the writing of a new compromise tariff bill and provide key support for Jackson's campaign against the Bank of the United States.[61] While a member of the Ways and Means Committee, Polk improved his bureaucratic skill by playing a leading role on the committee, and learning the inner-workings of congressional politics.

During the 1830s, high tariffs on imported goods became a national issue. Southern States recognized high tariffs imposed by the federal government as contrary to their economic interests as agricultural exporters, and thus anathema to states' rights. South Carolina opposed discriminatory tariffs. In effect, South Carolina would nullify any legislation passed by the federal government. Andrew Jackson, however, although he considered himself a states' rights supporter, was an unwavering advocate of national sovereignty. Disobedience to national laws could **Never** be justified.[62] What angered Jackson equally to states' disobedience to national law was the fact that his Vice President John C. Calhoun, a South Carolinian, supported nullification and even spoke of secession. Jackson expected obedience from his cabinet; Calhoun's actions violated Jackson's expectations. Privately, Jackson threatened to hang Calhoun if he uttered secession, this was no bluff. Caught in the middle was James K. Polk, a supporter of states' rights, but also a Jackson ally, and no secessionist. At a state dinner celebrating Thomas Jefferson's birthday on April 13, 1830, Jackson gruffly proclaimed his unequivocal stand against the nullification doctrine with the toast: "Our Federal Union, it must be preserved." Calhoun responded: "The Union- next to our liberty the most dear." Thereafter Polk distanced himself

[61] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 29-30.
[62] Ibid., 31.

from Calhoun and his supporters, leaving no doubt that he was, first and foremost, a Jackson man.[63]

Debate over the nullification issue ensued in Congress. During the 22nd Congress in 1832, South Carolina laid out its justification for opposing high tariffs. The Members of the South Carolina Legislature stated,

> "That South Carolinians are exceedingly aggrieved by the laws of the United States imposing high duties on foreign merchandise to protect manufactures. The evils under which South Carolina is suffering and are obvious and alarming: the great depreciation of cotton, the chief staple of her soil, has reduced the profits which the planters have long been accustomed."[64]

Like many southern states, South Carolina opposed s system which protected industry in the north, and burdened southern states with unreasonable taxes. On the surface, the nullification crisis revolved around the question of sovereignty: Which level of government has the final say on such matters as the tariff rates? Does the federal government, the state governments, or really neither (because the governmental system was set up in such a way that there is no locus of "last say")?[65]

Jackson worked with Congress and a compromise bill on tariffs gradually reduced duties over the next nine years. In Congress, Polk assisted in drafting a new tariff bill. But the bill was supplemented with a so-called Force Bill that confirmed the president's authority to use the armed forces, if necessary, to enforce federal laws. This temporarily resolved the controversy

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[63] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 24-25.
[64] South Carolina Legislature, "Memorial of the Minority of the Legislature of South Carolina, Praying that the Duties on Importations may be Reduced to a Scale Commensurate with the Necessary Revenue of the United States," January 24, 1832. Congress Session 22-1, S.doc.34, 1, HTTP://0-congressional.proquest.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/congressional/docview/t47.d48.212_s.doc.34?accountid=26417. Accessed January 21, 2013.
[65] David F. Ericson, "The Nullification Crisis, American Republicanism, and the Force Bill Debate," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (May, 1995): 251.

with both sides claiming victory.[66] The fact of the matter is that, after South Carolina adopted its nullification ordinances, most of the federal senators- centrists as well as nationals-would not have accepted a resolution of the crisis that did not include the Force Bill or some equivalent way of delegitimizing the nullifiers' view of the American public as a "mere" federation.[67] The crisis provided Polk an opportunity to understand the role of the president on domestic issues. Furthermore, the event showed Polk that it took a strong executive to govern the country. With the nation's well-being at stake, President Jackson took a strong stance against the nullifiers and threatened to use force if necessary. Polk remembered the actions taken by Jackson and mimicked his bluster to some degree during the Oregon question in 1846. Although President Polk did not reference Jackson's actions during the nullification crisis, Polk's tough talk with England resembled Jackson's bluster with South Carolina.

As the 1832 presidential election loomed, two issues were at the forefront of the debates: the nullification crisis and the re-chartering of the Bank of the United States. Polk played a pivotal role during both political fights. Andrew Jackson decided to drop John C. Calhoun from the ticket because of his stance on nullification, and he added the political savvy New Yorker Martin Van Buren who had engineered Jackson's victory in 1828. The 1832 Baltimore convention of course unanimously re-nominated Jackson and nominated Van Buren for Vice President, despite some southern trepidation. The opposition National Republicans, soon to be called the Whigs, nominated Henry Clay. The decisive issue in the campaign was that of Andrew Jackson's war against the Bank of the United States, a struggle that one historian claimed, "Would reveal the real meaning of Jacksonian Democracy."[68] Jackson regarded the bank as a "monster institution"

[66] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 32.
[67] Ericson, "Nullification Crisis," 253.
[68] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 32.

that unconstitutionally utilized public funds for private profit. He preferred a deposit bank as part of the treasury department, run by officials he would appoint.[69] Jackson's political nemesis Henry Clay once again collaborated against Jackson. This time it was the Bank's president Nicholas Biddle instead of John Quincy Adams.

The Second Bank came into being in 1816 with a twenty-year mandate, and like the First Bank, was the repository of federal funds, for which it paid the government no interest. In 1832, four years before the charter expired, Biddle- advised by Henry Clay-decided that this election year was the moment to press for a charter renewal.[70] Clay believed that Jackson would not veto the re-chartering of the U.S. Bank during an election year, he severely underestimated Jackson. When Jackson began to rail against the bank as a monster to be slain- and told Van Buren, "The Bank… is trying to kill me, but I will kill it." For James K. Polk, who now served on the Ways and Means Committee, the decision was easy: he supported President Jackson. Repeatedly, as the bank war raged, the president relied on Polk, first as a member of the Ways and Means Committee, and then as its chairman, to expose the bank's corruption.[71] The stage was set for a battle between Nicholas Biddle and Andrew Jackson. Polk's position on the Ways and Means Committee presented Jackson an ace-in-the-hole.

Nicholas Biddle pushed for an immediate vote, and the re-charter bill passed 107 to 85, with Polk, of course, in the minority.[72]The Ways and Means Committee, except Polk, supported the re-charter. Without flinching, President Jackson vetoed the re-charter bill. In his veto message of 1832, President Jackson stated, "I sincerely regret that in the act before me I can perceive none of those modifications of the bank charter which are necessary, in my opinion, to make it

[69] Ibid., 33.
[70] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 49.
[71] Ibid., 50.
[72] Ibid.

compatible with justice, with sound policy, or with the Constitution of our country."[73] Both Biddle and Clay were shocked by Jackson's veto; they were even more surprised at the result of the 1832 presidential election. In the presidential contest against Clay, Jackson had swept to victory with 57 percent of the popular vote- 688,000 ballots to 473,000. The electoral vote margin was 219 to 49.[74] Jackson won re-election, but his fight with the U.S. Bank did not end.

Following the veto, Jackson decided to remove all federal money from Biddle's bank and deposit it in several state institutions, which became known as "pet banks." James K. Polk was charged with producing a report on the U.S. Bank, reciting a litany of justifications for removing federal deposits. Among the most serious, Polk reported: "Biddle had excluded the federal government from policy-making deliberations; he had put federal funds to his personal use; he had used the money to corrupt politicians and the press; he had impeded the government's efforts to pay down the national debt; he had used the power of the bank to influence the outcome of elections."[75] With Polk's report and his lobbying in Congress against the Bank, Biddle and Clay did not have enough power in the House of Representatives to override Jackson's veto.

Jackson and Polk abhorred corrupt politics, and on December 30, 1833, Polk defended Jackson's actions before the House of Representatives. Speaking against the corrupt policies of the U.S. Bank, Polk stated, "The question is in fact whether we shall have the Republic, without the Bank, or the Bank without the Republic. It has done more, sir, in its manifesto officially issued by the board; it has undertaken to lecture the representatives of the people on political economy, and to indoctrinate Congress in regard to constitutional powers of the different

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[73] Andrew Jackson, "Veto Message, Washington, July 10, 1832," http://history.furman.edu/~benson/docs/ajveto.htm. Accessed January 21, 2013
[74] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 52.
[75] Ibid., 51.

departments of Government."[76] Polk endeared himself to Old Hickory following his report on the bank and subsequent defense of Jackson's actions. As a rising star in the Democratic Party, Polk, an ambitious man, set his sights on higher offices, and with the support of Andrew Jackson, little stood in the way of Polk's political aspirations.

Elected to his fifth term in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1833, Polk set his sights on another political office, Speaker of the House. Another Tennessean, John Bell, set his sights on the vacant Speaker of the House seat because Andrew Stevenson resigned in 1834. Polk sorely needed the president's support to win, but William B. Lewis, Jackson's sycophantic crony, told him that Old Hickory was cool to Polk's candidacy.[77] Lewis's statements to Polk could not be further from the truth after all Polk did for Jackson during his presidency. Polk's brother-in-law James Walker met him and informed him that Jackson supported his candidacy. Jackson gave Polk his blessing and he entered the race. In 1834, Polk ran against four challengers for the position. A series of convoluted political maneuvers took place involving Vice President Van Buren favoring Joel Sutherland from Pennsylvania, Richard Wilde supported by the Calhoun nullifiers; John Bell, who represented the Biddle interests; and James K. Polk, backed by the president. After ten ballots, with Calhoun shifting support to Bell, he was elected Speaker.[78] Polk, stung by his first major defeat, vowed to run in the 1835 election for Speaker of the House. Although disappointed over the voting results, while Jackson did not counsel Polk, he had the utmost confidence in Polk's chances in 1835.

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[76] James K. Polk, "Speech by Rep. James K. Polk Defending his Stance to Remove Monies from the Bank of the United States," House of Representatives December 30, 1833, *James K. Polk Papers*, Reel 59, (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.), 25.
[77] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 53.
[78] Ibid., 54.

James K. Polk directed his friends in Tennessee to spread word that the new Speaker had joined the opposition against President Jackson. Though John Bell assured his constituents he remained a committed Jacksonian,[79] his actions while Speaker of the House demonstrated his break with the Jackson administration on two occasions: he criticized Jackson's hard money policy, and he backed Hugh Lawson White over Martin Van Buren, Jackson's handpicked successor in the 1836 presidential race. Although a good friend of White, Polk decided to support his mentor's choice for president. When the Twenty-fourth Congress convened in December 1835, the Democratic majority in the House moved quickly to undo the mistake it had made in choosing Bell as Speaker.[80] Polk ran in the 1835 race for Speaker, and this time, the outcome was never in doubt. Backed by a solid Jackson majority, Polk won the post on the first ballot by a decisive 132 to 84 vote.[81] During his first stint as Speaker of the House, Polk maintained his Jacksonian principles: low tariff, opposition to internal improvements, and strong leadership. The Twenty-fifth Congress was one of the most closely and bitterly divided in American history. There were 108 Democrats and 107 Whigs in addition to twenty-four members from assorted parties.[82] Nonetheless, Polk stood ready for the challenge.

The year following Polk's first victory as Speaker, 1836, marked a presidential election in which Jackson passed the torch of Jacksonian Democracy to Martin Van Buren. Van Buren won a convincing victory with more popular votes than his four Whig opponents: William Henry Harrison, Daniel Webster, Hugh Lawson White, and William Person Magnum. His stunning loss of Tennessee to White, however, was a danger signal for the future.[83] Tennessee, Jackson's home state, represented the birthplace of Jacksonian Democracy, but growing anti-Jackson factions

[79] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 38.
[80] Ibid., 40.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Mayo, *James K. Polk*, 35.
[83] Ibid., 36.

were on the rise. These factions prevented both Jackson and Polk from delivering Tennessee into Van Buren's column. Although Martin Van Buren recognized this fact, he could not foresee the perilous economic crisis in the near distant future. A masterful politician, Van Buren proved inept to handle the situation.

Polk's four years as Speaker (he won re-election in 1837) were more like a trial by fire. American politics were beginning to be organized around a more rigidly partisan model. Polk was the first Speaker to be looked upon as a party leader, responsible for pushing President Van Buren's program through the House. Partisan conflict in Congress became far more intense as clearer economic, sectional and class differences emerged. Polk, as Speaker, exercised great powers in appointing all committees, deciding who had the floor in debates, making parliamentary decisions, and dictating the flow of deliberations. As leader of the Democratic majority, at the same time, his strategy was to give all important committee chairmanships to Democrats and insure that they had total control over the vital Ways and Means Committee.[84] During Polk's four years as Speaker of the House, he micro-managed every aspect of the job, his tenure as Speaker prepared him well for the presidency. One New Hampshire Democrat noted approvingly that Polk "sustained himself as well as any man could have done, through the last long, laborious, fatiguing, and stormy session. And notwithstanding the furious attacks upon him… embarrassing him with question after question of order, his equanimity was never disturbed."[85] The personal attacks the Democrat referred to were attacks made by anti-Jackson congressmen, including former Speaker John Bell.

[84] Ibid.
[85] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 45.

The agenda Polk expected to push was abruptly halted by the Panic of 1837. Few would admit it, but Jackson's war against the U.S. Bank helped fuel the crisis. The corrupt institution needed to be dealt with, but besides the "pet banks," Jackson did not have an economic plan for the future. The financial panic that gripped the U.S. economy in the spring of 1837 was among the most severe in its history. In the five years that followed the nation's first general suspension of specie payments by the banks, failures and loan losses reduced the book assets of the state chartered banks by forty-five percent, and 194 of the 729 banks with charters in 1837 were forced to close their doors. Prices of banking, railroad, and industrial securities in the early stock markets plummeted.[86] Prices for foodstuffs and housing all skyrocketed. The crisis placed the Van Buren administration in a difficult position. Unlike his predecessor, President Martin Van Buren lacked the strong leadership qualities necessary to govern the nation. Where Jackson directly involved himself in the job, Van Buren took a hands-off approach. His style did not fit the dire straits the economy experienced, the country required a leader. However, President Van Buren placed in a difficult position, tried to act.

With Jackson's blessing, Van Buren summoned a special session of Congress in September 1837 and asked for legislation to authorize removing the taxpayers' money from all the banks, placing it in an Independent Treasury. Each major city would have a Sub-Treasury for local convenience. In the meantime, Van Buren removed the government's deposits from the pet banks by executive action on the grounds that they did not pay specie as required by law. But his request for a statutory Independent Treasury stalled in Congress; ultimately it failed despite the

[86] Peter L. Rousseau, "Jacksonian Monetary Policy, Specie Flows, and the Panic of 1837," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Jun., 2002): 457.

support of Polk, Whigs and soft-money Democrats convincingly pointed out that removing federal deposits from state banks had a deflationary effect and worsened the depression.[87]

Despite Polk's efforts in the House, President Van Buren did not have the support in Congress or presidential leadership to overcome the demanding economic situation (only the Great Depression surpassed it). When the Panic of 1839 hit the U.S., Van Buren's presidential fate was sealed. Economic problems consumed Van Buren's administration, although he planned to run for re-election in 1840, the nation remembered his failed presidency. Whig candidate William Henry Harrison defeated Democrat Martin Van Buren in the election. Similar to the race in 1836, Van Buren lost Jackson's home state of Tennessee. Realizing that Tennessee voted for a Whig presidential candidate in 1836 and 1840, Jackson turned to his friend James K. Polk to convince Tennessee voters to return to the Democratic fold.

By 1839, Polk grew tired of his Speaker of the House position. As his term as Speaker of the House concluded, former President Andrew Jackson urged him to return to Tennessee and run for governor. Alarmed by the Whig trend in his native state, Polk followed the advice of his mentor. In 1839, Polk challenged Newton Cannon for the governorship. Always a tireless campaigner, Polk resolved to win the election at the grassroots level. For four months during the spring and summer of 1839 he crisscrossed the state, giving speeches in every county.[88] Significantly, Polk's campaign focused mainly on national affairs. Tariffs, the banking system, and internal improvements were on the minds of most Tennesseans, but the incumbent Whig governor, Newton Cannon, readily portrayed himself as much more in touch with Tennessee.[89] However, Cannon proved no match for Polk's superior debating skills and indefatigable work

[87] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 506-507.
[88] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 48.
[89] Borneman, *Polk*, 41.

ethic. When the election results came in, Democrats regained control of the state legislature and picked up three congressional seats. And, by the narrow margin of 54,102 to 51,396 votes, James K. Polk captured the governor's chair.[90] Jackson lauded Polk for stemming the Whig influence in Tennessee, and convincing voters to return to the Democratic Party. Jackson professed Polk's victory to signal "the return of old Democratic Tennessee to the republican fold again," but that was not the case.[91] Although Van Buren did not select Polk as a Vice President (in 1840 it was a reasonable possibility), Polk's political career seemed unstoppable.

If James K. Polk enjoyed his mentor's praise, he did not enjoy the reduced power the governorship presented. For one thing, the state constitution did not even grant him the power to veto legislative bills. Patronage appointments were limited by the relatively small size of the state government, and many of Polk's pet projects, including bank reforms, fell on deaf ears in the legislature.[92] For someone used to micro-managing affairs and possessing excellent bureaucratic skills, the governorship was a nightmare for Polk. Yet, Polk understood the importance of retaining the governorship and he decided to run for re-election in 1841.

Entering the re-election campaign, Polk believed the race would be decided on similar issues: tariffs, internal improvements, and banking issues. Unfortunately for Polk, the contest went a different direction. Polk's challenger was a 31-year-old state representative James "Lean Jimmy" Jones. Polk, who had known nothing but success on the campaign trail, spoke to the issues in his earnest and dignified manner.[93] However, Jones became an instant hit with the voters, who preferred his story-telling to Polk's long winded and carefully reasoned arguments on such issues

[90] Ibid., 42-43.
[91] Ibid., 43.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 52.

as the national bank and the tariff.[94] Jones's style resembled that of fellow Tennessean Davy Crockett, who preferred storytelling over an analytical approach. When voters went to the polls, they voted for Jones primarily based on his folksy humor. Besides his defeat in 1834 for Speaker of the House, Polk never felt the sting of losing a political race. The loss did not shake Polk's confidence, and he entered the gubernatorial race again in 1843.

Polk believed the people of Tennessee were fed up with Jones's storytelling and humor, and he assumed the governor's race was his to win. Following the same campaign strategies from two years prior, the candidates debated one another across the state. Once again, Polk supposed he had Tennessee voters on his side, he was mistaken. The voters re-elected Jones by a margin of 3,833 with more than 110,000 votes cast (Jones won by 3,243 in 1841).[95] Some voters in Tennessee were angered at Polk's support of Martin Van Buren in 1836 and 1840 despite Van Buren's utter failures in the office. Polk's hands were tied on the issue because his mentor Andrew Jackson personally selected Van Buren as his presidential successor in 1836. His consecutive governorship defeats proved that an affiliation with Jackson did not always guarantee political victory. Polk's consecutive losses for the governorship were difficult on him and the Democratic Party.

Across the country, Democratic leaders who once considered Polk a front-runner in the vice-presidential sweepstakes now interpreted the election results in Tennessee as his political obituary. If Polk could not build a successful party organization in the state that had given birth to Jacksonian Democracy, he could hardly be the right man to help lead the Democrats to victory in a national election.[96] Following Polk's defeat, Van Buren lectured him that "it is as

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[94] Ibid., 53.
[95] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* 67-68.
[96] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 55-56.

mortifying, as it is incomprehensible" that Tennessee should have been again lost to the Whigs. "You must, and I doubt not will, in good time, seek out the cause and apply the remedy."[97] In 1844, the Democratic Party prepared to meet at Baltimore to nominate a presidential candidate. Although it was difficult to admit after all his political successes and close relationship with party founder Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk's political career seemed finished.

Martin Van Buren's diminished popularity and power invited challenges from a number of quarters. Moreover, conflicts among the rank and file over banking policies, tariffs, and slavery further eroded the party's coherency. As a result, divisions in the Democracy ran toward the byzantine. John C. Calhoun, Lewis Cass, Richard Johnson, and James Buchanan spun webs of alliances throughout the Union that functioned as rival organizations to each state's Van Buren wing.[98] Although Democrats and Whigs widely assumed that Martin Van Buren would secure the nomination at Baltimore, trepidation among Democrats remained over the possibility. Even the most sanguine Democrats feared that Van Buren, if elected, could neither organize nor inspire the party's constituents. A Philadelphia Democrat thought that, although Van Buren's nomination was certain, "defeat stares us in the face."[99]

Meanwhile, back in Tennessee, James K. Polk licked his wounds following consecutive defeats for the governorship of his home state. Still, Polk wondered if his loyalty to the Democratic Party might secure his place on the Van Buren ticket. Van Buren decided to select Richard Johnson for his Vice President ending any dream Polk had on the subject. Democrats were divided in their support for a Van Buren/Richard Johnson ticket. Meanwhile, Clay expected his opponent to be Martin Van Buren and that the campaign would be fought along the economic

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[97] Borneman, *Polk*, 66.
[98] Michael A. Morrison, "Martin Van Buren, the Democracy, and the Partisan Politics of Texas Annexation," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Nov., 1995): 700-701.
[99] Ibid., 705.

lines that had emerged during the past fifteen years: the American System and a national bank versus laissez-faire and banking rules left up to the states.[100] By the mid-1840s, the two-party system was well entrenched. Leaders of the Democratic Party and the Whig Party set the platform presidential candidates were to follow: low tariffs vs. high protective tariffs, "pet banks" vs. a national bank, American System supporting internal improvements vs. little government intervention. Yet, another issue entered into the political campaign, the annexation of Texas. Of all the issues, the Texas question benefited James K. Polk more than any other topic.

In 1842, Van Buren paid a courtesy call on Clay at Ashland in May 1842, and many people, both in their own day and since, have supposed the prospective candidates reached an informal agreement, as Unionists and gentlemen, to leave Texas out of their contest. Very unlikely, however, the two reached the same conclusion independently and their simultaneous announcements were a coincidence.[101] Although it is debatable exactly what topics were discussed between Van Buren and Clay, their announcements in 1844 suggested their meeting in 1842 was more than a meaningless event.

In 1844, President John Tyler began discussions with Texas on possible annexation. President Tyler submitted a treaty to the Senate that would bring Texas into the Union. On April 27, less than a week after the Senate opened up debate on the treaty, the *National Intelligencer*, a Whig newspaper published a letter from Henry Clay opposing the acquisition of Texas, encumbered as it was with the prospect of war with Mexico. That same Saturday evening, Van Buren came out against annexation in a closely reasoned letter which appeared in the *Globe*, a Democratic

[100] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 682.
[101] Ibid.

newspaper, to Congressman William H. Hammett of Mississippi. Like Clay, Van Buren declared annexation to be inexpedient as long as Mexico opposed it. Van Buren would support it, however, if peace was preserved and a majority of senators and American citizens approved of the measure.[102] Little did Van Buren know, but he had made a grave error, and ex-President Andrew Jackson knew it.

Following Van Buren's letter opposing annexation, Jackson and Polk met at the Hermitage to discuss the state of the Democratic Party. Still a figure to be reckoned with in the Democratic Party, Andrew Jackson believed there was only one way to solve the crisis. A fervent expansionist, he was convinced that Van Buren's letter had been "a fatal error." To bring the party together, a southwestern, pro-annexation candidate was needed at the head of the ticket. Polk, Jackson said, was "the most available man."[103] Martin Van Buren made a major political error when he opposed the annexation of Texas, for it placed him in agreement with Henry Clay, the arch nemesis of Jackson. Van Buren's position on Texas deviated from the Jacksonian vision, which supported westward expansion. To rectify the situation and help the Democratic Party, Jackson recommended that Polk should travel to Baltimore not as a candidate for the vice-presidency, but the presidency itself. As he had done his entire political career, Polk followed the advice of his mentor.

With the blessing of Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk headed to Baltimore with presidential aspirations swirling in his mind. The careful observer must realize that each political victory of Polk's was a calculated move to set him up for a presidential run. He developed a close relationship with Jackson, became Jackson's Congressional ally, served as Speaker of the House twice, and won the governorship in 1839 in his home state. Some Democrats speculated Polk

[102] Morrison, "Martin Van Buren," 710.
[103] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 61.

might make a run in 1848 or 1852, but certainly not in 1844 when it was widely assumed Martin Van Buren would be nominated.

Arriving in Baltimore in May of 1844, Polk found the party undecided on whom to nominate. At the convention, 266 delegates packed the halls to nominate Henry Clay's challenger. As expected, Van Buren jumped out to an early lead, but did not secure the two-thirds needed for nomination. Lewis Cass ran second. Van Buren's support turned out to be soft. Senator Robert Walker persuaded some of Van Buren's delegates to join the South in backing the suspension of the convention's two-thirds rule.[104] In this case, a simple majority could nominate a candidate. This political conspiring further angered southerners who wanted a slaveholder as the Democratic nominee. Secondly, pro-annexation Democrats wanted a candidate who supported bringing Texas into the Union. Van Buren's letter from 1844 sealed his position on annexation, and pro-expansion Democrats condemned Van Buren. After the first day, the convention failed to nominate a candidate and was at an impasse between Van Buren and Lewis Cass of Michigan. Polk, who did not receive a single vote on the first day, met with manager Gideon Pillow and George Bancroft of Massachusetts to discuss his options. His political fortunes were about to change.

With each ballot, Martin Van Buren lost support. Polk benefited from the actions taken by George Bancroft and his manager Gideon Pillow. Both men electioneered on his behalf in northern states for his candidacy. Polk's team recognized the regional dissension among Democrats over Van Buren's potential candidacy. The rift between northern and southern Democrats widened when northern Democrats watched their southern brethren spurn Martin Van

[104] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 682-683.

Buren at the 1844 Baltimore convention.[105] Democrats knew that party founder Andrew Jackson supported his young protégé James K. Polk, and although in poor health, Democrats respected Jackson's position. A cabal consisting of Gideon Pillow, Benjamin Butler, and George Bancroft offered Polk to the convention as a way out, to prevent a Cass-Van Buren deadlock, and the delegates stampeded for him.[106] In a letter from Gideon Pillow to James K. Polk, Pillow stated, "Never was there such *unanimity*. Never was there such *enthusiasm* before seen or witnessed in any body. I held you up before the convention, as the "*Olive Branch of Peace*," and all parties ran to you as to *an ark of safety*."[107] On the 9th ballot, the delegation nominated Polk. After building a reputable career for over twenty years, the Democrats chose Polk as their man.

If the Democrats were elated, the Whigs were ecstatic. The Whigs asked, "Who is James K. Polk?" The question was a mocking gesture directed towards Polk and the Democratic Party, but it was all they could muster. Heading into the 1844 election, the Whig Party quickly discovered a man with ambition and political success on his side. Although Polk believed his political career over in 1843, now, he headed into the national election a formidable contender to longtime antagonist Henry Clay. The question for history would be whether James K. Polk was a dark horse who came from nowhere, or one of the most able and determined politicians of his time.[108] The 1844 presidential race answered that very question.

Before the election took place, Polk wrote a letter to Henry Hubbard stating his acceptance and intentions for the office. Polk said,

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[105] Jonathan Earle, "Marcus Morton and the Dilemma of Jacksonian Antislavery in Massachusetts, 1817-1849," *Massachusetts Historical Review*, Vol. 4, Race & Slavery (2002): 78.
[106] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 683.
[107] Gideon Pillow to James K. Polk, May 29, 1844, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume VII, January-August 1844* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1989), 162.
[108] Borneman, *James K. Polk*, 106.

> "It has been well observed that the office of President of the United States should neither be sought nor declined. I have never sought it, nor shall I feel the liberty to decline it, if conferred upon me by the voluntary suffrages of my Fellow Citizens… I deem the present to be a proper occasion to declare that if then nomination made by the convention shall be confirmed by the people and result in my election, I shall enter upon the discharge of the high and solemn duties of the office, with the settled purpose of not being a candidate for re-election. In the event of my election, it shall be my constant aim, by a strict adherence to the Old Republican land-marks, to maintain and preserve the public prosperity, and at the end of four years I am resolved to retire to private life."[109]

Despite his protestations, Polk's calculated moves placed him in position to run for the presidency. His one term pledge had two effects. First, it assuaged Van Burenites who believed the nomination was stolen from their candidate, and secondly, if elected, Polk could push his agenda without fear of his decisions costing him the 1848 presidential election. Polk's first challenge was defeating Henry Clay in the election, and then he could formulate the goals of his administration.

During the campaign, Henry Clay could find nothing to defame Polk's character: he did not drink or gamble like his mentor, and his marriage was not in question; Polk, on the other hand, attacked Clay's position on Texas and reminded voters of the "corrupt bargain" he participated in. While 1824 was an ancient memory for some, Clay's position on Texas was not. Clay, realizing his mistake in regards to annexing Texas, reversed course. He declared that he "should be glad to see" Texas annexed-provided it could be accomplished "without dishonor, without war, with the common consent of Union, and upon just and fair terms.[110] Clay's inconsistent stances confused voters. Polk, who tirelessly campaigned, had his duplicitous moments in the race as well. He believed that the tariff, which was raised in 1842, needed to be lowered. In the north, Polk stated that he did not object to a tariff which protected industry, while in the south he

[109] James K. Polk to Henry Hubbard, June 12, 1844, *Correspondence Volume VII*, 241.
[110] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 687.

assured voters the tariff would be reduced. He understood that he needed support from northern Democrats to win.[111] In a letter to John K. Kane, an ardent Jackson supporter, he attacked the Whigs instead of clarifying his stance on tariffs. Polk stated,

> "You will see in the Whig paper of this village that an attempt has been made, by a clique of Whig-partisans, to force me to make another Declaration of my views upon the tariff and Texas. From the *Nashville Union* of yesterday, a copy of which I send you, you will see how I have treated them. My opinions have been fully declared and are well understood, and it cannot be necessary, or proper that I should write any more. I shall treat their communications, with the silent contempt which it deserves."[112]

Although each candidate had their moments of duplicity along the campaign trail, both headed into election night confident in their chances. Clay craved the presidency as evidenced by his presidential run in 1824, 1832, and now 1844. Polk took calculated steps and accepted all political victories with Republican humility, stating he was merely a servant of the people. The stakes in the 1844 presidential race were monumental, and it proved to be a close race.

Complicating matters further, James Birney of the Liberty Party decided to run for president in 1844, running on a single issue: the abolition of slavery. His decision to enter the race proved instrumental to Polk's election hopes. In the national popular vote, Polk polled a plurality of 1,337,243 (49.6 percent) to Clay's 1,299,062 (48.1 percent) and Birney's 62,300 (2.3 percent). Polk defeated Clay 170 to 105 in the Electoral College, but the race was much closer. If 5,107 votes had gone from Birney into Clay's column in New York (Birney had 15,812 votes in New York), Clay would have won New York's 36 electoral votes, and even without a popular-vote plurality nationwide, Clay would have won the electoral vote 141 to 134 and with it the

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[111] Ibid.
[112] James K. Polk to John K. Kane, October 4, 1844, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume VIII, September-December 1844* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 152-153

presidency. Instead, New York's electoral votes went to Polk.[113] The race was one of the closest in American History; only the 2000 election could rival the 1844 election. Although victorious, to his astonishment, Polk lost his home state of Tennessee. Nevertheless, congratulatory letters flowed into Polk following his victory. One letter from Fernando Wood of New York City read, "I congratulate you upon your triumphant election. We look upon it here as the most decided and brilliant victory ever achieved by the democracy. Never have they (Whigs) had such an array of power and combination to contend against and never have they more completely covered themselves with glory."[114] Polk's victory was complete.

James K. Polk had been a Jackson man since he supported him for the U.S. Senate in 1823. Polk supported President Jackson throughout his presidency. Furthermore, Jackson gave numerous political opportunities to the young Congressmen, these opportunities he used to improve his bureaucratic skill. Jackson showed Polk how to be an assertive president who presided over his cabinet, and Jackson backed his young protégé for president. The fact remained that Polk was indebted to Jackson, but Polk wanted to establish himself as the man in charge of his administration. In a letter to close friend Cave Johnson, Polk stated,

> "My object will be to do my duty to the country, and I do not intend if I can avoid it, that my counsels shall be distracted by the supposed or not conflicting intents of those cliques. Another thing I will say, that I will if I can have a united and harmonious set of cabinet counselors, who will have the existing administration and the good of the country more at heart than the question who shall succeed me, and that in any event I intend to be *myself* President of the U.S."[115]

Similar to Andrew Jackson, Polk expected obedience from his cabinet members. Unlike his mentor, he would not handpick his successor, nor tolerate political squabbling amongst his cabinet members looking for higher positions. Polk demanded cabinet members to forswear from

[113] Borneman, *James K. Polk*, 128.
[114] Fernando Wood to James K. Polk November 5, 1844, *Correspondence VIII*, 274.
[115] James K. Polk to Cave Johnson, December 21, 1844, *Correspondence VIII*, 456.

seeking higher offices while serving in the administration. Polk interpreted his victory as a mandate to serve on behalf of the American people, he expected his cabinet to follow suit. With his victory complete, as usual, it was Old Hickory who summed it up succinctly: "Who is James K. Polk, will be no more asked."[116] Over the next four years, James K. Polk transformed not only the nation, but the presidency itself.

[116] Borneman, *James K. Polk*, 128.

CHAPTER 2: MR. POLK'S OFFICE: 1845-1846

From 1845-1846, President James K. Polk focused on domestic issues: lowering the tariff and establishing a Constitutional Treasury, and settling the Oregon question between the U.S. and Great Britain. In both domestic and foreign matters, President Polk involved himself in every aspect. Although Democrats controlled both the House and Senate in the 29th Congress, not all Democrats supported Polk's administration. Southern Democrats loyal to John C. Calhoun opposed the president, and northern Democrats who rejected the annexation of Texas and supported Van Buren were still present. Furthermore, Whigs rejected Polk's economic policies because they did not align with the American System. In regards to Oregon, the president needed to maintain support in Congress, preside over his Cabinet, and settle the territorial dispute peacefully if possible. Nevertheless, President Polk decided to accomplish the administrative goals by micro-managing Congress and the presidency.

To James K. Polk, all politics related to economic policy. These policies were deeply rooted in the early struggle between federalism and republicanism; Hamilton and Jefferson; the wealthy elite and the common man. He rejected Alexander Hamilton's early conviction that the "rich and wellborn" were entitled to "a distinct and permanent share of the government" while "the mass of the people… are turbulent and changing and seldom judge or determine right."[117] Polk believed that if democracy was to have meaning, the great mass of people deserved to vote and hold office as much as the wealthy few. Beyond that, government had a role to play in providing economic equality for every working citizen- except, of course, women and slaves.[118] Secondly, Polk supported the notion that regardless of economic status, all citizens (except women and

[117] John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 29.
[118] Ibid.

slaves) deserved equal economic opportunities. Furthermore, it took a vigorous president to protect American citizens from the corrupting power of wealth.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Polk supported President Andrew Jackson during his well-known Bank War and Nullification Crisis. Upon leaving his position as Speaker of the House and preparing to run for Governor of Tennessee, Polk addressed the people of Tennessee. Defending Jackson's administration and decisions, Polk stated,

> "General Jackson, like Mr. Jefferson, brought the ship of State back to the Republican tack. On the coming in of his (Jackson) administration, all the odious doctrines and principles, and the ultra-Federal tendencies of the administration which preceded it, were suddenly arrested and reversed."[119]

Certainly Polk despised the Adams administration following the "corrupt bargain" of 1824, but it was Adams's economic philosophy that roused his especial ire. Polk continued,

> "Had that administration (Adams) continued in power, and its policy prevailed, there is good reason to believe that the country, instead of being in its present prosperous and happy condition, would have been at this moment withering under the effects of a high protective tariff, and a profligate and extravagant system of internal improvements, with a heavy public debt still un-liquidated."[120]

The American System, supported by both President John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay was the antithesis of Jeffersonian/Jacksonian values. Polk defended his mentor, who took strong measures to battle corrupt financial institutions and prevent wasteful spending. However, when speaking of the "present prosperous condition" of the nation, Polk largely ignored the effects of the Panic of 1837 and current financial crisis of 1839. He also ignored Jackson's role in producing these debacles through ill-conceived economic policies. Nevertheless, Polk vowed to continue Jackson's economic policies into his presidency.

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[119] James K. Polk's Address to the People of Tennessee, April 3, 1839, *James K. Polk Public Papers*, Reel 59, (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.), 7.
[120] Ibid.

If George Bancroft's memory was correct, Polk "raised his hand high in the air and bringing it down with force on his thigh" confided to Bancroft the "four great measures" of his administration. First, with Texas at last on the road to statehood, the "joint occupation" of Oregon had to be settled with Great Britain. Second, with the flanks of Oregon and Texas secure, the continent must be rounded out by the acquisition of California and a "large district on the coast." Third, the tariff, so onerous to the southern states, must be reduced to a revenue basis instead of a protective tariff, and last, an Independent Treasury, immune from the banking schemes of recent years, must be established.[121]

President James K. Polk had a vision for both domestic and foreign initiatives, and he understood it took a dynamic president to achieve goals. Polk did not conform to the Whiggish notions about weak or limited presidents who yielded to a vigorous and dominant legislative branch. Polk witnessed the ineffectiveness of the administrations that followed President Andrew Jackson, and vowed to be an assertive president like his mentor, Old Hickory. Furthermore, Polk set out to dominate the nation's capital in every respect possible. He knew, as all effective presidents have known, that the office is more than an enumeration of constitutional duties and prerogatives. Indeed, the presidency is whatever the occupant can make of it (within constitutional bounds, of course).[122]

During the 1844 election, Polk assured voters in Pennsylvania he favored a protective tariff while simultaneously informing southern states the tariff on imported goods would be reduced. The industrial North favored high tariffs on imports because they protected American manufacturing, the lifeblood of that region's economy. The agrarian South, on the other hand,

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[121] Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 150.
[122] Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Norwalk: The Easton Press, 1987), xi.

deplored high tariffs because they imposed higher consumer prices on a region that relied so heavily on an export cotton economy. Southerners feared retaliation from abroad, and resented paying higher prices for manufactured goods.[123] Polk's duplicitous moment confused voters on an issue that had become a national obsession. If voters wanted insight into Polk's true opinion, his statement in 1829 revealed his attitude toward tariffs. As early as 1829, while running for reelection to Congress, he said that "it must ever be unjust to tax the labor of one class of society to support and fatten another."[124] True to Jacksonian form, Polk preferred low tariffs on imported goods. In President Polk's First Message to Congress he stated,

> "No higher or other duties shall be imposed on the importation into the United States of America of any article the growth, produce, or manufacture of the Kingdom and possessions of Portugal than such as are or shall be payable on the like article being the growth, produce, or manufacture of any other foreign country."[125]

President Polk directed his attention at European nations, but his economic principles applied to any country that traded with the U.S. Soon after his inauguration, President Polk pushed tariff reform.

President Polk approached his Secretary of the Treasury Robert Walker to help him on the tariff question. As had Andrew Jackson, Polk strongly believed in a cabinet that would do the bidding of the Chief Executive. Walker was more than willing to oblige. During the summer months of 1845 Treasury Secretary Walker commenced the task of accumulating information and statistics about tariffs, by sending out questionnaires to importers and customs officials. These surveys were designed to determine the level at which duties became high enough so as to

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[123] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 87.
[124] Ibid., 89.
[125] James K. Polk, "First Annual Message," December 2, 1845. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29486. Accessed January 29, 2013

reduce the volume of imports, correspondingly, the revenue.[126] Walker summoned to the nation's capital a group of appraisers and deputy collectors from the major customs houses to work out a schedule of duties that would establish ad valorem rates structured so as to produce maximum revenues.[127]

By February of 1846, the tariff bill was ready for a vote, but issues in Oregon and Mexico prevented a vote on the measure. Finally, in June of 1846, the House voted on the bill. The majority of the debates centered around the duties on tea and coffee. Both tea and coffee were viewed as valuable commodities, thus, this provision was rescinded which allowed the bill to be brought to a vote. At long last, on July 3, the House voted favorably on the Walker Tariff, an action that "much gratified" Polk, who viewed the bill as "the most important domestic measure of my administration."[128] In an apparently close vote, it cleared the House by nineteen votes. Nearly 99 percent of Whigs opposed the bill, with less than 70 percent of Democrats supporting the low tariff.[129] Polk lobbied Democratic representatives to vote favorably on the bill, the President understood he needed to do the same in the Senate where a close vote also loomed.

Throughout the month of July, Polk kept his finger on the pulse of the Senate, while marshaling support wherever he could. Again, the President admonished Cabinet members, as well as Senators, and sent them to persuade wavering colleagues.[130] A clear example of Polk's direct involvement on the tariff bill involved Senator James Semple of Illinois. One of the most disgruntled senators on the Oregon question. Polk sent the reliable Postmaster General and political confidant Cave Johnson to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station to intercept him and

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[126] Paul Bergeron, "President Polk and Economic Legislation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Perspectives on the Presidency (Fall, 1985): 783.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid., 784.
[129] Ibid., 784-785.
[130] Ibid., 785.

hurry him to the White House for a late-evening round of presidential persuasion. Semple agreed to stay and support the tariff, but in the final maneuvering for a vote, Vice President George Dallas was forced to break a tie and declare in favor of the President's tariff, much to the chagrin of his home state of Pennsylvania.[131] Rather than support his pro-protective tariff state, on the advice of Polk, Dallas supported the president's position.

Upon hearing the passage of the Walker Tariff, Polk wrote in his diary about the occasion. On July 29, 1846 he noted:

> "This great measure of reform has been successful. It has given rise to an immense struggle between the two great political parties of the country. Capitalists and monopolists have not surrendered the immense advantages which they possessed, and the enormous profits which they derived under the tariff of 1842, until after a fierce and mighty struggle."[132]

The Walker Tariff reversed the protectionist principles embodied in the "black tariff" of 1842 and inaugurated a decade and a half of freer trade, a period that also witnessed the conclusion of the Canadian Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 and the further liberalization of the tariff in 1857. This "triumph of free trade principles" was reversed only with the passage of the Morrill Tariff in 1861 and the advent of the Civil War.[133] President Polk's efforts and the efforts by his cabinet paid off, when, on July 30, 1846, he signed the bill. The passage of the Walker Tariff bill provided a clear example of President Polk initiating legislation, presiding over his cabinet, actively seeking out supporters for the tariff, and persuading Democrats to support the legislation. From the beginning of his term in office, President Polk planned to micro-manage governmental affairs. Once elected, President Polk directly involved himself in all aspects of

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[131] Borneman, *Polk*, 226.
[132] James K. Polk, *Polk: The Diary of a President 1845-1849: The Mexican War, The Acquisition of Oregon, and the Conquest of California and the Southwest*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), 134.
[133] Scott C. James and David A. Lake, "The Second Face of Hegemony: Britain's Repeal of the Corn Laws and the American Walker Tariff of 1846,"*International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter, 1989): 1.

government; his second domestic goal revolved around reviving the concept of creating an Independent Treasury.

In President Polk's First Annual Message to Congress, he called upon the establishment of a Constitutional Treasury. Polk stated,

> "In recommending the establishment of a Constitutional Treasury in which the public money shall be kept, I desire that adequate provision be made by law for its safety and that all Executive discretion or control over it shall be removed, except such as may be necessary in directing its disbursement in pursuance of appropriations made by law."[134]

As a member of the Ways and Means Committee during President Andrew Jackson's Bank War, Polk recognized the influence the U.S. Bank had in politics, and he remembered the short life of the Independent Treasury established by President Martin Van Buren. Democrats tended to distrust banks, preferring "hard money" to bank notes. Van Buren believed that the Panic of 1837 had been caused by the irresponsible credit policies of the state banks, leading to the loss of some public funds when banks collapsed. He had suggested a system of vaults to store government funds, the Independent Treasury system. A bill, passed in 1840, created this system, but, when the Whigs regained control of the government, they repealed the law.[135] Ironically, after the Whig Party repealed the Independent Treasury, they returned to Jackson's idea of "pet banks." The issue of the Independent Treasury now fell to the Polk administration.

In 1846, Polk pushed the Independent Treasury bill in Congress. In utter simplicity, the newly-proposed Independent or Constitutional Treasury bill provided the government should build fireproof vaults into which monies would be deposited until need for dispersal to various

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[134] Polk, "First Annual Message."
[135] Louise Mayo, *President James K. Polk The Dark Horse President* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2006), 90.

persons or agencies.[136] Democrats responded mainly by arguing that banks had no right to the federal monies in the first place; therefore no great harm or discrimination was being proposed by the administration. After about two days of unimportant debates, the House was ready to vote, but not before tacking on an amendment requiring that payments to the government be in gold or silver. Although not a major sticking point, the House added the amendment to the bill. On April 2 with no Whigs voting for it and no Democrats against it, the Independent Treasury bill cleared the House by a wide margin of 122 to 66.[137]

While the House voted rather quickly on the measure, the Senate did not. When the Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Democrat Dixon H. Lewis from Alabama, felt no urgency to vote on the matter, President Polk called Lewis to his office. Polk chided both the Finance Committee and the Senate for the intended stall, reminding Lewis of the importance he attached to this particular legislation.[138] In what became a common theme during Polk's presidency, he directly exerted pressure to achieve his goals. His knowledge of the bureaucratic and legislative systems enabled Polk to understand the inner-workings of Congress. Thus, he knew the people to confront when his measure stalled.

President Polk's willingness to challenge the chair of the Senate Finance Committee paid off. The Senate amended the bill numerous times, the most significant one being the postponement until January 1 of the requirement of specie payment to the government. For nearly two more months the bill languished in the Senate due to legislative and committee delays, before being

[136] Bergeron, "President Polk," 787.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 788.

voted on, as amended by the entire Senate.[139] Following strict party lines in the Senate, the bill passed on June 8 by a narrow 3 votes, 28 to 25.

The Independent Treasury under President Martin Van Buren had a short life, however, Polk's "Constitutional Treasury had staying power. It survived until 1913, when it was replaced by the Federal Reserve System.[140] President Polk's direct actions during the Independent Treasury bill deliberations represented his hands-on, dynamic style as chief executive. Polk succeeded where Andrew Jackson (un-supportive cabinet) and Martin Van Buren (ineffective president) failed in domestic matters. If Polk found domestic measures difficult to manage, his foreign policy dealings were his greatest administrative challenge.

[139] Ibid.
[140] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 122.

ALL OF OREGON: PRESIDENT POLK'S STANCE ON THE NORTHWEST

The precise phrase, 'Manifest Destiny' was first enunciated in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan, though before that date the theme namelessly and shamelessly underwrote much of American expansion. It invoked the providential right of the United States to push westward to the Pacific, to take possession of the North American continent.[141] As a Jacksonian, President Polk fervently supported westward expansion. One of the major reasons for Polk's electoral victory in 1844 originated from his support of westward expansion. He had campaigned as an expansionist, much to the approval of Jackson, southern Democrats who wanted Texas, and northern Democrats who wanted Oregon. The northeastern and middle Atlantic Democrats did not oppose territorial expansion, and thus supported Polk when he campaigned on an extravagantly expansionist platform that had called for "the reoccupation of Oregon and the annexation of Texas."[142] Problems did occur over the potential settlement of the "Oregon Question." While Polk coveted the territory from Great Britain, a nationalistic mood swept the country, and radicals called for war with England. Polk needed to use the right amount of pressure on the British government without the issue erupting into violence.

Several countries claimed the Oregon Territory before James K. Polk became the 11th U.S. President. Russian claims to any part of the West Coast south of 54' 40' (the southern tip of Alaska) had been extinguished in 1824 and 1825, by treaty. All Spanish claims to land north of 42' had been ceded to the United States in 1819.[143] The Adams Onis Treaty of 1819 settled many of the disputes between Spain and the U.S. The main articles of the agreement ceded the province of Florida and Spain's claims to any territory in the northwest to the United States, in

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[141] Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 81.
[142] Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 117.
[143] Bernard Devoto, *The Year of Decision- 1846* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 23.

return American assumption of claims U.S. citizens had filed against the Spanish government.[144] The conflicting British and American claims to the lands between those boundaries and west of the continental divide had not been settled. The extreme American position held that Oregon was U.S. territory to the boundary of the Russian lands, 54' 40.' The corresponding extreme British position denied any valid U.S. claim north of the Columbia River.[145] To say the Oregon subject was a contentious issue was an understatement. Only Texas rivaled the Oregon Territory in terms of challenges to the Polk administration, but the president was prepared for the task.

Polk, eager to expand, wished to deal with Oregon first. Similar to Andrew Jackson, Polk agreed that Great Britain had no right to encroach on U.S. territory. President Polk fully subscribed to the Monroe Doctrine and despised European nations meddling in the U.S. Democrats that helped elect him pushed the Oregon issue. In an effort to attract western voters to the expansionist cause called for the United States to establish its control over the entire Oregon territory, an area that it had claimed jointly with Great Britain for almost three decades.[146] President Polk dispatched diplomat Louis McLane to London to settle differences between the two countries. From London on August 4, 1845, McLane wrote, "The result of all I have learned is that this Government is earnestly desirous of adjusting the Oregon question, and willing to do so upon liberal terms. *Their chief difficulty arises from the opposition and influence of the Hudson's Bay Company*."[147] McLane continued, "The Government will be disposed, I infer, under these circumstances, to adopt the 49th parallel to the Straits of Fuca, and thence by a line giving the whole of Vancouver's island to the British side; but will insist, at the same time, upon

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[144] Ed Bradley, "Fighting for Texas: Filibuster James Long, the Adams-Onís Treaty, and the Monroe Administration," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Jan., 1999): 323.
[145] Devoto, *The Year*, 23.
[146] Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 68.
[147] Louis McLane to James K. Polk, August 4, 1845, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume X, July-December 1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 115.

a continuance for a longer period of existing privileges to the Hudson's Bay Company."[148] McLane concluded by stating, "The duration of this period, it is supposed, will form the most difficult point of the compromise."[149] President Polk fully understood the stakes, and solicited advice from McLane and his cabinet. Although the final U.S. policy decision resided with President Polk, he knew his decision might place the U.S. in a contentious position. If he acted imprudently, the U.S. might plunge itself into war, or at least, strained relations, with England. If Polk took a firm but reasonable stance, both countries could enjoy the settlement.

At first, Polk handled the growing problem with the British over Oregon with circumspection. In mid-1845, with the help of Secretary of State James Buchanan, he offered the king's minister to Washington, Richard Pakenham, a deal which divided the Oregon Territory along the forty-ninth parallel. The proposal placed both banks of the Columbia River in U.S. territory, even though no American settlements existed north of the great waterway.[150] Although Polk wished to continue the efforts made by the preceding Tyler administration, he displayed little enthusiasm for the whole business of compromising with the British.[151] Nevertheless, Polk sent the offer to the British government in hopes that it might resolve the issue. To President Polk's astonishment, Pakenham foolishly rejected the deal without consulting London. Polk's anger at the rejection did not blind him to the opportunities this diplomatic misstep offered. Polk blustered, and then demanded all the land to the northern-most U.S. claim, 54' 40'. The British flatly rejected the

[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 113.
[151] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 119.

demand. They were not about to surrender much of their northwestern territory and virtually all of the region's best harbors.[152]

The Oregon territory offered several opportunities for American citizens, and President Polk knew well the value of the Northwest Territory. The increasing United States population needed to be accommodated with additional land, and the ports and harbors located on the Pacific Ocean offered lucrative trading opportunities with Asia. Mercantile interests in the Pacific identify one powerful motive in American expansionism. Maritime calculations augmented the strong inclination of American commercial interests to seek a peaceful solution of the Oregon controversy and actually defeated the movement of 54' 40' quite as effectively as the threat of war with Great Britain or Mexico.[153] This ardent quest for ports on the Pacific, moreover, fused Oregon and California into one irreducible issue in the minds of commercial enthusiasts and thereby played an intensely persuasive role in the eventual delineation of this nation's western boundaries.[154] Polk desperately wanted Oregon and California for its economic and territorial incentives. To acquire Oregon, he needed to negotiate with Great Britain, while expressing his "All of Oregon" intention to both the U.S. and Great Britain.

When Pakenham rejected Polk's offer to divide the Oregon territory at the 49th parallel, a nationalistic mood swept the country. Rational politicians felt the 49th parallel was appropriate, while others such as Lewis Cass, a presidential contender in 1844, supported the divide at 54' 40'. Some congressional firebrands already issued bellicose calls for the British to surrender their claims to Oregon all the way north to the fifty-fourth parallel. "Fifty-four forty or fight!" was

[152] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 113.
[153] Norman A. Graebner, "Maritime Factors in the Oregon Compromise," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Nov., 1951): 331.
[154] Ibid.

their slogan.[155] On August 30, Buchanan rescinded President Polk's offer to divide at the 49th parallel, prompting a response by Pakenham. Quickly realizing the implications of the furor his blunder had caused, Pakenham wrote a letter to James Buchanan refuting the idea that he rejected President Polk's offer. Pakenham wrote, "Owing to circumstances which will doubtfully have been made known to you by the Minister of the United States in London, these papers had not been many days in the Majesty's Government, so as scarcely to allow time for that attentive examination of them which the importance of the subject required."[156] Pakenham continued,

> "You withdrew the proposal contained in the previous communication on the ground that it had been rejected by me without even a reference to my own government. Although they (British government) were not prepared to accede to the terms set forth in your proposal as a settlement of the question under consideration, that proposal might have led to further negotiation, thereby facilitating the accomplishment of what both governments have so much at heart, namely the satisfactory adjustment of the early question likely in any way to cause difficulty or embarrassment in the relations between the two countries. Her Majesty's Government will be glad to hear from the Government of the United States on this subject."[157]

Pakenham concluded by saying, "I did not say I rejected the proposal, what I said was that I did not feel at liberty to accept it and I think that is an examination of the question as it now stands the differences between the two expressions is of essential importance."[158] Pakenham's reversal occurred because the British government admonished him over his unilateral rejection of Polk's offer. Furthermore, the British government reassured McLane and the Polk administration that they desired to settle the dispute.

Regardless of Pakenham's assertion, President Polk held firm to his claim to the entire territory. If England rejected his initial offer, Polk would apply pressure on England to resolve

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[155] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 123.
[156] Richard Pakenham to James Buchanan, October 25, 1845, *James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, 1974. Reel 9.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.

the matter. Polk even listened (albeit for political maneuvering) to the "Fifty-four forty or fight!" supporters, but the president did not desire war with England. He eagerly wanted to resolve the Oregon matter, but decided to bide his time and wait for additional responses from England. Writing to Louis McLane, Polk said, "Mr. Pakenham as I learn from Mr. Buchanan has called several times at the Department of State, and has manifested great, uneasiness on the subject, as well as expressed an anxiety to renew the negotiations. Mr. Buchanan has informed him, more than once that if the British Government had any proposition to submit, it would be respectfully considered by this Government."[159]

From September through November the impasse over Oregon became clear; both sides seemed to be willing simply to let matters drift for a while. Throughout these months, Buchanan tried to maintain his optimistic view that breakthroughs would occur, whereas Polk was certain that his pessimistic outlook was the only proper view of Anglo-American relations.[160] Following Pakenham's actions and the impasse between the two countries in the fall of 1845, the president believed no compromise could be reached. The secretary continued to encourage McLane and even Pakenham to believe that compromise was feasible and possible, while Polk continued to demand substantial concessions from the British. In the meantime, Pakenham attempted to defend himself to his British superiors, and they, in turn, reprimanded his unilateral rejection of the Polk offer. The president smugly seemed to enjoy Pakenham's discomfort.[161] During this period, Polk took a firm, yet unusual stance. He demanded concessions from the British government, while appearing to acknowledge that no settlement seemed imminent. It is difficult

[159] James K. Polk to Louis McLane, October 29, 1845, *Correspondence*, 329.
[160] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 121.
[161] Ibid.

to discern whether or not Polk believed no compromise could be reached, or, he simply used the impasse as an opportunity to place the U.S. in a better negotiating position.

As President Polk prepared his First Annual Message to Congress, certainly the Oregon settlement needed to be addressed. In the message, the president affirmed the position of his administration stating,

> "The extraordinary and wholly inadmissible demands of the British Government and the rejection of the proposition made in deference alone to what had been done by my predecessors and the implied obligation which their acts seemed to impose afford satisfactory evidence that no compromise which the United States ought to accept can be affected. With this conviction the proposition of compromise which had been made and rejected was by my direction subsequently withdrawn and our title to the whole Oregon Territory asserted, and, as is believed, maintained by irrefragable facts and arguments."[162]

President Polk struck a bellicose tone with the British government over Oregon; urging Congress to consider how to protect American citizens in Oregon, without violating the Convention of 1827, the agreement that established joint occupancy. To terminate joint occupancy required a year's notice, he reminded Congress, and without such action the United States could not assert exclusive jurisdiction to any portion of the territory.[163] Therefore, Polk advised Congress, "This notice it would, in my judgment, be proper to give, and I recommend that provision be made by law for giving it accordingly, and terminating in this manner the convention of the 6th of August, 1827."[164]

President Polk wholeheartedly supported the Monroe Doctrine when it came to foreign affairs. With his message delivered, Polk went a bold step further. Alluding to past British and

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[162] James K. Polk, "First Annual Message," December 2, 1845. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29486. Accessed January 29, 2013

[163] Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (Oxford: ABC-Clio, Inc., 1983), 107.

[164] James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897*, *Volume IV 1841-1849* (Washington D.C.: Congress, 1900), 395.

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.[165] He quoted Monroe's non-colonization clause- "The American continents… are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers"- as continuing American policy.[166] Polk reaffirmed the Monroe Doctrine in his message to Congress during the stalemate in negotiations between England and the U.S. He took a calculated pose, but stood firm in his resolve to acquire the Oregon Territory regardless of the action, or rather inaction, of the British government. Polk stated his beliefs further in meetings with prominent politicians and cabinet members in order to gauge opinions, and to acquire support for his Oregon policy. When John C. Calhoun visited Polk on December 22 to determine if his policy on Oregon had changed, Polk wrote in his diary about the meeting. Calhoun advocated for peace, and Polk agreed. Polk wrote, "I told him I was in favor of peace, but at the same time all our just rights must be maintained."[167] The diary entry reveals that the president did not desire war with England; however, he would protect American interests in the northwest. Needless to say, Polk wanted the issue resolved, but England did not give any indication the matter would be solved by the end of 1845.

In usual fashion, Polk convened his cabinet on December 27 to discuss Oregon. Secretary of State Buchanan's report of the latest information regarding Oregon infuriated Polk.

> "Mr. Buchanan informed me that he met Mr. Pakenham (British minister in Washington) at the State Department, who submitted a proposition to refer to arbitration the Oregon question. The dispatch was read. It proposed to refer the question not of *title* but to *divide* the Oregon Territory, to the arbitration of some

[165] Walter R. Borneman, *Polk*, 168.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 35.

> friendly power. I instantly said it must be rejected, in which decision Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Bancroft both agreed."[168]

Pakenham's choice of words incensed the president. Pakenham's arrogant treatment of Buchanan reignited Polk's anger over the previous refusal of the 49th parallel. In a meeting with South Carolina Congressman James A. Black, Polk affirmed his resolve to resist English grandiosity. "I remarked to him that the only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye, that I considered a bold and firm course on our part the pacific one; that if Congress faltered or hesitated in their course, John Bull would immediately become arrogant and more grasping in his demands."[169]

Polk's dilemma became clear in January, when Congress, upon the recommendation of his December message, began the debate on the joint resolution to extend the twelve-month notice to England for terminating the Convention of 1827.[170] Since this action would convey to the executive a mandate for a prompt and final settlement of the Oregon question, it made considerable difference to members of Congress how President Polk would use his authority.[171] Week after week the quarrels in Congress revolved around efforts of conflicting Democratic factions to interpret Polk's objectives.[172] Neither Polk nor Buchanan wanted to lose support of western Democrats who vowed to support tariff reduction and the creation of an Independent Treasury.

Because of the contentious political situation, Polk played his cards close to his vest. When politicians Lewis Cass and Democratic Senator Hopkins L. Turney of Tennessee attempted to ascertain the intentions of the administration, Polk referenced his message to Congress.

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[168] Ibid., 40.
[169] Ibid., 42.
[170] Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 143.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.

Furthermore, he added that Congress needed to focus its energy examining his message instead of guessing at his intentions. The powerful and compromising voices of Calhoun and Democratic Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri could not be ignored, however, and the president assured them privately that he would submit any British proposal for a fair settlement to the Senate for its advice before rejecting it.[173] Polk's political handling of Congress was not limited to domestic matters, but foreign affairs as well. His administrative skill blended direct involvement in government undertakings with a level of secrecy. Over Oregon, Polk stood firm on his demands, while at the same time, he refrained from divulging too much information to Congress. Polk believed that revealing too much might alienate supporters of his administration, and intensify criticisms by his opponents. Oregon tested his bureaucratic skill.

From December through April 1846, several breakthroughs occurred over the Oregon matter. In an extremely important dispatch and letter of February 3, Louis McLane optimistically depicted British Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen and England's Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel as poised to make a reasonable compromise on Oregon. All that was needed, in effect, was an encouraging word from Washington, preferably from Polk rather than Pakenham.[174] McLane's offhanded report that British warships had set sail for North America alarmed both Buchanan and Polk.[175] Well aware of the situation between the two nations, Polk wrote McLane in late January: "The Oregon question is manifestly approaching crisis, and should the *notice* be authorized by Congress, as I doubt it will be in some form, it must be adjusted within the year, or war may follow."[176]

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[173] Ibid., 144.
[174] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 128.
[175] Ibid.
[176] James K. Polk to Louis McLane, January 28, 1846, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume XI, 1846* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 54.

On the other side of the Atlantic, England was keenly aware that some American radicals desired war over Oregon, and England stood ready if the Polk administration selected that course of action. With news of British ships sailing for North America, Polk's strategy needed to be a cautious one. In his letter to McLane, Polk believed he understood England's difficult position.

> "I know *Great Britain* never cedes away territory, but in this case to avoid the alternative of war, by which her North American colonies, would probably be lost to her, and by which she would otherwise be so greatly injured, she might possibly yield to such a settlement. I have mentioned these views in the Cabinet."[177]

The president subsumed that England did not desire war with the U.S. over Oregon. Therefore, he saw England's difficult position as an opportunity. President Polk's support of the 54' 40 or Fight! group was lukewarm at best. The president recognized the pressure he could apply to England if he appeared to support the radicals. Polk maintained his tough stance on Oregon into the spring, but his position softened during the spring months as negotiations showed signs of a settlement.

During the spring of 1846 the administration appeared to be much more receptive to a negotiated settlement, although in typically inscrutable fashion the president continued to keep congressional leaders guessing as to his real intentions.[178] Congressional deliberations over terminating the joint-occupancy went on for months. In early 1846, Ohio Democratic Senator William Allen of the Foreign Relations Committee presented the resolution calling for giving notice to the British for the abrogation of the joint-occupancy treaty. Senator John J. Crittenden, a Whig from Kentucky, then countered with a proposal that the president be permitted to give notice at his discretion, but not before the end of the congressional session.[179] By the time the

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[177] Ibid., 55.
[178] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 143.
[179] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 129.

Senate finally voted on the termination resolution notice in mid-April, the mood in Washington was clearly one of compromise, which the president, now seeking to distance himself from the 54' 40' extremists, did nothing to discourage.[180] After months of discussion, the Senate embraced the Crittenden proposal. The president utilized his cabinet members to lobby the House members on behalf of the Crittenden resolution that had been embraced by the Senate. The legislative tug of war finally ended on April 23, when, by substantial margins, both chambers approved the Senate version, with minor alterations.[181]

However, the mood in Britain was a bit different as evidenced by an article in a London newspaper on April 18, 1846. Addressing the American rejection of proposals made by the British for access to the Columbia River, control of Vancouver Island, and access to the Straits of Fuca, the article stated,

> "Between these two proposals lies the question of peace and war- narrowed, as these controversies always are, to a small issue; but, nevertheless, broad enough to swallow up the peace of the world. The moderate Senators make the 49th parallel their "fighting line." President Polk is evidently more disposed to lean to the side of resistance than of concession."[182]

From a political perspective, President Polk's bluster, and actions convinced England that he did not wish to reach an agreement. Regardless of his dire outlook on the situation, the president wanted to resolve the issue between the two nations. The always calculated and astute politician, Polk's bluff effectively worked.

In a letter to James Buchanan, American diplomat Ambrose Dudley Mann discussed the difficulty of the arbitration process between the two nations. Mann stated, "Mr. McLane reiterates his belief that we can never succeed in getting a clear line of 49 degrees. I have given it

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[180] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 143.
[181] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 130.
[182] London Newspaper April 18, 1846, *James Buchanan Papers*, Reel 9.

to him as my opinion, that nothing less would be received, except indeed as trifling a consideration as the free navigation of the Columbia River for a limited period- say ten, fifteen, or twenty years."[183] Certainly as Mann's communication stated, Louis McLane's tone changed somewhat from his earlier correspondence in February. Earlier, McLane believed the British government was open to settling the issue. President Polk, with the support of his cabinet, repeatedly rejected England's desire to have free navigation of the Columbia River. Polk took a firm stand on the issue and once again called London's bluff after the nation ordered ships to sail for North America.

Across the Atlantic British diplomats were perusing the Oregon termination notice, which they received on May 15. Since the document bore little resemblance to the uncompromising position taken by the president in his December message, a resolution to the crisis seemed near.[184] Anxious to proceed with the negotiations that had been derailed for more than nine months, Lord Aberdeen had already drafted a new British offer. Aberdeen agreed to accept the 49th parallel compromise line, with the stipulation that Vancouver Island remain under British control. In a last-minute effort to ensure agreement, U.S. minister McLane prevailed on Lord Aberdeen to make one final, important concession: instead of providing for unlimited access to the Columbia River, the terms of the offer were changed to provide access only to the Hudson's Bay Company.[185] Polk conceded the loss of Vancouver Island early, but he believed this concession sufficient to terminate all further conversation over free ports to the south of the Strait.[186] With the new terms completed, Aberdeen shipped the British proposal to the U.S., where Polk eagerly awaited its arrival. However, an unforeseen issue presented itself to President

[183] Ambrose Dudley Mann to James Buchanan, April 18, 1846, *James Buchanan Papers*, Reel 10.
[184] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 148.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 147.

Polk when the British proposal reached his desk. Political infighting in the Democratic Party, however, would complicate Polk's diplomatic efforts.

As usual, Polk gathered his cabinet on June 4 to review the newest British offer. Immediately, Secretary of State Buchanan angered Polk by switching abruptly from a conciliatory to a bellicose stance. Buchanan had consistently supported dividing Oregon at the 49th parallel. Now, Buchanan stated that "the 54' 40' men were the true friends of the administration and he wished no backing out on the subject."[187] Buchanan's actions were unusual based on his conciliatory nature. However, two reasons explained his switch. Buchanan felt political pressure from fellow Democrats who wanted the 54' 40' line. Secondly, Buchanan had presidential ambitions for the 1848 race; extremists would condemn him if he did not adhere to their demands. When Polk asked him to compose a response to the British proposal, Buchanan refused. In a somewhat sarcastic tone, the secretary commented: "Well! When you have done your message I will then prepare such a one as I think ought to be sent in." Stung by the remark, the president excoriated Buchanan, demanding to know: "Do you wish…to draw up a paper on your own in order to make an issue with me?"[188] In a rare instance of public outburst, Polk's words stopped Buchanan cold. His message to Cave Johnson in December of 1844 made clear that he expected obedience from cabinet members. He expected a harmonious cabinet that would act with the current administration in mind, and set aside political aspirations. Polk correctly recognized Buchanan's actions as politically motivated and against the president's wishes.

President Polk, witnessing the struggles President Jackson endured with his cabinet, knew that he needed full support from his cabinet, no division could exist. Polk did not wish to see the

[187] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 132.
[188] Ibid.

Oregon matter unsettled because of Buchanan's questionable actions. On June 9, A few days after discussing the British proposal, Polk wrote in his diary about Buchanan's encounter with other Cabinet members following the contentious meeting. "Mr. Bancroft reminded Mr. Buchanan of a remark which he had made in the Cabinet some months ago, that the title of the United States north of 49 degrees was a shackling one. Mr. Bancroft reminded him of several of his own dispatches to Mr. McLane strongly in favor of a settlement of the question on the basis of 49 degrees."[189] What incensed Polk more than Buchanan's words were his motives. Unlike Jackson, who handpicked his successor, he required cabinet members to foreswear running for office while serving in his administration, Buchanan's actions smacked of ulterior motives as opposed to advice to the president.

Finally, with prodding by other cabinet members and the president, Buchanan supported the new British proposal and sent it to the Senate for its advice. Understanding the Senate's power in the treaty process with foreign nations, Polk stated in his message on June 10, "The Senate are a branch of the treaty-making power, and by consulting them in advance of his own action upon important measures of foreign policy which may ultimately come before them for their consideration the President secures harmony of action between that body and himself."[190] Polk's political skill and understanding the legislative process influenced his decision to send the treaty to the Senate for its advice. Polk had maintained his position for "all of Oregon," and by asking the Senate's advice before submitting the treaty for ratification, he placed the onus of any compromise on that body. He would be the man who had won Oregon south of 49 degrees; Congress would take the responsibility for forfeiting that portion north of 49 degrees.[191]

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[189] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 114.
[190] Richardson, *A Compilation*, 449.
[191] Borneman, *Polk*, 224.

Congress accepted the treaty; on June 18th, Polk sent the treaty back to the Senate for its ratification. There the western extremists, through the device of amendments, made their last valiant effort to thwart the compromise. But their attempts were to no avail, as the Senate on June 18 overwhelmingly, and not unexpectedly, approved the treaty by a vote of 41 to 14.[192] President Polk signed the treaty, yet another accomplishment of his administration. The treaty extended the boundary between the United States and British America west of the Rocky Mountains along the 49th parallel north latitude to the Pacific Ocean.[193] The territory opened up, currently encompasses the states of Washington and Oregon and parts of Wyoming and Idaho.

Although President Polk used a belligerent tone directed at the British government, he did not intend to go to war. With the right measure of brinkmanship and political acumen, Polk effectively bluffed England out of the Oregon territory. The United States obtained the Oregon territory, including both banks of the Columbia River.[194] If the U.S. had gone to war, they would have fought an unfavorable two front war (by the time of the Oregon Treaty, the U.S. declared war on Mexico). Instead, Polk acquired vast stretches of land without going to war with England. Secondly, he presided over his cabinet and admonished James Buchanan when he felt Buchanan's actions represented ulterior motives.

The major outcomes of the settlement opened up ports where merchants seeking lucrative deals could trade, and settlers could establish homes. A major population increase in 1846 required massive stretches of land, Polk understood this fact. In his Second Annual Message to Congress, Polk recommended protection of American citizens. He stated, "It will be important during your present session to establish a Territorial government and to extend the jurisdiction

[192] Bergeron, *James K. Polk*, 133.
[193] Henry Commager, "England and Oregon Treaty of 1846," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Mar., 1927): 18.
[194] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 114-115.

and laws of the United States over the Territory of Oregon."[195] Now that Polk obtained the land, he planned to use federal authority to protect American interests. In a mere eighteen months, President Polk lowered the tariff to a revenue basis, established the Constitutional Treasury, and obtained the Oregon territory. The response Polk made to Cave Johnson in 1844, "I intend to by *myself* President of the United States," came to fruition with the settlement of the Oregon Territory. He was no longer Andrew Jackson's shadow; he was James K. Polk the 11th U.S. President.

[195] James K. Polk, "Second Annual Message," December 8, 1846. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29487. Accessed February 4, 2013

CHAPTER 3: DESTINY FULFILLED: CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

At forty-nine years of age, James K. Polk was the youngest president to take the oath of office. Along the campaign trail in 1844, Polk canvassed as a pro-expansionist who firmly believed Texas should be annexed and brought into the Union. Polk benefited from previous administrations and Martin Van Buren's folly, when the "Little Magician" agreed with Henry Clay that Texas needed to be left out of the 1844 election. At the urging of ex-President Andrew Jackson, Polk used the Texas issue to appeal to voters. Polk's strategy, along with Henry Clay's waffling on the Texas question secured his electoral victory.

Before Polk's election in 1844, he profited from efforts made by previous administrations with regard to Texas annexation. In 1829, President Andrew Jackson dispatched Anthony Butler to Mexico City in order to purchase Texas for five million dollars, but once Mexican newspapers discovered Butler's monetary mission, he could do little maneuvering.[196] Mexicans were upset over Butler's diplomatic bungling towards her southern neighbor and rejected President Jackson's offer. The Jackson administration's failure to acquire Texas also discouraged Texans who had hoped for a quick annexation and who now faced the prospect of fighting for their independence.[197] Relations between Texans and Mexicans quickly deteriorated and ultimately erupted into conflict. Even with his friend Sam Houston taking a pivotal role in the struggle, President Jackson remained reluctant to support the fight. Jackson feared that any further involvement by the U.S. might embroil the country into war with Mexico.

When Texas won its independence in 1836, Jackson remained hesitant to act. What concerned Old Hickory most was that while Texas had proclaimed independence and established a

[196] Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 70.
[197] Ibid., 71.

government, Mexico still showed every sign of marshaling forces to avenge General Santa Anna's defeat and recapture its wayward province.[198] If that happened, then American annexation too quickly, or even diplomatic recognition of the Texas republic by the United States prior to similar recognition by European powers, might well trigger open warfare with Mexico.[199] Thus, Andrew Jackson departed office without resolving the issue, leaving the question for his successors. Although Jackson acted unusually circumspect, his fear of a potential war with Mexico over Texas, and concerns over losing support within the Democratic Party because of annexation stopped the president from addressing the issue.

When Jackson's handpicked successor Martin Van Buren came to office, he immediately faced an economic crisis, what became known as the Panic of 1837. Economic woes plagued Van Buren's administration, leaving little room for other matters. Much to Sam Houston's chagrin, President Van Buren would not answer requests to admit Texas into the Union. The Texas issue passed to Whig President William Henry Harrison who died shortly after taking the oath of office, before he could act on Texas. His Vice President John Tyler inherited the Texas problem. Despite political pundits labeling him as an "accidental president," President Tyler attempted to act decisively, promoting an expansionist agenda with the help of his administration. Tyler, Secretary of State Abel Upshur, and later John C. Calhoun, sought to secure Pacific Ocean ports in California, and included the speedy annexation of Texas coupled with a diplomatic strategy to secure Oregon for the North and West as a sectional trade-off for Texas.[200] Though not all of these diplomatic initiatives were successful, they clearly were

[198] Ibid., 72.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Edward P. Crapol, "John Tyler and the Pursuit of National Destiny," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 476.

designed to undercut the antislavery challenge, defuse sectionalism, fulfill the national destiny, and not incidentally, win Tyler a full second term as president.[201]

Debates in Congress over Texas focused on boundary issues and the expansion of slavery westward. In 1844, the 28th Congress passed a resolution stating that, "A reasonable and amicable effort is made to obtain the concurrence of Mexico in a conventional agreement for ascertaining and establishing the boundaries which shall separate her adjacent territories, to the west and to the north, from those of Texas."[202] Both Democrats and Whigs debated the ramifications of annexing Texas during the 28th Congress. Needless to say, Texas represented a thorny issue because of border disputes and sectional tension. Despite this, President Tyler believed settling the Texas question could ensure his re-election.

Unfortunately for President Tyler, his Democratic tendencies cost him favor within the Whig Party. Twice, for instance, he vetoed Henry Clay's attempts to establish a national bank. Tyler rapidly became a man without a party. At the 1844 nomination, even the Democrats rejected Tyler as a candidate. Tyler and Polk agreed that the 1844 presidential election must be interpreted as a mandate for Texas, notwithstanding all the other factors that had entered into the result, and the plain truth that both Clay and Birney opposed annexation had slightly outpolled Polk who favored it.[203] With Polk's victory in 1844, Tyler looked for a way to salvage his reputation. The lame duck session of Congress that began in December 1844 offered the

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[201] Ibid.
[202] Resolution on the Annexation of Texas June 6, 1844, 28th Congress 1st Session, Exec. Doc. 19, 28-1. HTTP://0-congressional.proquest.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/congressional/docview/t51.d48.sed-28-1-20?accountid=26417. Accessed February 13, 2013
[203] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 698.

outgoing president a final chance to achieve his rightful place in the history books. Tyler seized it.[204]

To admit Texas into the Union required congressional approval. The friends of annexation argued that through the exercise of this power, Texas could be admitted to statehood without a treaty, even though it remained a foreign country. Ex-President Jackson and expansionist Democrats created the idea for a joint resolution, Tyler supported the notion. Such an act of Congress would require only a simple majority in each house, a much more attainable goal than the two-thirds of the Senate needed to ratify a treaty.[205] The House passed Texas admission 120-98; there, the Democrats had the majority. However, in the Senate, a Whig majority existed, posing a threat to the success of the resolution.[206] Northern Whigs stood in opposition to Texas admission into the Union. Polk, the newly-elected president, encouraged Senate Van Burenites to back the resolution. Polk's effort further revealed his unequivocal position on Texas. The Senate narrowly passed the resolution 27 to 25, and on March 1, 1845, President Tyler signed the joint resolution.[207]

After leaving the White House, Tyler believed that he had done his part to advance America's destiny as a great world power. John Tyler also took exceptional pride in his role in the annexation of Texas and in retirement frequently hailed it as the crowning achievement of his presidency.[208] Yet, former President Tyler left the incoming president in a difficult position. With Texas' annexation complete, President Polk needed to settle boundary disputes between Mexico and the U.S. over Texas. His troubles had only begun.

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[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., 699.
[208] Crapol, "John Tyler," 481-483.

Taking the oath of office on a rainy March 4th day, Polk charted America's foreign policy by stating, "In the management of our foreign relations it will be my aim to observe a careful respect for the rights of other nations, while our own will be the subject of constant watchfulness. Equal and exact justice should characterize all our intercourse with foreign countries."[209] He continued by saying, "Foreign powers do not seem to appreciate the true character of our Government. Our Union is a confederation of independent States, whose policy is peace with each other and all the world. To enlarge its limits is to extend the dominions of peace over additional territories and increasing millions. The world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our Government."[210] The final sentences seemed hypocritical by the time Polk left office four years later, but nevertheless, Polk set the course for U.S. policy.

Polk, like Tyler, wanted Texas, but his expansionist vision extended further westward. Aware of the economic benefits of a foothold on the Pacific coast, Polk set his sights on obtaining California. An astute politician, the Tennessean wanted California not only for its land, but especially for its fine ports. Owning the harbors of San Francisco and San Diego could magnificently enhance the mushrooming U.S. trade in the Pacific and- as Polk fully appreciated- greatly please American merchants.[211] The president, moreover, suspected that the British were using their financial control over Mexico's debt to force the Mexicans to sell, or at least to mortgage, their province of California to London financiers.[212] Before he could concentrate on California, however, Polk needed to address Texas annexation and the unstable Mexican government.

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[209] James K. Polk, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1845. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25814. Accessed February 13, 2013
[210] Ibid.
[211] Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 115.
[212] Ibid.

The major dispute between the U.S. and Mexico hinged on the border between the two nations. As a prisoner after the battle of San Jacinto, Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna had accepted the Rio Grande, not the Nueces River, as the boundary in a secret provision of the treaty ending the Texas Revolution. The Mexican government promptly rejected this agreement.[213] Not to be denied, the Texas Congress simply passed a law in 1836 unilaterally declaring the river to be its southern and western boundary.[214] President Tyler completed the annexation of Texas, but the boundary dispute went unresolved. By early summer of 1845, President Polk made his position clear on Texas. Washington aimed to send a clear and unequivocal message to Mexico and Great Britain that it would brook no interference in its plans to annex Texas.[215] Polk stated to Andrew Jackson Donelson, "I am resolved to defend and protect Texas as far as I possess the constitutional power to do so."[216] It is difficult to determine if Polk desired war at this point with Mexico, but it is clear that Polk believed the U.S. should protect Texas and American interests in the region.

By the fall of 1845, President Polk pushed ahead with his intentions over Texas by instructing American officials to open dialogue with Mexico. Writing to Mexican foreign minister Manuel de la Pena y Pena, U.S. Consul John Black wrote, "For conciliation, whereby all existing differences may be amicably and equitably adjusted, and the honor of both nations, and their friendly relations restored."[217] Working as a U.S. Consul in Mexico City, Black tried to convince Mexican officials that diplomatic relations might be restored between the two nations over boundary issues. However, the Mexican government remained unstable at best. In the early

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[213] Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 120.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid., 121.
[216] Ibid.
[217] John Black to Manuel de la Pena y Pena, October 13, 1845, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8, (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

1840s, Santa Anna served as president of Mexico and formed an alliance with General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga. But the chronic problems of an empty national treasury, fractious internal friction, a civil war in Yucatan, and continuing border strife over Texas remained no matter who was president.[218] The alliance between Santa Anna and Paredes did not last long. Over time, Mexican officials grew tired of Santa Anna. After a failed attack on Paredes, Santa Anna sailed for Cuba, supposedly banned from Mexico for life, and Jose Joaquin Herrera served as interim president.[219] Herrera quickly angered Mexican officials when he attracted moderates willing to reach some accommodation over Texas, while Paredes became the champion of the puros (pure) who saw Texas as just the first grab of a rampant American imperialism.[220] An astute politician, Polk recognized he could exploit Mexico's dire situation.

President Polk instructed Secretary of State James Buchanan to appoint former U.S. Representative John Slidell envoy to Mexico. Buchanan stated, "It is greatly to be desired that our boundary with Mexico should now be established in such a manner as to preclude all future difficulties and disputes between the two Republics."[221] He continued, "A great portion of New Mexico being on this side of the Rio Grande, and included within the limits already claimed by Texas."[222] As mentioned, Polk wanted the ports and harbors of California for American merchants. Buchanan stated, "From information possessed by this Department, it is to be seriously apprehended that both Great Britain and France have designs upon California…It is the desire of the President that you shall use your best efforts to obtain a cession of that Province from Mexico to the United States."[223] As he had in the Oregon controversy, President Polk

[218] Borneman, *Polk*, 193.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid., 194.
[221] State Department to John Slidell, November 10, 1845, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel number 8.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

despised European intervention in North America. Polk understood that monetary compensation for the disputed boundary might solve the issue, and possibly open up negotiations on additional territory. Acting on Polk's instructions, Buchanan instructed Slidell that,

> "The President wishes to deal liberally by Mexico. You are therefore authorized to offer to assume the payment of all the just claims of our citizens against Mexico; and, in addition to pay five million dollars in case the Mexican Government accepts the boundary between the two countries from the mouth of the Rio Grande to New Mexico."[224]

With his precise instructions from Buchanan, Slidell traveled to Mexico on an important diplomatic mission.

President Polk evidenced his confidence in Slidell's mission in a letter to a family member. Writing to his brother William H. Polk, James K. Polk stated, "There will be no war with Mexico. Preliminary steps have already been taken, with the assent of Mexico, for renewing diplomatic relations between the two countries."[225] This letter to his brother suggests that Polk believed diplomatic talks, not war, could solve the issue. In retrospect, a year later those words would haunt the president, but as of now, he seemed confident in the mission. The envoy arrived in Mexico during the first week in December, shortly before General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga proclaimed a revolution against the government of General Jose Joaquin Herrera- hardly the most propitious time to seek a reopening of diplomatic channels.[226] Slidell nonetheless persisted in his efforts to establish communications with the foreign minister, Manuel de la Pena y Pena, who immediately raised several objections to the new United States minister. The most important of these was the protest that Slidell had been given a higher title (Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary) than what the Mexican officials had stipulated; the least important

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[224] Ibid.
[225] James K. Polk to William H. Polk, November 27, 1845, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume X, July-December 1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 388.
[226] Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Norwalk: The Easton Press, 1987), 70.

objection was that Slidell had arrived several weeks earlier than had been expected.[227] However, the Mexican government's instability proved a greater obstacle. The Herrera government did not receive Slidell, and on January 2, Paredes marched on Mexico City forcing the Herrera government to flee.[228] Slidell communicated his difficulties being received in Mexico. "Not having as yet been received by this Government in my official character, I am not in a situation to take matters presented to me by my countrymen, but whenever I am free to act; their interests will have my best attention."[229]

During discussions with Mexico, Polk received an interesting message from Slidell in late December. Writing from Mexico, Slidell said,

> "I have endeavored to throw all the responsibility and odium of the failure of negotiations, on the Mexican Government. This will place us upon the strongest possible ground and I have no doubt, that if an appeal be made by you to the country, it will meet with a hearty and unanimous response. A war would probably be the best mode of settling our affairs with Mexico, but the failure of the negotiation will be very disagreeable and mortifying to me."[230]

As shrewd a politician as Polk, he took note of Slidell's advice. Over Oregon, President Polk placed onus on the British government to resolve the issue, while bluffing about going to war over Oregon. In Mexico, Polk understood if diplomatic relations failed, a victorious war could force Mexico to cede desired territories and fulfill "Manifest Destiny." The same day Polk received the thought-provoking letter from Slidell, Texas joined the Union as the 28th state. Still, the president needed to leave diplomatic options open before pursuing alternative options.

In February 1846, Alexander J. Atocha, representing the views of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, held several conversations with Polk in which he pressed the contention that Santa Anna,

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[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.
[229] John Slidell to State Department, December 24, 1845, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8.
[230] John Slidell to James K. Polk, December 29, 1845, *Correspondence*, 449.

if he were to gain control of the Mexican government, would favor a treaty with the United States.[231] Polk noted the meeting in his diary saying,

> "Santa Anna favored a treaty adjusting a boundary between the two countries the Del Norte should be the western Texas line, and the Colorado of the West down through the Bay of San Francisco to the sea should be the Mexican line on the north, and that Mexico should cede all east and north of these natural boundaries to the United States for a pecuniary consideration, and mentioned thirty millions of dollars as the sum."[232]

Polk concluded the entry by stating, "Col. Atocha did not say that he was sent by Santa Anna to hold this conversation with me, but I think it probable he was so."[233] But Atocha made clear that the patriotic Mexicans would not consent to any government's selling them out; the cession must appear to be forced. He would suggest that Washington take stronger measures.[234] Atocha and Polk recognized the instability of the Mexican government. More importantly, they understood the correlation between diplomatic relations and public opinion.

A cunning politician, President Polk did not reveal his orders to Taylor during the talks with Atocha. In July 1845, ten months before war began, Polk instructed the U.S. military commander in Texas, Zachary Taylor, to move across the Nueces River into territory (between the Nueces and the Rio Grande) that was hotly disputed between Texas and Mexico. In January 1846, the president told Taylor to encamp on the Rio Grande itself.[235] Polk's orders occurred before his meeting with Atocha. Secretive by nature, Polk kept military information between himself and his cabinet. Yet, Polk made a major political mistake. Neither he nor his Cabinet seems to have appraised critically Santa Anna's proposal. They did not realize that Santa Anna hoped to use

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[231] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 71.
[232] James K. Polk, *Polk: The Diary of a President 1845-1849: The Mexican War, The Acquisition of Oregon, and the Conquest of California and the Southwest*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), 51.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Bernard Devoto, *The Year of Decision- 1846* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 71.
[235] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 117.

them for his own purposes: they were being played for fools to assist in the overthrow of Paredes.[236] While Polk wanted the Mexican government to receive Slidell, Polk nonetheless appeared to be quite taken with Atocha's visit, particularly when he relayed the contents of his conversations to the cabinet.[237] Remarkably, his cabinet supported Atocha's plan.

The president stiffened his attitude and tone toward the Mexican government, demanding that the government receive Slidell and that it pay the U.S. claims immediately.[238] Apparently, Atocha's recommendation that Washington take stronger measures influenced Polk's now inflexible stance. If nothing else seemed to work, Polk proposed that Slidell retire to a warship off the coast of Mexico and await further word from Washington. Polk pledged to issue a strong message to Congress, seeking authorization for the executive "to take redress into our own hands by aggressive measures."[239] Secretary of State James Buchanan disagreed with this gunboat policy, while other cabinet members sided with the president. Always the cautious one, Buchanan advised the president against belligerent talk with Mexico. Buchanan took a similar position over Oregon when President Polk took a warlike tone with England. Instead, Buchanan insisted to Slidell in mid-March to press his demands to be received in Mexico City. It does not appear that Buchanan recognized Santa Anna's ruse, he merely advised the president against imprudent actions.

Mindful of Mexico's financial troubles, Polk suggested in a cabinet meeting a few days later that the administration ask Congress to appropriate a special $1 million discretionary fund which could be placed at Slidell's disposal.[240] Polk reasoned that Slidell could use the money to induce

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[236] Devoto, *The Year*, 72.
[237] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 71.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 141.

the Mexican government to sign a treaty with the United States.[241] In other words, the money served as a bribe. Slidell demanded the Mexican government receive his diplomatic credentials, but the Paredes administration refused. The U.S. envoy demanded his passports and informed Buchanan that, "We can never get along well with the Mexicans, until we have given them a good drubbing."[242] Upon Slidell's departure, dialogue broke down between the U.S. and Mexico. If President Polk wanted additional territory, he needed to pursue other options. Encamped on the Rio Grande, Zachary Taylor's defensive position offered Polk an opportunity to resolve the dispute between the two nations. With negotiations stalled, the president selected another course of action.

Mexican officials were not impressed with Taylor's position on the Rio Grande. Polk issued clear instructions to Taylor. If the Mexican army crosses the Rio Grande, Polk informed Taylor, it should be considered an act of war. The General "should not wait to be attacked but to attack her army first.[243] Polk believed he had exhausted his diplomatic options, and if Mexico would not settle the issue, the United States would act. Polk ordered a blockade at the mouth of the Rio Grande and protection of Texas by federal troops. Writing to Taylor, Mexican general Mariano Arista demanded that he retreat to the Nueces. Naturally, Taylor refused and a series of skirmishes ensued.[244]

On April 25, 1846, a detachment of Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed two companies of American soldiers on the left bank of the Rio Grande, in the ensuing skirmish

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[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibid., 142.
[243] Louise Mayo, *President James K. Polk The Dark Horse President* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2006), 109.
[244] Ibid.

eleven Americans were killed, five wounded, and the remainder taken captive.[245] Away in Washington, Polk did not discover the events on the Rio Grande until weeks later, but prepared to draft a war message. The president understood Taylor's position might provoke a response by the Mexican Army. If Taylor did not retreat to the Nueces, the Mexican Army had little option but to attack. In a cabinet meeting in early May 1846, the president discussed options. Despite the absence of aggression on the part of Mexico, Polk now believed that its refusal to receive Slidell gave the United States "ample cause of war" and favored sending Congress a declaration to that effect.[246] All cabinet members agreed except George Bancroft, who advised the president to wait until some act of provocation by Mexico.[247]

Historians debate whether Polk had drafted his war message before receiving news from the Rio Grande, but one thing is certain. President Polk's decisive actions in the hours immediately after the news arrived, demonstrated unmistakably that Polk readily embraced war. In fact, war with Mexico well suited the president's plan for territorial expansion.[248] The president did not reveal however his territorial goals to anyone outside of his cabinet. During cabinet meetings, he explained the value the territories of California and New Mexico possessed. Once word arrived in Washington that U.S. forces were attacked, Polk knew his war message to Congress would be well received. Secondly, he recognized the need to act quickly. Writing in his diary on May 10, 1846, Polk wrote, "As the public excitement in and out of Congress was very naturally very great, and as there was a great public necessity to have the prompt action of Congress on the Mexican question, and therefore an absolute necessity for sending my message to Congress on

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[245] John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 3.
[246] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 144.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War*, 3.

tomorrow, I resumed this morning the preparation of my message."[249] Polk recognized the linkage of diplomatic and military action to public support and approval.

The following day, Polk sent his message off to an eager Congress. Although nervous about Congressional reaction, Polk believed his administration went through the necessary diplomatic channels over Mexico. Now Congress needed to act. The message read,

> "But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war. As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country."[250]

Polk's message invoked the patriotism required by the nation to respond to Mexico's aggressive actions. Of course, the message did not explain Polk ordering Taylor to cross the Nueces into disputed territory. His message placed the responsibility on the Mexican government for the state of affairs between the two nations.

With the message delivered, President Polk expected Congress to respond. The declaration of war (literally, an assertion that a state of war already existed by act of Mexico) was attached as a preamble to a bill appropriating $10 million for the troops at the front and authorizing the president to enlist fifty thousand more for defense against foreign invasion.[251] Whigs were hesitant to support the bill. They conceded that the executive had authority to repel an invasion, but they wanted a thorough discussion by Congress before declaring a full-scale offensive war

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[249] Nevins, *Polk: The Diary*, 84.
[250] James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897, Volume IV 1841-1849* (Washington D.C.: Congress, 1900), 441-442.
[251] Howe, *What Hath God*, 741.

upon Mexico.[252] However, after only two hours of discussion, with the support of the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, the amendment attaching the preamble passed, 123 to 67.[253] This vote reflects the actual extent of opposition to the war, rather than the tally on the combined bill, which carried 174 to 14, with 35 abstentions.[254] Assuredly, not every politician agreed with Polk's actions or possible motives. Indicative of Whig activity were the resolutions and speech of Abraham Lincoln. Although he willingly voted supplies, this first-term Congressman from Illinois authenticated his Whig credentials by introducing a series of resolutions requesting that the president submit information "whether the particular spot on which the blood of our citizens was so shed was or was not at that time *our own soil*."[255]

In the Democratic Senate, President Polk expected little opposition. However, John C. Calhoun, showing remarkable political courage, tried to stem the fever for what he thought to be an avoidable war. He was willing to immediately approve the necessary men and armaments, but vigorously opposed the preamble blaming Mexico for the outbreak of war.[256] The motion to remove the preamble failed 28 to 18. The declaration of war itself was approved by a vote of 40-2, with Calhoun abstaining.[257] Polk had assessed the feelings of the popular majority accurately, at least for the moment. He had decided that imperialism was a winner with the electorate, which he could stir up and take advantage of it politically.[258] The Whig Party recalled the fate of the Federalist Party following their opposition to the War of 1812; they did not want to share the same fortune.

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[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War*, 153.
[256] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 110.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought, 743.*

In the evolution of American presidential power, it is difficult to overstate the transition that occurred on May 13, 1846. The framers of the Constitution specifically reserved the power to declare war for the legislative branch.[259] The American declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812 had been a congressional affair. Architect of the Constitution that he was, President James Madison knew full well where the power to declare war was lodged.[260] In the spring of 1812, Madison agonized over sending a war message to Congress, doing so only after considerable pressure from war hawks in the House of Representatives led by a young Henry Clay.[261]

Thirty-four years later, not only did James K. Polk almost demand that Congress recognize that a state of war already existed, but also he left little doubt that those who failed to respond to his charge would be branded as cowards.[262] Both the House of Representatives and the Senate spared little time approving Polk's war message. Certainly Democratic majorities in both houses assisted the president's cause. In future American conflicts: Spanish American War, World War I, and World War II, Congress acted promptly approving presidential war messages. Given the enormous accumulation of presidential power after Polk, this transition may not seem significant. But in 1846, Polk's strong executive leadership was the impetus that sent the pendulum of the war-making power swinging away from Congress and toward the executive branch.[263] As Polk did throughout his presidency, he acted decisively when it came to administrative goals. Where President Jackson hesitated on the Texas issue, Polk prepared to use military force to defend the Lone Star State. President Tyler annexed Texas, whereas Polk desired additional territory after admitting Texas into the Union.

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[259] Borneman, *Polk*, 208.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid., 208-209.
[262] Ibid., 209.
[263] Ibid., 210.

In 1846, President Polk settled the Oregon question with Britain, achieved his two domestic measures, lowering the tariff and establishing the Constitutional Treasury. Now, he engineered a war with Mexico. From the beginning of his presidency, Polk's micro-management style dominated his administrative goals, and the war would be no different. Unlike President James Madison, Polk actively involved himself in all military details. First, Polk developed a strategy for the conflict, intending for U.S. forces to secure northern Mexico. Polk hoped that early, decisive victories would induce Mexico to capitulate, recognize Texas annexation, and sell California, making an invasion of central Mexico unnecessary.[264] If Mexico did not sue for peace-and there was good reason for Polk to think that it would not- then the United States would be in a strong defensive posture strung across the north of Mexico and the Rio Grande from which it could pursue further military operations.[265] President Polk believed he needed to prosecute a short war for two reasons: One, acquire the territory promptly, and secondly, avoid as much criticism over his war policy as possible.

Although he had minimal military experience, Polk understood the political ramifications of a protracted war. After a cabinet meeting on May 30, 1846, Polk wrote in his diary, "I stated that if war should be protracted for any considerable time, it would in my judgment be very important that the United States should hold military possession of California at the time peace was made, and I declared my purpose to be to acquire for the United States, California, New Mexico, and perhaps some others of the Northern Provinces of Mexico whenever a peace was made."[266] Polk held firm to his expansion goals, especially acquiring California, to which his cabinet concurred.

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[264] John Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition: Polk and Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 27.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 106.

Besides his disclosure to Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft his four administrative goals, this represented the first time the president articulated his full plan to his cabinet.

Besides understanding the problems with a protracted war, Polk also recognized the political risks associated with the army's ambitious generals. Polk's difficulty in choosing commanders and formulating strategy at the beginning of the war reflected extensive Whig representation in the general staff. All of the army's top commanders were Whigs, and Polk, though practical, did not wish to hand the opposition party the popularity attendant upon a Whig general's victory.[267] Both Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison won the presidency largely because of their military successes. Now, Polk inherited an army with known Whig supporter Winfield Scott and popular military veteran Zachary Taylor. Polk felt caught between these two ambitious men. Polk wanted to prosecute the war with alacrity, but feared that quick military success by Whig generals might cost the Democrats the 1848 election. While Polk defended American interests, he was not blind to the partisan implications of the war.

From Taylor's and Scott's perspectives, Polk's micro-managing of the conflict presented an obstacle to their military operations. The breadth and detail of Polk's instructions to his commanders is staggering. They included, for example, delineating the exact numbers of troops needed for the Santa Fe and Chihuahua campaigns, declaring what sort of soldier was best suited for conquering California, and castigating staff officers and military professionals for not seeing early on that pack mules would be more useful for transportation in Mexico than horse-drawn wagons that required fine roads.[268] Polk's detailed instructions might have revealed his lack of confidence in his military commanders. For example, referencing Scott's recommendation for

[267] Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition*, 133.
[268] Ibid., 136.

troop levels required for the war effort, Polk wrote in his diary on May 14, 1846, "General Scott did not impress me favorably as a military man. He has had experience in his profession, but I thought was rather scientific and visionary in his views."[269] Despite Polk's meddling, Taylor won multiple victories for the U.S. After defeating Mexican forces at the Battle of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma in early May, Taylor's army crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico.[270] On May 17, Americans laid siege to Matamoras, where Mexican forces under General Arista were entrenched. Arista withdrew, and the next day Taylor's troops occupied Matamoras without firing a shot. Polk rewarded him with a brevet commission as major general for these exploits.[271] Even while engaged in partisan calculation, Polk realized the importance of lauding U.S. victories to winning the war. Writing to Taylor on May 30, 1846, Polk wrote, "The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma rank among our most brilliant victories and will long be remembered by the American people."[272]

Although Polk rewarded Taylor for his early military services, he remained wary of both Taylor and Scott. Writing in his diary on September 22, 1846, Polk wrote, "Several of these officers are politically opposed to the administration and there is reason to apprehend that they would be willing to see the government embarrassed. With these apprehensions, I shall for the future give more attention than I have done to their conduct."[273] This statement proved two points. President Polk preferred to oversee every aspect of the war, and he understood that in order to protect his administration from criticism, critics needed to be monitored. However, Polk could not eliminate all criticisms against his war policy. Writing to a friend on July 21, 1846,

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[269] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 93.
[270] Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition*, 28.
[271] Ibid.
[272] James K. Polk to Zachary Taylor, May 30, 1846, *Correspondence of James K. Polk Volume XI, 1846* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 188.
[273] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 150.

Kings County, New York delegate O. DE A. Santangelo wrote, "Yet, our *happy nation* is in full possession of Texas- our government is wantonly squandering millions upon millions of dollars, and shedding torrents of our best blood, to extend its "bloodless conquests," and the "area of freedom," and the innocent victims of all these heroic deeds, are starving to death![274] To avoid further criticism of this nature, President Polk knew he needed a quick conclusion to the hostilities.

While Zachary Taylor secured several victories for the U.S., Polk needed a man capable of ending the war. He turned to Winfield Scott. Polk approved Scott's plans for the reduction of San Juan de Ulua and the invasion of the heart of Mexico from Vera Cruz. He then put Scott in charge, telling him quite openly that if he won it would be Polk's victory, and if he lost, the administration would not share the responsibility with him.[275] In his diary, Polk wrote, "I intimated to him that if I was satisfied that he had the proper confidence in the administration and that he would cordially cooperate with it, that I was disposed to assign him to the command."[276] Polk believed he was derailing Taylor's presidential run, and he was confident- on ample grounds- that he could keep Scott's candidacy from blossoming.[277] Polk accurately recognized Scott's presidential aspirations, but the president needed Scott in the field. The appointment paid off, as Scott achieved victories at Vera Cruz, Cerro Gordo, and Churubusco over Santa Anna. By September 1847, the U.S. stood at the gates of Mexico City, but a treaty to end the war remained elusive.

On April 15, 1847, President James K. Polk appointed Nicholas Trist to negotiate a treaty between the U.S. and Mexico. Polk stated, "I do hereby appoint you Commissioner of the U.S. to

[274] O. DE A. Santangelo to Henry C. Murphy, July 21, 1846, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8.
[275] Devoto, *The Year*, 485.
[276] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 170-171.
[277] Devoto, *The Year*, 485.

Mexico, with authority to meet Commissioner or Commissioners or other persons having authority from the Government of Mexico, and with him or them negotiate and conclude a settlement of the subsisting differences, and a lasting Treaty of peace and friendship between the U.S. and that Power."[278] Although President Polk initiated the conflict, he wished to resume a peaceful relationship with Mexico. On the same day Trist received his appointment from the president, he received a letter from Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker. Walker wrote, "In the event of your concluding a treaty of peace and limits with the Government of Mexico… you are authorized to draw upon the Secretary of the Treasury any sum not exceeding three millions of dollars to be paid under your instructions aforesaid."[279] He concluded by referring to a Congressional act on March 3, 1847, "An act making further appropriation to bring the existing war with Mexico to a speedy and honorable conclusion."[280] Similar to Slidell's $1 million discretionary fund, the money allotted to Trist represented nothing more than a bribe.

Following Polk's orders, Secretary of State James Buchanan's initial draft of instructions to Trist provided that the United States would pay $15 million for Mexican cessions, but the president was willing and even anxious to increase that amount if necessary.[281] As Polk argued before the cabinet, the prolongation of the war would cost the country far more than $20 or $30 million. All cabinet members eventually agreed that if Trist were able to acquire all the terms mentioned, the price tag should be $30 million; if, however, the Tehuantepec matter fell through (transit rights by U.S. citizens across the Mexican shipping route), the payment should not exceed $25 million. Furthermore, if Lower California could not be obtained in the treaty, then

[278] James K. Polk to Nicholas Trist, April 15, 1847, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8.
[279] Robert J. Walker to Nicholas Trist, April 15, 1847, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 98.

the compensation should be $20 million.[282] Of course, if Trist could secure a treaty for less money, both the cabinet and president agreed he should do so. Upon receiving his instructions, Trist departed for Mexico to negotiate a settlement.

Upon hearing of Trist's appointment, General Winfield Scott did not share the enthusiasm of the Polk administration. After all, Scott believed his military victories placed the U.S. in position to impose terms on Mexico. Frustrated by his inability to march on the capital and end the war, Scott may have felt that the glory- and political capital- he had hoped to achieve by the campaign were slipping from his grasp. Scott sensed in Trist's appointment another threat by the administration to undercut his authority.[283] When Trist arrived, Scott refused to receive him, and even informed the president that he would resign over the matter. Because of his military successes, Scott believed he should serve as the chief negotiator. Although Polk despised Scott, he rejected his request. Trist decided to focus on the peace negotiations. Trist believed ardently in Manifest Destiny but now feared that the war threatened to destroy the Union. Trist wanted a quick peace.[284]

Much to Polk's dismay, Trist's early meetings with Mexican officials collapsed. Polk decided to alter his monetary offer to the Mexican Government. Writing in his diary about events from a cabinet meeting on September 7, 1847, Polk stated, "I expressed myself as being entirely agreed to reduce the sum to be paid from thirty to fifteen millions for the cessions."[285] Although early negotiations stalled, peculiarly enough, Polk supported demanding more territory at a reduced rate. "In the course of the discussion the Attorney General expressed the opinion that if an army

[282] Ibid.
[283] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 183.
[284] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 120-121.
[285] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 261.

took possession of the City of Mexico, and the Mexicans still refused to make peace, that Mr. Trist should be recalled."[286]

While the U.S. Army occupied Mexico City exactly one week following the September 7 cabinet meeting, an alarming event took place. Trist deviated from his instructions and even befriended Scott after their initial encounter. Polk expressed outrage, for example, with Trist's indications of some flexibility on his part concerning the Texas boundary and the acquisition of all of Upper California.[287] Polk's instructions were clear, and California remained a top priority for the administration. Now, besides the stalling negotiations, Polk faced another crisis. An "All-Mexico" movement appeared which demanded that U.S. claims and loss of life could only be satisfied by seizing the entire country.[288] Polk fueled the All-Mexico drive by leaving open the possibility of more war and more conquest if Mexico did not immediately give him what he wanted.[289] As he did during the Oregon settlement, Polk supported a radical movement to acquire territory he desired. With Trist's negotiations going nowhere, he embraced the "All-Mexico" movement if it meant bringing Mexican officials back to the table. Polk was playing a dangerous political game during a period where politicians desired an end to the conflict. While the ploy worked during the Oregon settlement, the tactic against Mexico could fuel the anti-war sentiment sweeping the U.S.

Although Polk initially resisted his Attorney General's urging to recall Trist, by October of 1847, Polk changed course, as did the rest of the cabinet. On October 6, Polk ordered Buchanan to recall Trist from Mexico. In a letter Buchanan wrote, "In this state of affairs, the President believing that your continued presence with the army cannot be productive, but may do much

[286] Ibid.
[287] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 101.
[288] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 121.
[289] Ibid.

harm by encouraging the delusive hopes and false impressions of the Mexicans, has directed me to recall you from your mission and to instruct you to return to the United States."[290] Buchanan continued, "Should you have concluded a Treaty before this dispatch shall reach you, which is not anticipated, you will bring the Treaty with you to the United States for the consideration of the President, but should you, upon its arrival, be actually engaged in negotiations with Mexican Commissioners, these must be immediately suspended.[291]

Upon receiving the dispatches on November 6, Trist ignored Polk's order to return to the United States. Trist's blatant disobedience upset Polk who now prepared to send his Third Annual Message to a divided Congress tired of war. Polk did not have a Democratic majority to support his war policy, but he reiterated his demands from Mexico. "A treaty of peace should settle all existing differences between the two countries. If an adequate cession of territory should be made by such a treaty, the United States should release Mexico from all her liabilities and assume their payment to our own citizens."[292] He affirmed that territories the U.S. currently possessed as result of military victories belonged to the U.S., and if the U.S. won the war, further territorial acquisitions would be forthcoming. Despite Trist's refusal to return, a treaty needed to be finished in order to acquire additional territories.

Nicholas Trist persevered through months of agonizing discussions and deliberations with Mexican officials, which resulted in a treaty in February 1848. Curiously enough, the Polk administration remained oblivious to Trist's efforts during much of this time, for communications apparently were exceptionally slow and infrequent.[293] The treaty actually

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[290] James Buchanan to Nicholas Trist, October 6, 1847, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 8.
[291] Ibid.
[292] James K. Polk, "Third Annual Message," December 7, 1847. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29488. Accessed February 16, 2013
[293] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 102.

arrived in Washington on February 19, a scant two and a half weeks after it had been signed at Guadalupe Hidalgo. Polk initially approved the treaty, for its terms were within the instructions given to Trist. Still complaining about Trist's conduct, the president acknowledged that the treaty should not be rejected simply on that basis.[294] Polk's cabinet members also condemned Trist's refusal "to return to the U.S. when he was recalled," but they, too, agreed to examine the treaty.[295] A few days after receiving the settlement, Polk noted in his diary that, "I made known my decision upon the Mexican Treaty, which was that under all the circumstances of the case, I would submit it to the Senate for ratification, with a recommendation to strike out the 10th article."[296] The 10th article involved Mexico's rights to land grants in Texas, thus, with his cabinet's full support to reject the article, the Polk administration forwarded to the Senate Trist's treaty, negotiated and signed by a diplomat without official plenipotentiary powers.[297]

Unfortunately for President Polk, the debate over the treaty lasted longer than he anticipated. The unhappy fact for Polk was that senators in favor of All of Mexico joined forces in opposition to the treaty with those who wanted no cession whatsoever.[298] Polk courted them when it suited his purposes, but lost control of radical sentiment. Polk, understanding the dangers if delays occurred during the ratification process, sent a message to Congress. Polk wrote,

> "Looking at the actual condition of Mexico, and believing that, if the present treaty be rejected, the war will probably be continued, at great expense of life for an indefinite period; and considering the terms… I consider it to be my solemn duty to the country, uninfluenced by the exceptionable conduct of Mr. Trist, to

[294] Ibid.
[295] John C. Pinheiro, "Religion without Restriction: Anti-Catholicism, All Mexico, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 2003): 90.
[296] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 306.
[297] Pinheiro, "Religion without Restriction," 90.
[298] Ibid., 90-91.

> submit the treaty to the Senate, with a recommendation that it be ratified with the modifications suggested."[299]

Once again, President Polk knew that he needed to act decisively. Although he condemned Trist's disobedience, the agreement produced by Trist's tireless efforts needed to be ratified by Congress. On March 20, 1848, the Senate voted to ratify the treaty: 38 in favor, 14 opposed, with 4 abstentions, those voting against the treaty included 7 Whigs.[300] To Polk's surprise, 7 Democrats voted against the treaty, including his political confidant Thomas Hart Benton, who advised the president on military matters during the course of the war. Upon receiving word that the treaty passed, Polk wrote in his diary, "I sent for the Secretary of War, with a view to have a messenger dispatched to General Butler in Mexico, to carry intelligence to him that the treaty with Mexico had been ratified by the Senate of the United States, with certain amendments, and that it would be sent out by a commissioner invested with plenipotentiary powers in the course of four of five days."[301] With Mexico's acceptance of the amended treaty, Polk fulfilled his expansive goals.

According to the terms of the treaty, Mexico agreed to recognize the boundary of Texas up to the Rio Grande and ceded to the United States Upper California and New Mexico. In return, the United States agreed to pay Mexico $15 million and assume the outstanding claims of American citizens.[302] To put into perspective the vast territory the U.S. acquired because of the treaty, the attained region currently encompasses the present states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Nevada, a small corner of present-day Wyoming, California, and the western and southern portions of Colorado. Moreover, the territorial acquisitions benefited the U.S. in another way.

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[299] Message from President James K. Polk to Senate, February 29, 1848, *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Reel 11.
[300] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 807.
[301] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 315.
[302] Ronald C. Lee Jr., "Justifying Empire: Pericles, Polk, and a Dilemma of Democratic Leadership," *Polity*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer, 2002): 528.

Polk did not yet know it, but the United States had won far more than 500,000 square miles of land and important commercial outlets on the Pacific Coast. In early December a small quantity of gold from the California mines was received in Washington by Secretary of War William Marcy and shown to the president. A decade later, prospectors found extensive silver deposits in Nevada, and American production experienced a thirtyfold increase.[303] Counting Texas, Oregon, California, and New Mexico, James K. Polk extended the domain of the United States more than any other president, even Thomas Jefferson or Andrew Johnson (who acquired Alaska). His war against Mexico did more to define the nation's continental scope than any conflict since the Seven Years War eliminated French power between the Appalachians and the Mississippi.[304]

In his Fourth and final Address to Congress, Polk explained his foreign and domestic policy during his administration. "It has been my constant aim and desire to cultivate peace and commerce with all nations. Tranquility at home and peaceful relations abroad constitute the true permanent policy of our country. War, the scourge of nations, sometimes becomes inevitable, but is always to be avoided when it can be done consistently with the rights and honor of a nation."[305] He continued, "The great results which have been developed and brought to light by this war will be of immeasurable importance in the future progress of our country. They will tend powerfully to preserve us from foreign collisions, and to enable us to pursue uninterruptedly our cherished policy of "peace with all nations, entangling alliances with none."[306] Polk did not mention or defend his highly unpopular actions; he focused on the outcome and the results. He did however make recommendations to Congress in regards to the newly acquired land. "But to affect these great results not only California, but New Mexico, must be brought under the control

[303] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 204-205.
[304] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 809.
[305] James K. Polk, "Fourth Annual Message," December 5, 1848. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29489. Accessed February 16, 2013
[306] Ibid.

of regularly organized governments. The existing condition of California and of that part of New Mexico lying west of the Rio Grande and without the limits of Texas imperiously demands that Congress should at its present session organize Territorial governments over them."[307] Fearing European intervention or other annoyances, President Polk advised Congress to act quickly in order to protect American interests. While the Whig Party held the majority in the House, and had opposed Polk's administration from the beginning, the president felt compelled to present his final request.

With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo completed, President James K. Polk achieved his four major goals, and looked forward to retirement from public life. After more than twenty-five years of service, he accepted the reality that his political career was over. Members of the Democratic Party, knowing the popularity Zachary Taylor gained from the Mexican War, pleaded with Polk to seek a 2nd term. Addressing the Democratic Party, Polk wrote, "I refer you to my letter of the 12th of June 1844, accepting the nomination tendered to me the Democratic Nomination Convention of that year. In that letter I declared that in the event of my election I should "enter upon the high and solemn duties of the office with the settled purpose of not being a candidate for re-election."[308] Even with the announcement, party members still flooded Polk's office seeking to convince the president otherwise. Addressing Senators Bagby of Alabama and Turney of Tennessee, Polk wrote,

> "I assured them that I had no desire to continue beyond the present term, and that I looked forward to the period of my retirement with sincere pleasure. They said they had no doubt of that, but that the condition was such, and the divisions among the Democratic Party, as between the present aspirants for the nomination,

[307] Ibid.
[308] James K. Polk to Democratic Party, *James K. Polk Papers* (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.), Reel 57.

> that it might become indispensable to nominate me as the only means of restoring harmony, in the next election, and that it might become my duty to yield.[309]

While an ambitious man throughout his life, James K. Polk prepared to leave office at term's end.

While Polk's accomplishments during his term pleased him, the presidential election of 1848 did not. In November 1848 the Whigs, having nominated General Taylor, elected him over Democrat Lewis Cass and a surprise third-party Free Soil candidate, Martin Van Buren. Polk expressed patronizing pity for Van Buren, but his view of Taylor as a presidential prospect was identical to his judgment of him as a general of the army: "He is wholly unqualified."[310] While Polk tried to limit Taylor's military achievements, ultimately his actions were in vain.

As customary, Polk accompanied newly-elected President Taylor to the Inauguration. During the course of the short ride, Taylor made the casual remark that California and Oregon were too distant from Washington to be part of the United States and should be allowed to establish separate governments. Too stunned to reply, Polk said nothing, but he could not help peevishly noting in his diary that he found Taylor to be "a well-meaning old man. He is, however, uneducated, exceedingly ignorant of public affairs, and, I should judge, of very ordinary capacity."[311] Once Taylor finished his speech, Polk noted in his diary, "As soon as this was over I advanced to him and shook him by the hand, saying to him, "I hope, sir, the country may be prosperous under your administration."[312] Doubtless, Polk had little faith in President Taylor, but he turned the reins of government over and prepared for retirement.

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[309] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 298-299.
[310] John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 153.
[311] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 211.
[312] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 388-389.

James K. Polk's indefatigable work ethic defined his political career, and his presidency was no different. Polk devoted himself to the office, rarely making public appearances. But, after four years of political infighting, cabinet squabbles, delays in Congress over domestic legislation, possible war with Great Britain over Oregon, and war with Mexico over western territory, Polk left the office a careworn man, and it showed. When he took the oath of office that rainy March 4, 1845 day, he was the youngest president-elect. Now, the office aged him significantly and his health deteriorated because of the stressful job. Seeking to return to his home in Tennessee by boat, a major cholera outbreak spread throughout the south. Making numerous stops to appear before the populace in affected areas, Polk fell ill and soon thereafter was bedridden shortly after he arrived in Tennessee. On June 15, 1849, a little more than three months after leaving office, the 11th U.S. President died. Upon hearing the news, President Zachary Taylor issued an executive order stating, "The President with deep regret announces to the American people the death of James K. Polk, late President of the United States, which occurred at Nashville on the 15th instant. A nation is suddenly called upon to mourn the loss of one the recollection of whose long services in its councils will be forever preserved on the tablets of history."[313]

Only the 2nd U.S. President to oversee a major conflict, James K. Polk set numerous precedents. For example, Polk's war message to Congress represented the first time in which an executive did not merely ask for a declaration of war, but demanded a declaration. Once hostilities commenced, Polk developed the first military strategy, and advised the supplies necessary to win the war. Instead of leaving military matters to field commanders, the president determined that he could oversee operations, despite a lack of personal military experience. Furthermore, Polk required any reports produced by cabinet members pertaining to the war to be

[313] Zachary Taylor, "Executive Order," June 19, 1849. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=68060. Accessed February 16, 2013

delivered on his desk. Not only would the president supervise generals, but his cabinet as well. At the culmination of the Mexican War, Polk directly involved himself in peace negotiations. He sent specific instructions to envoy Nicholas Trist to secure a peace treaty between both nations. With discussions complete, Polk advised Congress to accept the treaty with stated modifications. For the first time in American History, a president used war as a premise to acquire vast stretches of land. Polk's role as a bureaucratic in-fighter and innovative use of presidential power left an indelible mark on the presidency. Polk left behind an unforgettable if controversial presidential legacy. Nevertheless, during the mid-19th century, James K. Polk profoundly affected the office and the nation. The country would not see another strong executive until Abraham Lincoln twelve years later.

CONCLUSION: POLK'S PRESIDENTIAL LEGACY

James K. Polk's bureaucratic skill and micro-managing leadership style permitted him to achieve all four administrative goals: reduction of the tariff, establishment of a Constitutional Treasury, settlement of the Oregon and Texas dispute, and acquisition of California. From his earliest days as a senate clerk in Tennessee, through his election to the U.S. House of Representatives, membership of the Ways and Means Committee, and service as Speaker of the House, Polk learned the legislative process and honed his bureaucratic skill in these various positions. After twenty years serving in these roles, Polk developed into a reputable and astute politician.

Writing in his diary on September 23, 1848, Polk wrote, "I have not had my full Cabinet together in council since the adjournment of Congress on the 14th of August last. I have conducted the government without their aid. Indeed, I have become so familiar with the duties and workings of government, not only upon general principles, but in most of its minute details, that I find but little difficulty in doing this."[314] Polk further explained his managerial style by writing on December 29, 1848, "The public have no idea of the constant accumulation of business requiring the President's attention. No president who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure. If he entrusts the details and smaller matters to subordinates constant errors will occur. I prefer to supervise the whole operations of the government rather than entrust the public business to subordinates, and this makes my duties

[314] James K. Polk, *Polk: The Diary of a President 1845-1849: The Mexican War, The Acquisition of Oregon, and the Conquest of California and the Southwest*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), 345.

very great."[315] Both statements in 1848 revealed a president who throughout his term dominated Washington in every respect.

Elected in 1844 as the first "Dark Horse" president, James K. Polk supported, as his mentor Andrew Jackson did, the idea that it took a strong executive to govern the nation. Elected by the people and for the people, Polk viewed his election as a mandate to act on behalf of the populace. At the Democratic National Convention, Polk made a remarkable promise: if elected, he vowed to serve only one term. The move was not an empty gesture to be retracted four years later.[316] Following his campaign pledge and subsequent victory, Polk set to work. After revealing to George Bancroft, his Secretary of the Navy, his four goals, Polk methodically went about accomplishing each one.

His two domestic goals embodied the Jacksonian economic philosophy: low tariffs and an Independent Treasury. Historian Paul Bergeron states that Polk did not conform to the Whiggish notions about weak or limited presidents who yielded to a vigorous and dominant legislative branch, thus, the president initiated economic legislation.[317] Relying on his Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker for tariff reform, reviving Martin Van Buren's creation of an Independent Treasury, and persuading Democrats to support his legislation, President Polk placed the country on a course of financial stability. The Walker Tariff reversed the protectionist principles embodied in the "black tariff" of 1842 and inaugurated a decade and a half of freer trade, a period that also witnessed the conclusion of the Canadian Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 and the further liberalization of the tariff in 1857. This "triumph of free trade principles" was

[315] Ibid., 360-361.
[316] Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 69.
[317] Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Norwalk: The Easton Press, 1987), xi.

reversed only with the passage of the Morrill Tariff in 1861 and the advent of the Civil War.[318] His "Constitutional Treasury" was an idea with strong legs. It survived until 1913, when it was replaced by the Federal Reserve System by fellow Democrat President Woodrow Wilson.[319]

In the growth of presidential power during the 19th century, Polk's involvement in domestic matters cannot be overlooked. The president initiated legislation and lobbied Democrats to support bills. Furthermore, he admonished cabinet and Senate Finance Committee members when bills delayed for unseen reasons. When the Senate failed to vote on the Independent Treasury bill, Polk chided Senate Finance Committee Chair Democrat Dixon H. Lewis of Alabama in order to force a vote. Also, Polk expected cabinet members to support his legislation over state politics. For example, Vice President George Dallas came from Pennsylvania, a pro-protective tariff state. Dallas's vote in the Senate broke the tie over the tariff issue. Polk's efforts towards domestic reform are only surpassed by 20th century presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, FDR, and LBJ.

Ex-President Andrew Jackson convinced Polk that to win the presidency, a candidate needed to support the annexation of Texas and westward expansion. Old Hickory's advice proved good. Jackson's handpicked successor, Martin Van Buren, cooperated with Henry Clay in opposing Texas annexation during the 1844 campaign, thereby sealing his fate within the Democratic Party. James K. Polk, as Andrew Jackson did, embraced "Manifest Destiny" and affirmed the Monroe Doctrine. In an effort to attract western voters to the expansionist cause, Polk called for the United States to establish its control over the entire Oregon territory, an area that it had

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[318] Scott C. James and David A. Lake, "The Second Face of Hegemony: Britain's Repeal of the Corn Laws and the American Walker Tariff of 1846,"*International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter, 1989): 1.
[319] John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 122.

claimed jointly with Great Britain for almost three decades.[320] Striking a bellicose tone with England during his First Annual Address to Congress in 1845, Polk stated, "our title to the whole Oregon Territory," in an effort to assert his intentions over the region. Although President Polk did not desire war, his aggressive posturing allowed him to place the onus on England to settle the issue. At that point a nationalistic mood swept the country.

Rational politicians felt the 49th parallel was appropriate, while others such as Lewis Cass, a presidential contender in 1844, supported the divide at 54' 40'. Some congressional firebrands already were warlike in calling for the British to give up their claims on Oregon all the way north to the fifty-fourth parallel. "Fifty-four forty or fight!" was their slogan.[321] An astute politician, Polk understood that supporting a radical movement could lead to two things: war or settlement. Luckily for the president, England came back to the negotiating table and divided Oregon at the 49th parallel. With the right measure of brinkmanship and political acumen, Polk effectively bluffed England out of the Oregon territory. He had nevertheless turned possible war and his own humiliation into a victory. The United States obtained the Oregon territory, including both banks of the Columbia River.[322]

Once again, Polk's innovative use of presidential power is clear. In order to acquire the territory, Polk urged Congress to terminate the 1827 Convention, which established joint occupancy. If England would not settle the dispute, Polk used a warlike tone in order to force negotiations. The president relied heavily on James Buchanan and diplomat Louis McLane to explain America's terms to Britain. Although Polk played a dangerous political game with England over Oregon, he acquired the territory peacefully.

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[320] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 68.
[321] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 123.
[322] Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 114-115.

Departing President John Tyler worked diligently to annex Texas, and signing the joint resolution on March 1, 1845, President Tyler laid the groundwork for the incoming President Polk. Where Polk used a bellicose tone with England before resolving the dispute peacefully, he took a different course of action with Mexico over Texas and additional territorial claims. Following its successful war for Independence in 1836, Texas sought statehood. As a prisoner after the battle of San Jacinto, Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna had accepted the Rio Grande, not the Nueces River, as the boundary in a secret provision of the treaty ending the Revolution, but the agreement was promptly rejected by the Mexican government.[323] Not to be denied, the Texas Congress simply passed a law in 1836 unilaterally declaring the river to be its southern and western boundary.[324] Texas did not officially join the Union until December 29, 1845, but by that time, President Polk affirmed the Rio Grande as the border between the two nations, and used both diplomatic and military actions to confirm his belief.

Dispatching General Zachary Taylor to setup defensive positions on the Rio Grande, and appointing John Slidell as envoy to Mexico vested with the powers to settle the dispute, President Polk demonstrated his willingness to settle the dispute diplomatically or militarily. However, outside of his cabinet, no one knew Polk sent Taylor down to the disputed region. When negotiations between the two nations fell through, Taylor's position on the Rio Grande provoked Mexico's only response, attack. On April 25, 1846, a detachment of Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed two companies of American soldiers on the left bank of the Rio Grande, in the ensuing skirmish eleven Americans were killed, five wounded, and the

[323] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 120.
[324] Ibid.

remainder taken captive.[325] President Polk's decisive actions in the hours immediately after the news arrived, demonstrated unmistakably that Polk readily embraced war. In fact, war with Mexico well suited the president's plan for territorial expansion.[326] By explaining to his Cabinet and Congress that he exhausted all diplomatic options, Polk convinced the nation that the unprovoked attack by Mexico provided a cause for war.

Polk's usage of presidential power is evidenced by his war message. Not only did James K. Polk almost demand that Congress recognize that a state of war already existed, but also he left little doubt that those who failed to respond to his charge would be branded as cowards.[327] The power to declare war is reserved for the legislative branch, but Polk largely ignored this fact. Given the enormous accumulation of presidential power after Polk, this transition may not seem significant. But in 1846, Polk's strong executive leadership was the impetus that sent the pendulum of the war-making power swinging away from Congress and toward the executive branch.[328]

Using executive action to secure the support and financial backing from Congress, President Polk planned to micro-manage the conflict from the beginning. Desiring a short war to avoid criticism of his war policy, Polk encountered problems from the beginning. He inherited an army largely dominated by Whigs, including two key members: Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor. Foreshadowing future problems in American conflicts between presidents and generals, Polk held low opinions of both men because of their political leanings and ambition. Nevertheless, Polk needed to be pragmatic. He needed to win the war while containing the political aspirations

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[325] John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 3.
[326] Ibid.
[327] Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 209.
[328] Ibid., 210.

of both individuals. After over a year of bloody struggle between Mexico and the U.S., "Mr. Polk's War" seemed to be on the verge of concluding.

Dispatching Nicholas Trist to secure a peace treaty between the two warring countries, President Polk hoped for a quick process. Unfortunately for the Chief Executive, the procedure dragged on into 1848. Despite refusing to return to Washington upon Polk's recall letter, Nicholas Trist proceeded through months of agonizing discussions and deliberations with Mexican officials, which resulted in a treaty in February 1848. Curiously enough, the Polk administration remained oblivious to Trist's efforts during much of this time, for communications apparently were exceptionally slow and infrequent.[329] The Senate's ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo fulfilled Polk's expansive goals, and had an enormous effect on the U.S. According to the terms of the treaty, Mexico agreed to recognize the boundary of Texas up to the Rio Grande and ceded to the United States Upper California and New Mexico. In return, the United States agreed to pay Mexico $15 million and assume the outstanding claims of American citizens.[330] To put into perspective the vast territory the U.S. acquired because of the treaty, the attained region currently encompasses the present states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Nevada, a small corner of present-day Wyoming, and the western and southern portions of Colorado.

Although Polk completed his vision of a continental nation, and placed the U.S. on a path as a world power, there were downsides to his expansion policies. As president, Polk had an obligation to explain the causes of war; his explanation constituted the official national position on these issues and as such helped to shape the public debate over the war. When considered

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[329] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 102.
[330] Ronald C. Lee Jr., "Justifying Empire: Pericles, Polk, and a Dilemma of Democratic Leadership," *Polity*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer, 2002): 528.

alongside the principle narrative of the details of war, Polk's arguments illuminate the struggle to reconcile a policy of aggressive territorial expansion with a dedication to universal practices of justice.[331] Polk did not adequately explain the actions he took to place the U.S. on a collision course with Mexico. By January 1848, the House, by a vote of 82 to 81, denounced the conflict as "a war unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States."[332] For the first time in American History, a U.S. President engineered a war. Polk set a precedent that his successors have followed.

President James K. Polk failed to respond appropriately to a growing national crisis, slavery. During a Congressional session to appropriate funding for the Mexican War in 1846, an amendment was added to the bill. The Wilmot Proviso, created by Pennsylvania Democrat David Wilmot, stated that *no territory* ceded by Mexico would enter the Union as a slave state. Historian Paul Bergeron believes Polk did not perceive the enormity of the meaning and ramifications of the Wilmot Proviso to the nation at large; few political leaders did so at the moment.[333] In a diary entry dated August 8, 1846, President Polk privately stated his feelings over the matter of expansion and slavery. "In the House a bill passed that body, but with a mischievous and foolish amendment to the effect that no territory which might be acquired by treaty from Mexico should ever be a slaveholding country. What connection slavery had with making peace with Mexico it is difficult to conceive?"[334] It is incorrect to say Polk demonstrated naïveté over the issue of slavery and expansion; he simply compartmentalized both. Taking this course of action, he could ignore any connection between the two issues.

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[331] Ibid., 516.
[332] Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, 146.
[333] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 87.
[334] Polk, *Polk: The Diary*, 138.

By the time Polk left office in 1849, it became disturbingly clear to Polk and to others that questions about tariffs, internal improvements, and banks were fast vanishing from the national and partisan scene, to be replaced by the all-consuming issue of the expansion of slavery.[335] Instead of actively addressing the question, Polk accused politicians of creating absurd legislation aimed at derailing his expansive policies. As the nation fractured along sectional lines over the issue, Polk passed the subject to his successors, a grave mistake that the nation paid for by the blood of the Civil War.

James K. Polk's presidency is both intriguing and perplexing. Coming to office, Polk succeeded three largely ineffective administrations. As chief executive, he worked long hours to supervise every act of his administration. While other officers fled Washington's summer heat, the president remained.[336] Polk also left another historic legacy. The way in which he led the United States into the Mexican War set precedents for later powerful chief executives- indeed, provided an early preview of the so-called "imperial presidency" of the twentieth century.[337] President Harry S. Truman with considerable enthusiasm listed Polk as one of the eight best Presidents. Truman declared that 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 did it, and when he got through with it he went home.[338] Understanding the demands of the job, President Truman admired Polk's attentiveness while in office.

However, historians also reveal the less pleasant qualities of Polk. Author Sam W. Haynes explains the rather secretive and reserved style that Polk possessed. During the next four years

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[335] Bergeron, *The Presidency*, 207.
[336] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 126.
[337] Ibid., 125.
[338] Louise Mayo, *President James K. Polk The Dark Horse President* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2006), 3.

there would be many more occasions when critics of the president would point to his penchant for disingenuousness, if not outright deception. Haynes continues, to his political enemies, the Tennessean exhibited a "trait of sly cunning which he thought shrewdness" that would ultimately earn him the sobriquet "Polk the Mendacious." Those close to the president generally took a kinder view, maintaining that Polk was by nature taciturn and self-contained, qualities which, they admitted, he often used to good advantage. Furthermore, Haynes explains that George Bancroft could marvel at Polk's ability to keep "his mouth as effectively shut as any man I know." At the least, the president was a man of dignified reserve who played his cards close to the vest, and in so doing often kept even his closest associates guessing as to his real intentions.[339]

As scholar Bernard Devoto notes, James K. Polk possessed other qualities necessary for a strong executive to succeed in office.

> But if his mind was narrow it was also powerful and he had guts. If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second.[340]

Devoto's *1846- The Year of Decision* explained that before James K. Polk entered the office, Congress dominated the nation's capital from 1837 to 1845 by initiating legislation on various issues. After Polk left the presidency in 1849, Congress dominated again until Abraham Lincoln entered office in 1861.[341]

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[339] Haynes, *James K. Polk*, 79.
[340] Mayo, *President James K. Polk*, 144.
[341] Bernard Devoto, *The Year of Decision- 1846* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 7-8.

During his presidency, James K. Polk strengthened the executive branch in ground-breaking ways. When examining Polk's legacy, historians must focus not only on his accomplishments, but how his successors built upon the usage of executive power. Following the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, the presidency once again underwent a transformation. President Lincoln faced a nation at war with itself, and turned to the Constitution to determine his war powers as Chief Executive. While the Constitution did not address Lincoln's unique situation, he felt the preservation of the Union required strong, and at times unquestioned executive action. At the beginning of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln asked, "Are all the laws but one to go unexecuted, and the Government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated?"[342] Without waiting for congressional approval, Lincoln called up new troops, ordered construction of warships, established a blockade of Southern ports (at the time considered an act of war), and seized rail and telegraph lines.[343] Most seriously, on six occasions Lincoln suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus without congressional authorization explicitly required by the Constitution.[344] Lincoln based his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus on national necessity.

The Civil War had, of course, an enormous nationalizing effect. President Abraham Lincoln's wartime actions temporarily extended the powers of the federal government, especially the presidency, over the states and the people. In the course of the war, Lincoln shifted the initiative over the raising of troops from the Northern governors to the federal government.[345] Lincoln used presidential power in another unprecedented way. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The edict stated that any slave held in rebellious states is

[342] Joel D. Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson, eds., *The Executive Branch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 453.
[343] Ibid., 456.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid., 489.

now free. While the proclamation did not end slavery, nor did Lincoln have the Constitutional authority to issue such a document, his usage of federal power throughout the Civil War provided a clear example of a president strengthening the executive branch in a creative way.

The upshot of any comparison between James K. Polk and Abraham Lincoln as commanders in chief is that unlike Polk, President Lincoln tended to consider military necessity first and more successfully compartmentalize his virulent partisan leanings.[346] This was partially due to personality differences between the two men, but overall Lincoln's leadership grew out of the simple fact that unlike in the Mexican War the Union and federal government were threatened.[347] What Lincoln had to learn from Polk as commander in chief, however, was that a president must closely supervise his generals but still allow them to fight, and at all times must be aware of and able to manage cabals and political machinations within Congress and the army.[348]

Andrew Jackson largely shaped Polk's vision of the presidency, but James K. Polk made the office his own. Furthermore, Polk represents the first modern president as we understand the office. Unlike Jackson, Polk presided over his cabinet, and his cabinet by and large stayed intact. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the New Deal and pushed economic matters in Congress, Polk pushed economic reform during the mid-19th century. In foreign policy, as countless 20th and 21st century presidents did, President Polk charted a foreign policy course for the U.S., which vaulted the nation onto the world stage as a world power. Since then, despite economic woes and foreign wars, the U.S. has yet to take its final bow. While Polk lacked charisma, and rarely traveled outside the office as modern presidents are required to do, his bureaucratic skill, decisiveness, and strong leadership remain in line with contemporary

[346] John Pinheiro, *Manifest Ambition: Polk and Civil-Military Relations during the Mexican War* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 165.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid.

executives. In four short years, Polk transformed the nation and the presidency. Although his methods are questionable, and some deem unconstitutional, in time, James K. Polk may be considered one of the strongest presidents to have ever inhabited the White House.

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