

# James Knox Polk

## *A great wartime president*

by Wayne Lutton

This past year's election campaign and the death of former President Ronald Reagan prompted journalists and scholars to once again rate our Presidents. Aside from George Washington, "greatness" tends to depend on a particular commentator's ideological bent. Next to our first President those most often cited as "great" are Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy – perhaps reflecting the bias of those participating in the surveys.

If you believe presidential "greatness" should be based upon personal character, the attainment of a positive agenda for the country, and the ability to lead during wartime, then our 11th President, James Knox Polk, surely deserves to be ranked among the very greatest. In a recent addition to the American Presidents Series, *James Knox Polk: 1845-1849*, John Seigenthaler, former editorial director of *USA Today* and founder of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, has written a concise and highly readable biography of this shrewd and decisive commander-in-chief.

Polk was born in Mecklenburg County, N.C., and grew up in Tennessee, where his grandfather and father "imbued him with the principles of Jefferson," as famed historian George Bancroft, who served in his cabinet, pointed out. His mother, Jane Knox Polk, was a descendant of the same John Knox who launched the Reformation in Scotland and her piety was an enduring force in his life. He was sober, honest, and hardworking. Later, after his marriage to Sarah Childress, James Polk and his wife paid for a pew in the Presbyterian Church and throughout his years in public life they regularly attended Sunday services.

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Wayne Lutton, Ph.D., is editor of *The Social Contract*.

James nearly died at the age of 17 when forced to undergo emergency surgery for urinary stones. The author describes the operation he endured, without general anesthesia or antiseptics to prevent infection. In Seigenthaler's estimation, "the boy became a man on Dr. McDowell's operating table. Here, for the first time, were evidences of the courage, grit, and unyielding iron will that Whigs, the British Crown, and the Mexican army would encounter once he became President."

After his recovery, James attended a series of Presbyterian academies, where he excelled in Latin, Greek, literature, logic, philosophy and geography. He entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1816, at a time when it was dominated by its Presbyterian president, Rev. Robert Chapman. Polk was an outstanding student and earned the privilege of giving the commencement address at graduation. Polk then studied law in the office of Felix Grundy, a noted criminal lawyer who had served as a state legislator and chief justice of the state supreme court, passing the bar exam in June of 1820.

As a young man, Polk rose rapidly from the Tennessee legislature to the U.S. House of Representatives. There he was twice elected speaker as a principal supporter of "Old Hickory" Andrew Jackson, his political mentor. Polk returned home to run for governor of Tennessee. This was seen as a springboard for a future run for the presidency. However, he served only one two-year term in the statehouse, being twice narrowly defeated for re-election. By early 1844, James Polk was considered to be politically dead. No one would have bet that by the end of the year he would be the newly-elected President.

The author is at his best when describing how Polk became the surprise candidate of the Democratic Party. Former President Martin Van Buren was favored to run against the Whig candidate Henry Clay. At the time,

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American public opinion overwhelmingly favored admitting the Republic of Texas to the United States. But in an amazing misreading of popular sentiment, both Van Buren and Clay issued official statements declaring their opposition to welcoming Texas into the Union. "Remember the Alamo!" still reverberated in the hearts of American patriots and Texas President Sam Houston was a revered figure. Dubbed "Young Hickory" by former President Andrew Jackson's supporters, who managed his campaign, Polk won his party's nomination and defeated Clay in the general election. At the time, he was the youngest man ever elected to our highest public office.

Polk pledged to serve only one term. This freed him to push ahead without focusing on re-election. He had four goals: To fund the federal budget while lowering tariffs (then the main source of revenue); to restore an independent national treasury, taking public deposits out of the too often corrupt hands of private banks; acquire the Oregon Territory from Britain; and welcome Texas and California into the Union. He achieved the first three objectives in his first year and a half in office, a truly remarkable accomplishment.

Liberals have sought to define Polk's presidency by the Mexican War of 1846-1848. Then and now, his critics claimed that Polk deliberately provoked war with Mexico in order to acquire Texas, New Mexico and California. Seigenthaler tends to take a middle view. It may simply be that he is less familiar with this chapter of American history.

There is no doubt that Polk wanted to extend American sovereignty from coast to coast. However, there is no evidence that he started a war with Mexico to get it. By 1835 Texas's independence had been recognized by the United States, England, France and other nations. California was already lost to Mexico. The real question was which country would control it: England, France, or the United States. Polk, trying to avoid war, dispatched John Slidell to Mexico City with an offer to purchase New Mexico and California.

War broke out in 1846 primarily because Mexican President Mariano Paredes, who seized power in a military coup in early 1846, thought a war with the United

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States could be easily won. The Mexican Army dwarfed that of the U.S., with 27,000 regular troops against an American army numbering only 7,200. The Mexicans were better armed and better trained. President Paredes boasted that he would see the "Eagle and Serpent" of

Mexico floating over the White House. British and French military observers predicted an easy victory for Mexico.

In April 1846, President Paredes ordered his commander of the Army of the North to "commence hostilities, yourself taking the initiative against the enemy [the U.S.]." On April 24, 1846, General Mariano Arista sent 1,600 cavalry across the Rio Grande to attack American forces on the northern side of the river. Later that day, a Mexican force cut down Captain William Thornton and 60 American dragoons, and "American blood was shed on American soil." (For those interested, the best treatment of this period remains Seymour V. Conner and Odie B. Faulk, *North America Divided: The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, Oxford University Press, 1971).

Seigenthaler relates how President Polk had to battle not only the Mexican Army but also his leading generals, Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor. Both were outspoken Whigs who would themselves run for President (Taylor was elected after Polk). Fighting against the Mexicans with a small army of regulars and state militia volunteers across broad deserts, where problems of supply hampered operations, America's armed forces performed brilliantly – including our Pacific Naval Squadron, which kept the British Navy from seizing Northern California.

Polk spearheaded America's westward expansion, while securing his domestic agenda. Despite his achievements, Polk left office amid a firestorm of antiwar attacks. The stress took such a physical toll that he died just three months after the end of his term.

Today, few Americans can even identify James Knox Polk. We can thank John Seigenthaler for writing an admirable portrait of a President who deserves to be far better known and appreciated. •