James K. Polk: A One Term President

Ben Martin

Prof. Jon Day

**Introduction**

“Just before the inauguration of Mr. Polk, he sat in his room with one of those whom he had selected for one of the departments of the government and speaking energetically, he raised his hand high in the air and bringing it down with force on his thigh, said, ‘there are to be four great measures of my administration: 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 complete and permanent establishment of the Constitutional Treasury.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Joseph Shattan states it perfectly when he says in his article, *One-Term Wonder*, “most Americans know little about our eleventh president, even though during his administration the territories that now constitute as California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, as well as parts of Montana, Colorado, and Wyoming, came under American control.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This could not be further from the truth; former President James K. Polk was the most effective president between the administrations of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. In just one term Polk was able to accomplish all “four great pillars” that he laid out at the beginning of his administration.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The way Polk handled his relationship with Congress and his activism toward passing his bill has become the model for the modern presidency.[[4]](#footnote-4) By using lobbying and individual business conferences he was able to pass his two economic legislative bills, tariff reduction bill and the Constitutional Treasury Bill. The interesting part of the Polk administration is how he handled his military conquest by obtaining that vast amount of territory by pursuing the Oregon Question, involving Great Britain, and the Mexican War. Polk for lack of a better phrase is to be considered a political master mind and one of the most undervalued and accomplished presidents of our nation’s history.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The President**

John Knox Polk was born November 2, 1975 near Charlotte, North Carolina. He began his education at home due to ill health; until at the age of seventeen when he underwent a surgical procedure removing urinary stones. He then went on to study at the University of North Carolina and read law under Tennessee attorney Felix Grundy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Polk served in the Tennessee Senate until he was elevated to the United States House of Representatives for seven terms as a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson; he would be nicknamed “Young Hickory” as a result. Later, he would become the governor of Tennessee and fail to be reelected for a second term. While severing in the Senate and as governor of Tennessee he would gain the political knowledge and expertise that he would later use in his presidency. He would then advance his political career by becoming the Democratic Vice President nominee in 1844, where he would become elected president as a compromise candidate with 50.5% of the vote.[[7]](#footnote-7)

After being elected he made it known to his administration that he intended to be a dominate figure. He also gave indication of his political agenda and his four major goals: solve the Oregon Question with Great Britain, the acquisition of California from Mexico, tariff reduction, and to create a permanent Constitutional Treasury.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Polk was highly involved in communicating his administration’s policy pursuits to the public. This was done through a newly created government-subsidized newspaper called *The* *Union*. The president’s intention for the paper was to communicate to the public that he was in charge of his administration. He would meet regularly with the paper’s editor to ensure that the paper was publicizing the promotion of his policies without any knowledge to the public that the he was its author.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Polk organized his cabinet to be what the modern day president would consider his White House Staff. He would meet with them twice a week; this gave Polk the opportunity to keep his staff focused on advancing his political agenda. He would also use them to lobby within Congress and to report to him voting numbers; they also would alert Polk of any budgetary or operational needs for the department. This information would help push the President’s agenda through successfully.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Polk was very narrow-minded; his attention began and ended with politics. He wrote four presidential diaries which are broad resources that pertain to concerns of all his predecessors such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. His goal was to master the role of the presidency, however, his diaries show very little of the consequences toward the policies passed.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Polk’s strengths were his organization skills within his cabinet and his ability to use untapped resources such as lobbying.[[12]](#footnote-12) He was known for being a very hard worker and to exhaust himself to the point of physical exhaustion. In fact, he collapsed delivering his valedictory address during his graduation from North Carolina.[[13]](#footnote-13) Polk also excelled in his tenacity and clarity of his policy intent and ability to obtaining the short-term immediate political goals. The political strength of Polk became a lesson for every future president to attempt to achieve. Polk’s ability to push policy through would also become his major downfall as president. He lacked the ability to notice the long-term consequence that would arise later in American history, one being the slavery issue that arouse from obtaining new territory; this issue would lead up to the Civil War.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Tariff Bill**

Charles Sellers was quoted in Paul Bergeron’s article stating, “Polk was to display a brand of presidential legislative leadership that the country would not see again until the time of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.”[[15]](#footnote-15) What was very apparent with Polk, during his presidency, was that he was very assertive with his legislative program; he implemented and directed his own program for legislation rather than wait for Congress to shape their own.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Polk was the most meddlesome with the legislative process involving the Walker Tariff Bill; this bill was to establish reduced tariffs to increase revenue. Polk turned to his Treasury Secretary Robert J. Walker to run a statistical analysis on reducing tariffs which came out favorable. The bill would begin in the House. The House was stalling due to being influenced by manufacturing lobbyist who was requesting delays due to the potential elimination of Corn Laws by Great Britain. The President, fearful of this, countered with his own lobbying through cabinet members and a few select Senators. Due to the excessive lobbying, the bill passed through the House with little implication. The Senate, however, was a little more difficult with passing the bill. The President would send his cabinet and strong supporting Senators to pressure undecided members to vote in favor for the bill. One example of the president’s excessive control over legislation was with James Semple of Illinois. Semple was rumored to be leaving town before voting commenced. Polk then dispatched delegates from Illinois and the Postmaster General Johnson to seek out Semple in attempt to return him back to the capital so he could cast a vote. With reluctance Semple returned and voted in favor of the bill. The president would also hold individual meetings with members such as William Haywood of North Carolina and Spencer Jarnagin of Tennessee. Haywood would resign before voting, however, Jarnagin with contemplation of resignation decided to stay and vote in favor of the bill. As Polk sent pressure throughout the Senate, the bill eventually was passed.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Constitutional Treasury**

The second pillar was Polk’s domestic policy that aimed at creating an Independent or Constitutional Treasury.[[18]](#footnote-18) By creating this policy, Polk was essentially separating the federal government from the banking business. This was because Polk disagreed with the fact that banks were using federal deposits to make a profit for themselves and increase inflation; which, at the time was a problem.[[19]](#footnote-19) He followed by denouncing the deposit of federal monies in various state banks and only allow them to be stored in the federal treasury; this would be done for “safe-keeping.” Essentially this would take the state banks out of the dispersal and deposits of federal monies allowing the federal government to supervise this action; this in turn would hopefully solve or limit the inflation problem.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The Democrats would argue that the federal government had no right to the federal monies in the first place and that this bill had no precedent. The interesting part is that once the debates ended in the House, they added an amendment that would require payments to the federal government be in gold or silver. The vote would pass the House with little effort by the President.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In the Senate, there were a lot more pressing matters that caused a four month delay, however, this was inexcusable to Polk. The Senate Finance Committee was chaired by Dixon H. Lewis who made it public that he had the intention of dragging his feet with the legislation; this would then result in the President summoning Lewis to his office.[[22]](#footnote-22) He would also place a lot of pressure on Senator Benton that the legislation was of the upmost importance and needed to be pushed through the Senate; the request by the President would fall upon deaf ears and the delay would continue. Lewis would continue to sit on the bill until June 8th and reported the bill to the Senate floor where the bill would have a lot of measures attached to it. Eventually, after, two more month delay, the bill would be passed.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Constitutional Treasury bill received the least amount of attention from the President because of the current foreign affairs with Mexico and Great Britain. He didn’t think that the bill require all that much and was the least important of all matters taking place at the current time of the country. Polk only made two references in his dairy about the bill, one when it passed the House and another when it passed the Senate.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Playing the Game of Nations**

Joseph Shattan states, “when he assumed office in March 1985, the spirit of ‘Manifest Destiny’ –a phrase coined by John O’Sullivan, editor of the United States Magazine and Democratic Review, to describe the widely-held view that the United States was geographically predestined to expand as far west as the Pacific Coast—was in the air. Jacksonians like Polk were strong believers in Manifest Destiny because they hoped that territorial expansion would ward off twin corruptions of urbanization and industrialization, as well as reinforce America’s commitment to a simple, honest and virtuous agrarian way of life.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

The first challenge to achieving Manifest Destiny was overcoming Great Britain and solving the Oregon Question and Texas Annexation. Texas at this time has not yet accepted Congress’s offer to become part of the Union. Great Britain in the meantime was making their attempt at gaining power over Texas which would give a foothold on the southern flank of the United States. At the same time, the two nations were at a deadlock involving the terms of Oregon Territory.[[26]](#footnote-26) Congress advised Polk to not immediately dispatch his administration to try and influence the annexation of Texas to Texas politicians. They were successful and the annexation of Texas into the Union was December 1845 as the 28th State. The acquisition of Texas is what made the Mexican War possible that would later give the United States the achievement of Manifest Destiny.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the Northwest, Polk refused to accept the deadlock with Great Britain over the Oregon Territory. The British were willing to settle the border dispute at the 42 degree parallel; however, the United States would only settle for the 49degree parallel. The Democrats created a rallying chant, “54 degrees 40’ or Fight,” as they demanded the reoccupation of Oregon. Since these terms were clearly unacceptable to Great Britain it was in the air that the United States was ready to head to war with Great Britain. Polk at the time could not afford to go to war with Great Britain since he was in the same situation with Mexico in the South. Polk then pursued a strategy called “brinkmanship,” which is essentially a maneuver of bluffing in order to achieve a desired result. With the threat of war from the United States, Great Britain decided to agree to the terms of the 49 degree parallel; which is what Polk wanted in the first place.[[28]](#footnote-28)

With the strategic play made by Polk with Great Britain over the Oregon Territory being successful, he made the same attempt with Mexico. The goal of Polk with Mexico is to acquire the land of California from Mexico to open up the nation to the Pacific Coast. Polk sent John Slidell of Louisiana to negotiate the purchase of the territory, including New Mexico, and to agree on the southern border line of Texas. The price offered by the United States was $25 million for California, New Mexico, and placing Texas’s southern border at the Rio Grande River. Polk decided to place the threat of war on the bargaining table in order to ensure the purchase by placing General Zachary Taylor and 4,000 soldiers between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande River. The Mexicans, however, would not even meet with Slidell and refused the offer from the United States. They did something that Polk did not see coming; they did nothing; this put Polk at a deadlock that he could not overcome. Eventually the Mexicans would break and kill several American soldiers giving Polk the option to Declare War on Mexico May 12, 1846. This would result in the United States winning the war and forcing the purchase of the desired territories for $15 million from Mexico.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**Conclusion**

By then end of Polk’s presidency he accomplished everything that he set out to do to reshape the country. Though Polk may not be one of the most popular presidents in U.S. history he is definitely one of the most successful in regards to passing policy and achieving territorial expansion. However, at the end of Polk’s presidency there was still one more promise to be kept. When Polk was elected president he promised that he would serve one term due to the fact that he felt it was fluke he won; he also wanted to avoid alienation of the two candidates that probably should have won.[[30]](#footnote-30) Polk’s friends and enemies in Congress both agreed that he was a force to be reckoned with and to be respected. Historically speaking, he deserves much more credit and attention than history has awarded him.[[31]](#footnote-31)

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1. Fred I. Greenstein, The Policy-Driven Leadership of James K. Polk: Making the Most of a Weak Presidency,” *Presidential Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 2010): 725. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Shattan, “One Term President,” *American Spectator* 29, no 10 (October 1996): 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Greenstein, 725-726. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shattan, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Greenstein, 728. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 730. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 730-731. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 731. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Shattan, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Greenstein, 732. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Paul H. Bergeron, “President Polk and Economic Legislation,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 15, no 40 (Fall 1985): 783. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bergeron, 783. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 783-787. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 788. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Shattan, 33.

    *Also See.* Michael A. Morrison, “Westward the Curse of Empire: Texas Annexation and the American Whig party.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 221-249. This Article gives more of a descriptive explanation of the annexation of Texas. It covers the process and the election value Texas had. It also gives a little explanation of the consequences that came due to the annexation of Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid.

    Also See. Edwin A Miles, “Fifty-Four Forty or Flight: An American Political Legend,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44, no. 2 (September 1957): 291-309. This Gives a lot more background knowledge to the campaign on the British concerning the Oregon Question. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, 34-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Greenstein, 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Bergeron, 794. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)