

# Expansionism, Slavery, and Sectionalism: James K. Polk and American Enlargement under the Fluctuating Forces of Manifest Destiny

**David Fotouhi** College of Arts and Science of Vanderbilt University

*This article explores the relationship between President James K. Polk's progressive ambition in the national electorate and the geographic expansion of the United States, particularly with regard to the social and religious foundations for manifest destiny in the public conscience. The author finds that manifest destiny played a central role in President James K. Polk's successful campaign for the White House as well as his handling of foreign and domestic affairs.*

The United States saw dramatic change during the 1840's. President James K. Polk swept into power as the unanticipated flag bearer for westward expansion at any price. Many Americans at the beginning of the decade agreed that the ideal of expansion was the fate and due course of the nation: a manifest destiny for the country. The official term manifest destiny was coined by John O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, based in New York (Hietala 1997, 50). O'Sullivan wrote that manifest destiny was America's right and duty "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (O'Sullivan in Haynes 2002, 89). This definition is quite ambiguous and does not describe how this policy should be implemented, leaving one to his or her own interpretations and increasing the mantra's versatility and applicability (Haynes 2002, 89-90). This ideology affected not only the sentiments of the public, but also the public's electoral decisions. Many citizens were drawn to believe that the United States had an obligation, ordained by God, to establish an empire (Haynes 2002, 89; Hietala 1997, 50). Manifest destiny played a key role in the election of President James K. Polk as well as in his handling of foreign conflicts and domestic objectives.

With a keen ability to balance the diverse desires of the nation while maintaining his hawkish vision for enlargement, Polk led America southward into Mexico and westward into California and Oregon. Even as his policy's popularity eroded, the tenets of manifest destiny remained the guiding force in Polk's expansionist agenda during his one term in office. Yet these territorial gains came at a price: they brought the sleeping giant of slavery out into the open and further stressed the already existing divisions within the Democratic Party and the nation (Joy 2003, 62-3). The popular and romantic ideal of manifest destiny allowed Polk to forward his vast territorial ambitions and his societal vision for the nation by means of an aggressive expansionist policy under the banner of providence and duty

*Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2006

© Board of Trust of Vanderbilt University

(Bergeron 1987, 110-1). Nonetheless, Polk struggled with compromise, tempering some of his expansionist policies while refusing to budge on others. Though some historians see Polk as an unequivocal hardliner, it was this struggle between strict manifest destiny and policies of compromise which most impacted his administration as well as the nation's future, ultimately failing to quell growing national tensions. Manifest destiny and the ensuing struggle to adapt this ideal into a policy agenda of expansion and compromise shaped the Polk administration more than any issue, leaving many permanent marks on the nation and contributing to the long term causes of the civil war.

Popular sentiment among many groups caused by societal changes winnowed and molded the idea of rapid expansion under manifest destiny. One main factor which resulted in calls for enlarging the nation was rapid population growth during the 1840's. In this one decade alone, the American population increased by more than six million people, from 17,120,000 in 1840 to 23,261,000 in 1850 (Bergeron 1987, 5-6). Another population factor was an influx of new immigrants, which totaled 2.2 million by the end of the decade and helped to trigger a near-doubling of the nation's urban population (Bergeron 1987, 6). With these population stresses as the backdrop, some began to worry that rapid industrialization and urbanization would create a class of landless workers, or "white slavery" (Hietala 1997, 57-8). Anxiety and concerns about unionization and urbanization were echoed by an emerging group of neo-Jeffersonians, those who longed to return to an agrarian society of small farmers in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson. Traditional followers of Jefferson voiced concerns about expansion as late as the Monroe administration. They feared a large nation and felt that an American continental empire would compromise popular sovereignty and lead to a reign of tyranny (Haynes 2002, 91). Yet, by the 1840's, the nation's apprehensions to expansion had eroded and many neo-Jeffersonians from all regions, especially the South, West, and old Northwest, believed that territorial addition was the panacea for O'Sullivan's "yearly multiplying millions," allowing white workers to choose farming over industry and, in the process, providing security from possible foreign encroachment (Hietala 1997, 57-8; Bergeron 1987, 66; Haynes 2002, 89-90). Polk and his idol, fellow Tennessean Andrew Jackson, concurred with these neo-Jeffersonian anxieties and saw expansion as a way to slow these societal changes and stifle the potential emergence of an aristocratic class (Leonard 2001, 24; Bergeron 1987, 66-7; Haynes 2002, 92). Interestingly, this neo-Jeffersonian motivation for expansion did not dominate the minds of the army officers and troops who would carry out the missions of expansion. Their nationalistic desires along with the goal of career security played a far larger role than an intangible agrarian ideal (Watson 1997, 97). Economic and racial concerns were also involved. Some southerners wanted to expand their slave lands and even create a "cotton empire" to rival the British. In their way were "inferior" indigenous peoples holding valuable southern and western lands as well as the ever-present British threat on North American territory (Bergeron 1987, 110; Hietala 1997, 57-8). Finally, the development of the "penny press" allowed Northern newspapers, many of which were strong supporters of territorial enlargement, to spread their views to many more people

than in past decades (Bergeron 1987, 66, 89). All of these factors contributed to the spread of expansionist fever throughout the early and middle 1840's.

Manifest destiny and James K. Polk collided in the election of 1844. While he could have run for a second term, President John Tyler was not trusted by many in his own party. Tyler switched from the Whigs to the Democrats soon after taking office in 1841 and went on to break with his new party on the National Bank controversy (Joy 2003, 63; Bergeron 1987, 17-8). Again an option for the Democrats, 1840 presidential nominee Martin Van Buren had a passive stance on the Texas annexation issue, which did not sit well with many expansionists (Polk, J. K. 1929, 14; Bergeron 1987, 15-8; Joy 2003, 51). Therefore, the "dark horse" candidacy of James K. Polk was not as unexpected as some historians have claimed. At the Democratic Convention in Baltimore, the "new man" approach prevailed after delegates could not decide on either Van Buren, moderate and later Polk cabinet member James Buchanan, or Lewis Cass, a pro-expansion General (Bergeron 1987, 15-6; Leonard 2001, 35). Polk prevailed on the ninth ballot as many Democrats felt the swell of popular support for expansion and refused to choose a moderate for the election.

The general election's main issue was, undoubtedly, expansion in general and Texas specifically (McCormick 1952, 51). The Whig party nominated Henry Clay, who largely dodged the expansion issue on the campaign trail and underestimated the level of southern support in his own party for annexation (Haynes 1997, 138). Nearing the election, Clay admitted that he might support enlargement under certain circumstances. This back-and-forth policy alienated northern, anti-slavery Whigs, some of whom broke party ranks and voted for Liberty Party candidate James G. Birney of Kentucky (Haynes 2002, 63-5; Bergeron 1987, 18). Democrats had hoped to reestablish party unity and cohesiveness by including northwestern ambitions along with Texas expansion in their platform (Haynes 2002, 92-3). The swing state in the election was undoubtedly New York. Birney's presence (which predominantly took votes away from Clay), combined with a flood of immigrants in New York who longed for an old agrarian ideal similar to that of the neo-Jeffersonians, gave Polk the state's 36 electoral votes by a 5,000 vote majority (Haynes 2002, 92). Another tactic of Polk and the Democrats was the slogan "54' 40" or fight," which referred to the goal of obtaining all of British Oregon to the 54<sup>th</sup> parallel. This phrase's inherent northern appeal helped take votes away from Clay in this critical state. Regional conflict also played a role in the election. A multiplicity of other local issues captured voters' attentions, and even surpassed concerns of expansionism in some regions (Haynes 1997, 139). All of these factors produced a single outcome: an expansionist president in the White House who would radically increase the size and scope of the United States.

In his inaugural address in 1845, Polk conveyed to his small audience that the Constitution was "the offspring of concession and compromise" (Polk, J.K. in Polk, W. 2000, 205). While he would follow through on his own personal desires as well as his campaign promise of expansion, Polk was able to accept compromise (sometimes reluctantly) in order to appease the many sides of the expansion issue.

Polk would remain hawkish on expansion even with this ability to give and take, choosing to carry out a multi-front, simultaneous foreign policy of enlargement. Pressures would mount in Texas and Mexico, resulting in a shooting war. At the same time, pressures in Oregon, where Polk and the Congress would compromise on their promise, and in California, where Polk would not allow a compromise, also took center stage. Polk often reasserted the Monroe Doctrine to forward his view that the United States could not tolerate “permitting [further] foreign colonization” of North America (Polk, J. K. 1929, 18; McCormick 1952, 57). Polk’s use of the Monroe Doctrine worked to calm the nation as well as to assert his commitment to an offensive foreign policy.

The first main issue on Polk’s agenda was also the last on Tyler’s. Tyler had pushed the Texas republic to accept statehood, which it finally did on July 4, 1845. This act further strained relations between the United States and Mexico, with hostilities slowly reaching the point of boil-over. Again in his inaugural address, Polk stated:

I regard the question of annexation as belonging exclusively to the United States and Texas. They are independent powers competent to contract, and foreign nations have no right to interfere with them or to take exceptions to their reunion. 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 (Polk, J. K. in Kunhardt, et al. 2003).

Although he was already attempting to win the propaganda war, Polk believed the annexation of Texas to be perfectly legal (Bergeron 1987, 81). Thus, when Mexico refused to meet with American diplomat John Mason Slidell in December, 1845, Polk and his cabinet became furious. They also believed this as ample cause for war (Haynes 2002, 129). By April of 1846, Polk believed that America’s “. . . relations with Mexico had reached a point where we could not stand still but must assert our rights firmly” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 71).

Polk and other Democrats tried to sway public opinion for a conflict by reinforcing the economic benefits of Texas along with exaggerated claims of British designs on the territory and its cotton-producing potential. An economic depression and falling crop prices in the early 1840’s helped sway the public toward Polk’s viewpoint (Merk 1983, 52-3). Southern supporters of expansion hoped to protect American commerce in the Gulf of Mexico as well as to develop a cotton empire utilizing slave labor in the newly settled lands (Douglass in Hietala 1997, 59; Bergeron 1987, 52). This potential cotton-producing juggernaut would force Great Britain and others into a dependency on American cotton, giving the United States a near-monopoly on the crop (Bergeron 1987, 52). When these exaggerated rumors of British designs on Texas surfaced during the final months of the Tyler administration, many southern leaders were alarmed at the threat of a commercial, abolitionist power developing next door. Even worse, the potential existed for a repeat of 1812: the British attempting to intervene in what Polk and the Democrats believed was an American matter. They felt that Texas must be

annexed for the sake of not only the southern economy, but also American national security (Haynes 1997, 117-9, 129). Some northerners favored expansion of slavery into Texas as well. They hoped this plan, in theory, would reduce the number of slaves in the old south and; therefore, minimize the potential northward exodus of African-Americans after the eminent (in their minds) collapse of the slave system (Bergeron 1987, 52). Also, new racist sentiment against emerging Native American, European, and Hispanic mixed-races like mestizos and other indigenous peoples in Mexico and the southwest filled the role for an unworthy and lesser enemy for Americans in search of conquest “allotted by Providence” (Haynes 2002, 101). Democratic Senator John Fairfield of Maine went so far as to say that “the Mexicans are a rascally, perfidious race . . . They are little better than a band of pirates and robbers” (Fairfield in Hietala 1997, 53). This brand of rhetoric and bigotry became the backdrop for the Mexican conflict.

Polk saw the cut off of Mexican diplomatic relations with the United States as a key opportunity to advance soldiers southward, beyond the traditional boundary of the two nations at the banks of the Nueces river (Joy 2003, 64; Bergeron 1987, 63). Polk wrote that “General Taylor shall be instructed that the crossing the Del Norte by a Mexican army in force shall be regarded as an act of war on her part, and in that event . . . not to wait to be attacked but to attack her first” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 5-6). A few months after this order was sent to the front lines, on April 24, 1846, sixteen Americans were killed when Mexican forces crossed the Rio Grande and attacked a patrol unit on the American side of the river. Wasting no time, Polk read his declaration of war to Congress the next day. Yet by encouraging Texans to ignore the Nueces River boundary and by ordering troops into the region around the Rio Grande, Polk was clearly aiming to incite the provocation (Zinn 1995, 147-8). As seen in his diary, Polk desired a conflict with Mexico at this point; he began pushing for war by the middle of April, before word of fighting on the Rio Grande even reached Washington (Polk, J. K. 1929, 83, 87; Bergeron 1987, 75-6). The attack on the patrol unit gave Polk the reason as well as the excuse he needed to declare war. Although he initially attempted to resolve the issue through diplomacy, Mexico, in Polk’s mind, left him with no other option (Polk, J. K. 1929, 87; Polk, W. 2000, 218; Bergeron 1987, 86). Polk seemed to prefer an armed conflict in this case because he believed that more territory could be gained through a more aggressive course of action (Polk, J. K. 1929, 84, 91). This approach concurred with John O’Sullivan and his view of the “spirit of expansionism” and its justification of bold adventures (Bergeron 1987, 65). Polk now had his war, but Texas would be just one front of the American battle for territorial expansion.

As the war progressed and battles became bloodier, the unity behind Polk started to crumble. The country had lost the romantic idealism, excitement and patience that Polk still maintained (Zinn 1995, 149-50). Repeated calls for more troops and more funding for the conflict began to take a toll on northerners in particular (Polk, J. K. 1929, 95). Many started to disagree with the President’s rigid manifest destiny policy concerning Texas and the southwest, which differed from his more compromising stance on the Oregon issue. This growing dissention can be seen by the diary of Colonel

Hitchcock, as he wrote “I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors . . . we have not one particle of right to be here . . . so as to have a pretext for taking California and as much of this country as it chooses” (Hitchcock in Zinn 1995, 149). While Polk’s expeditions were never nationally unpopular, certain sections of the nation did disapprove of some of his policies. The Senate was slow to act on a number of bills concerning the war, leading Polk to write that “. . . there was a great public necessity to have the prompt action of Congress on the Mexican question” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 84). Even with the conflict lasting longer than anticipated, Mexico’s weak and financially destitute government lacked the ability to hold its northern provinces (Leonard 2001, 195). With the controversial Walker Tariff passed to finance the prolonged conflict, Polk decided in late 1846 to re-initiate peace talks with Mexico, hoping that any agreement would hold favorable terms (Morrison 1967, 4). The war continued; startling many Europeans as to the determinedness of the Administration’s manifest destiny policy as well as the possible growth of America as a hemispheric power (Hietala 1985, 206). The British desperately opposed the expansion of America into Texas, fearing the loss of a future source of cotton for their growing empire (Haynes 2002, 107). This escalating conflict with Britain also complicated the American quest for the Pacific Northwest.

Polk eventually began to realize that compromise needed to be reached on the Mexico issue. He attempted to buy a peace with Mexico while maintaining his most desired territorial conquests. Polk’s determination to obtain the greater southwest along with his recurring disagreements with cabinet member James Buchanan can be seen in his diary:

If when we came to make a treaty I found that I could obtain a boundary from the mouth of the Rio Grande west to the Pacific by paying a few millions more for it than the boundary mentioned by Mr. Buchanan, I should certainly make such a treaty. It was very manifest that Mr. Buchanan desired to avoid acquiring any southern territory below the boundary indicated by him. I differed with him in my view, and was sorry to find him entertaining opinions so contracted and sectional (Polk, J. K. 1929, 121-2).

Buchanan was far more moderate than Polk on many issues and frequently disagreed with his policies. Polk was willing to concede some aspirations, as he was forced to keep the “no territory” and the “all of Mexico” Congressional factions in line (McCoy 1960, 163-4). Despite this, many knew that Polk would not accept anything less than the Rio Grande boundary; he could not back down from the policy which elected him in the first place regardless of its diminishing popularity. Here, Polk was able to balance the differing extremes in Congress as well as to slightly temper the idealistic unfeasibility of manifest destiny without losing its desired effects for the nation. Polk seemed to always maintain his hawkish desire for enlargement. For example, he still hoped for Mexican territory southward to the 26<sup>th</sup> parallel as well as all of New Mexico and California, even when he could see that some concessions would be unavoidable (Polk, J. K. 1929, 118).

Polk made his desires for Mexican territory very clear. Though he pushed for a settlement, he wrote in his diary that “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” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 106). Though he would concede his hope for gaining roughly the northern third of modern Mexico, Polk would obtain nearly all of what he sought (Polk, J. K. 1929, 118). In February, 1848, Polk, (pressured by the need to keep Democratic unity high for the upcoming election), and the Mexican government agreed to and signed the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty established the southern Texas border at the Rio Grande in exchange for payment of \$18 million to Mexico (Haynes 2002, 177). Some factional alliances prevented the quick ratification of the treaty in Congress, yet it eventually passed by a 22 vote margin in the Senate (Bergeron 1987, 104-5). Notwithstanding his effective victory in this conflict, critics and historians cite that Polk still promoted a show of force in the Yucatan of Mexico or an attempt to purchase or forcefully seize the island of Cuba in the Caribbean until early 1848 (Hietala 1997, 61). Strict manifest destiny would have encouraged this further enlargement, but Polk eventually backed down, sensing neither the nation nor members of his own party would support such actions, especially in an election year. Along with gaining Texas, the treaty ceded New Mexico and Polk’s prized California to the United States.

Polk’s crusade to gain more territory was simultaneously pushing into the southwest and Californian regions while the battle for Texas raged on. From the early days of his presidency, it was widely known within the administration that Polk desired “the immense value of Upper California” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 307; Bergeron 1987, 72; McCoy 1960, 50). An early mention of California in relation to the Mexican War can be seen in a diary entry: “I stated that if the 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 . . .” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 106). Polk’s idol, Andrew Jackson, attempted to purchase California during his administration, yet he and others failed to accomplish this. Another motive for Polk’s fascination was the potential threat of British commerce. The Hudson’s Bay Company was increasing in scale with each passing day and many officials feared eventual British dominance in the region and reiterated that time was of the essence if the United States was to act on its goals of acquisition (Billington 1960, 569; McCormick 1952, 56). Envoy Thomas O. Larkin added to the fear, exaggerating the merits of the largely unfounded assertion that the British were backing advancing Mexican troops en route to California (Bergeron 1987, 72; Haynes 2002, 112). As early as October of 1845, Polk wrote in his diary about his uncompromising designs on the California as well as the near-hysteria surrounding the prospects of more British involvement in North America:

Great Britain had her eye on that country [California] and intended to possess it if she could, but that the people of the United States would not willingly permit California to pass into the possession of any new colony planted by Great Britain or any foreign monarchy, and that in reasserting Mr. Monroe’s doctrine I had California and the fine bay of San Francisco as much in view as Oregon (Polk, J. K. 1929, 19).

Many expansionists also favored acquiring California and New Mexico for their potential trade capabilities California's ultra-fertile crop lands, and a would-be buffer zone from foreign aggression (Polk, J. K. 1929, 19; Leonard 2001, 193). A door to Asia and the Pacific existed in California, especially by way of the coveted San Francisco harbor (Joy 2003, 53; Bergeron 1987, 66). The majority of the Democratic Party was solidly behind Polk in his quest, as shown by the Democratic *Washington Union* newspaper in 1845, when it wrote, "Let the great measure of annexation to be accomplished . . . the road to California will be open to us. Who will stay the march of our western people . . ." (Zinn 1995, 148). Even though many Whigs began to disagree with the method of expansion by conquest, they still had their eye on the goal of Californian annexation (Zinn 1995, 150).

Polk had anticipated that Mexico would deny any sale of California. He therefore wanted to incite a revolution that would lead to the creation of a new, independent republic. This republic could then ask to be annexed by the United States, in a similar fashion as Texas (Polk, J. K. 1929, 106; Joy 2003, 74-5). As hostilities mounted in Texas near the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers, Polk determined that it was a favorable time to fulfill his vast objectives in the west (Morrison 1967, 3). Led by Fremont's forces, Californian rebels captured the town of Sonoma and established the Bear Flag Republic on July 4, 1846. By mid-January, 1847, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and San Diego had all fallen to American forces, leading Polk to write that he would not accept any treaty that did not turn over New Mexico *and* California to the United States (Polk, J. K. 1929, 106). This aim was fulfilled by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in early 1848, which ended both conflicts with Mexico. This new acquisition of territory in the southwest not only fulfilled Polk's desires of trade and protection, but also foretold a shift in power within the Democratic Party toward the south (Morrison 1967, 14).

While the conflict with Mexico began to intensify in the south and southwest of the growing nation, conflict with Britain over Oregon also preoccupied Polk's agenda. In the hope of gaining more northern votes, the Democrats added the "all of Oregon" agenda to their ambitious platform during the 1844 election (McCoy 1960, 44; Haynes 2002, 117). "Oregon fever" had been spreading throughout the northern states, complete with stories of majestic, unclaimed land (Joy 2003, 51). The main impetus for Polk's designs on Oregon was to give northerners an incentive to support his enlargement policies in return for the administration's acquisition of vast territories in the southwest United States. Even some southerners agreed with "all of Oregon," seeking to bring Texas into the Union as a slave state, offset by Oregon as free territory for northern expansion (Polk, J. K. 1929, 3-4; Joy 2003, 51). Yet, even with their aspiration of northern enlargement and their reluctant confidence in manifest destiny, many Whigs felt that all of Oregon would force the United States into another shooting war with Britain (Haynes 2002, 117-8). Again, in Polk's 1845 inaugural address, he emphasized that the American government owed the new settlers and pioneers protection (McCormick 1952, 57; Billington 1956, 155-6). He also stated frankly that "Our title to the country of Oregon is 'clean and unquestionable' . . ." (Billington 1956, 155; Joy 2003, 109). The President urged Congress to denounce

the Treaty of 1818, which dictated that the United States and Britain should hold Oregon in joint occupancy (McCormick 1952, 57-8).

According to Polk, all desires of Britain in North America should be checked thoroughly (Haynes 2002, 71-2). Despite this, many of Polk's cabinet members as well as members of Congress encouraged him to consider the 49th parallel boundary long before any compromise was agreed upon. As written in his diary, Polk recalled:

. . . Mr. Buchanan remarked that he thought from what he had heard from the members of Congress who had spoken to him, that they would be favorable to a settlement of the question on the parallel of 49 degrees of north latitude . . . Mr. Buchanan expresses the opinion . . . that the country would not justify a war for the country north of 49 degrees . . . (Polk, J. K. 1929, 29).

Polk appeared to remain hawkish on 54'40"; doing otherwise would have raise questions about his regional biases. He wrote in late 1845 that he ". . . was in favour of peace [with Britain,] but at the same time all our just rights must be maintained" (Polk, J. K. 1929, 35). Polk expressed his willingness to engage in an armed conflict after the British initially refused the 49th parallel compromise when he wrote "if we do have war it will not be our fault" (Polk, J. K. 1929, 3). This somewhat stubborn statement shows the degree to which the policy of manifest destiny was engrained in Polk. Yet, with a greater conflict brewing in the south and Congress pressing for a 49th parallel compromise, Polk realized that he could not afford the risks of waging a two-front war for territorial expansion without the backing of Congress.

As tensions mounted, the Polk administration benefited from British domestic concerns such as an economy in recession and conflict over Irish protective tariffs. Many of these preoccupations left British Prime Minister Robert Peel and Lord Aberdeen with little interest in or capability for foreign advancement (Leonard 2001, 195). Along with these domestic concerns, the Hudson's Bay Company had to deal with violent American settlers in the Oregon territory, ultimately choosing to gradually exit the region. These factors resulted in a new offer from Britain: accepting the 49th parallel border to the Pacific while allowing Vancouver Island to remain under British control and permitting only limited access to the Columbia River by the Hudson's Bay Company (Haynes 2002, 133). The struggle officially ended when an official treaty was ratified in June, 1846, with little opposition from either Congress or Polk's cabinet (Morrison 1967, 11-3; Billington 1960, 532; Haynes 2002, 133-5). Many lawmakers sought to avoid another violent conflict, as war with Mexico had been declared just weeks earlier. Buchanan and other officials always seemed ready to accept the 49th parallel as the official border of Oregon, but Polk only showed signs of compromise by the Spring of 1846, when tensions with Mexico were weeks away from war and Britain's government appeared to be favoring a compromise (Polk, J. K. 1929, 24, 29-31, 75, 114-6; Billington 1960, 509). Some northerners and many Democratic "54' 40" men" were incensed over Polk's decision, feeling he favored southern wishes by ceding

Oregon to concentrate on a more pressing conflict with Mexico. Other Democrats accused the administration of flinching in fear of Great Britain (Haynes 2002, 135). As manifest destiny matriculated into reality, such sectional conflict within the growing America increased. Each section of the nation viewed the conflict with Britain differently (Haynes 1997, 140). These growing internal tensions coupled with the repercussions of expansion would undoubtedly lead to further conflict.

As the acquisition of new territory drew to a close, internal conflict over slavery in the states escalated. Southerners were content with ceding Oregon to the north so that they could pursue slave desires in Mexico (Bergeron 1987, 114). Polk continued to insist that “Slavery has no possible connection with the Mexican War, and with making peace with that country” (Polk, J. K. in Polk, W. 2000, 223-5). Yet Polk’s hawkish, goal-oriented view of manifest destiny had split the party regionally. Democratic Senator David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, angered at the Oregon Compromise and other bills which favored the South, proposed the Wilmot Proviso in 1846. The Proviso would have banned slavery in any new territories acquired from Mexico (Morrison 1967, 16-8). Some northerners even tied Polk and other Southern Democrats to a slave conspiracy which aimed at expanding slavery, whatever the costs (Polk, J. K. 1929, 30-1). Polk showed an element of perplexity in his journal entries about the Proviso, writing that “he saw no necessary connection between the two questions [expansion and slavery]; that the settlement of the one was not dependent on the other” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 4). Polk seemingly did not understand why the Congress was taking up the issue of slavery at the expense of his funding requests. The President interpreted the issue as merely a detail which could be dealt with in due course, hoping lawmakers would prioritize the pressing needs of the armed conflict over such philosophical debate. To his goal-oriented and single-minded style of leadership, obtaining the land was priority number one; deciding how to govern it would come later. In 1848, slavery was banned in Oregon territory, but the Proviso failed to do the same in the southwest. The Proviso passed the House of Representatives, but stalled in the Senate and was eventually excluded from the final version of the Senate war funding bill (Polk, J. K. 1929, 189-90; Morrison 1967, 37). Yet, it did stir up anti-slavery sentiment throughout the north and enraged many southerners. The Wilmot Proviso effectively ended the era when slavery issues were kept quiet (Polk, J. K. 1929, 328; Billington 1960, 587-8). Numerous northerners felt that the term manifest destiny itself acted as an excuse for Southern, slave-based causes (Bergeron 1987, 65). Rather than show the common unity of the United States, manifest destiny widened the crevasse between two diverging societies (Haynes 1997, 141).

Not only did expansionism bring the conflict over slavery into the open, but it also swayed the nation away from further conquests. The expansion issue had placed a nearly intolerable strain on the two-party system (Haynes 1997, 140). Party lines were skewed as regional affiliation took precedence. This phenomenon first appeared in the midterm elections of 1846. As support for the conflict in Mexico decreased and with the Oregon compromise angering northerners, many new moderates were sent to Washington. These moderates opposed war to fulfill manifest destiny aims and helped to weaken Polk’s political abilities (Zinn 1995, 156-7; Bergeron 1987, 125). A radical anti-war, anti-slavery, no

territory faction appeared after the midterms, sometimes allying with extreme elements of the Democratic Party to block Polk's foreign policy legislation (Bergeron 1987, 86-7). Polk also had trouble controlling the radical expansionists within his own party. Some Democrats still wanted to expand territorial acquisitions into Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula or purchase Cuba, angering moderates and Whigs (Bergeron 1987, 107). While the Cabinet decided against this secretive plan during the summer of 1848, it showed that Polk's expansionist aims were not waning even in the last months of his administration (Polk, J. K. 1929, 327-8). This discord among different Democratic factions continued straight through the election of 1848, deepening regional and ideological divides within the party in the process.

Polk declined to run for a second term, making good on his 1844 campaign promise. The Democrats nominated Lewis Cass of Michigan, an extreme expansionist who lost the nomination to Polk in 1844. Cass promoted a new idea: "squatter sovereignty," which would allow settlers of new territory to determine whether the region would be slave or free (Polk, J. K. 1929, 325; Morrison 1967, 170). Yet Polk's now-unpopular policies had already done too much damage for Cass to repair in the span of a campaign. Northern Democrats teamed up with anti-slavery "conscience Whigs" and formed the Free Soil Party, which opposed the expansion of slavery. The Free Soil Party nominated former Democrat Martin Van Buren for president in 1848. The Whigs nominated Zachary Taylor, a Mexican War hero with no solid position on many issues, including slavery. Polk strongly disapproved of Taylor's nomination and his later victory, writing in his diary:

Without political information and without experience in civil life, he is wholly unqualified for the station. Having no opinions or judgment of his own . . . he will be compelled to rely upon the designing men of the Federal party . . . and will be made to reverse . . . the whole policy of my administration (Polk, J. K. 1929, 351-2).

The nation had tired of manifest destiny and enlargement at such a high cost. Taylor won the election with help from Van Buren and the Free-Soilers. They deprived enough votes from Cass in New York, again the key swing state, to give the electoral majority to Taylor and the Whigs (Morrison 1967, 171). Even with some expansionist sentiment remaining after Polk left office, no more major territory would be added to America until after the civil war (Leonard 2001, 196, 189). As of 1848, the nation's rapid phase of expansion under the banner of manifest destiny had come to a close.

Yet even with the nation heading in a different direction, James K. Polk's legacy still remained respected. "These great results . . . will be of immeasurable importance in the future progress of our country," stated Polk at his last State of the Union address on December 5, 1848 (Polk, J. K. in Leonard 2001, 189). If Polk had not accomplished his campaign of expansion, the nation today would have only one coast, alienating America from trade and cooperation with Asia and the Pacific. Even though he undoubtedly favored the south in his actions, Polk must be given credit for creating an America similar to the one we know today and attempting to balance regional aspirations. Polk

attempted to tackle these issues when he sensed they threatened the Union, as can be seen when he addressed his cabinet in January, 1849:

I expressed my disapprobation of any further proceedings of the southern members of Congress on the slave question in caucus . . . . I thought it was wholly unjustifiable for Southern members of Congress, when a fair prospect was represented of settling the whole question, to with-hold their cooperation . . . . I put my face alike against southern agitators and Northern fanatics, and should do everything in my power to . . . preserv[e] the Union” (Polk, J. K. in McCoy 1960, 164).

Polk eventually disagreed with both extremes, but especially with the southerners who wanted radical expansion at any cost, even the Union in Polk’s eyes. When asked by Senator Crittenden of Kentucky about his feelings towards further southern expansion, Polk said “I did not desire to acquire a more southern territory that which had indicated because I did not desire . . . the agitation of a question [slavery] which might sever and endanger the Union” (Polk, J. K. 1929, 189-90). Polk would not allow the Union to split, but he did little to quell the root causes of these conflicts. He had always emphasized that the government should look to advance projects in which protection and commerce were the chief considerations; and with manifest destiny, this was accomplished (Hietala 1985, 202).

Though his policies positively affected the nation, they also left much for Polk’s successors to confront. He left the new Whig administration with huge issues concerning slavery in the new territories from Mexico, which he had not resolved (Haynes 2002, 189). Abolitionists unified during his administration with the new objective of limiting the spread of slavery westward. The annexation of Texas was the starting line for the build up to the civil war. Ill-suited compromises like the Wilmot Proviso and the later “Compromise of 1850” fostered sectionalism and further divided the nation and political parties down regional lines (Haynes 1997, 115). Polk’s policies attempted to take most regions into account, but the finished product pleased nearly no one. Southerners wanted more southern expansion and scoffed and resented northern attempts to stifle slavery’s enlargement and, consequently, the south’s economic well-being. Northerners resented Polk’s focus on southern expansion, his avoidance of the slavery question, and the Democrats’ later idea of squatter sovereignty.

These unresolved issues would lead to further conflict. Historians have agreed that Polk “. . . failed to appreciate the socioeconomic changes that had occurred in the nation since 1820 . . .” (Leonard 2001, 189-90). Many of the newly enlarged nation’s flaws were invisible to some of the Democrats and southern Whigs, who had been almost blinded by manifest destiny (Hietala 1985, 213). While one cannot lump Polk in this category, his attempt to balance regional agendas with the extreme idealism of manifest destiny proved marginally successful at best. Another issue arose when it became clear that America could not absorb so many new cultures and residents at once. The added area of the nation made the country more difficult to control as well as further contributing to the sectional divisions within the Union. The method of taking these new territories, ordained by God or not, was cun-

ningly summarized by the *Whig Intelligencer* when it wrote “. . . we take nothing by conquest . . . Thank God!” (Zinn 1995, 166). Without understanding the roots of these long term causes, one cannot truly understand the civil war or even the balance of American history.

The idea of manifest destiny influenced Polk greatly, even as the nation became restless and less idealistic than its leader. Some historians would say Polk did not go far enough in only applying the feasibly rational aspects of manifest destiny, doing so only in favor of his native southern region. While this contains some truth, in the end, Polk had to compromise with himself. He could not fight a two-front war with Mexico and Britain, and retreat from the southern border would have been catastrophic. While he often arrived at compromise in the end, Polk nearly always favored his hard-line approach. Overall, his greatest shortcomings were not his policies, but the stresses placed on the nation because of his policies’ repercussions. While he rhetorically expressed his disdain for extremism, he did not accurately comprehend the link between expansion and slavery (Polk, J. K. 1929 , 4). This inability to understand a potentially explosive problem led to passive inaction instead of corrective policy initiatives. The same can be said about sectional and party differences: Polk knew they existed, but he only moderated his foreign policy instead of actively attempting to address the state of affairs directly. Manifest destiny drove the Polk administration; it propelled it into power and guided its foreign policy. Yet, Polk and others were eventually able to alter the ideal to fit with what they could accomplish. Polk’s legacy should be characterized by not only the vast territory gained under his administration, but also the way in which he was driven by steadfast ideals, while still managing to mold those ideals into a feasible policy. He viewed himself as “the hardest-working man in this country,” attempting to merge his extensive desires of enlargement with more restrained and even more pugnacious viewpoints than his own (Polk, J. K. 1929, 194). As a result, his short and often overlooked one-term administration managed to change the face of the nation and permanently alter the American experience for generations to come.

## References

- Bergeron, Paul. H. 1987. *The presidency of James K. Polk*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Billington, Ray A. 1956. *The Far Western Frontier 1830-1860*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Billington, Ray A. 1960. *Westward Expansion*. Second Edition. New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.
- Haynes, Sam W. 1997. “Anglophobia and the Annexation of Texas: The Quest for National Security.” In *Manifest destiny and empire: American Antebellum expansionism*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Haynes, Sam W. 2002. *James K. Polk and the expansionist impulse*. New York, NY: Longman Press.
- Hietala, Thomas R. 1985. *Manifest design, anxious aggrandizement in late Jacksonian America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Hietala, Thomas R. 1997. "‘This Splendid Juggernaut’: Westward a Nation and Its People." In *Manifest destiny and empire : American Antebellum expansionism*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Joy, Mark S. 2003. *American expansionism 1783-1860 : A manifest destiny?* London: Pearson Education.
- Kunhardt, Philip B. Jr., Kunhardt, Philip B., III, and Kunhardt, Peter W. 2003. The American President Series: James K. Polk. <http://www.americanpresident.org/history/jamespolk/>. (Accessed 27 Sept 2004).
- Leonard, Thomas M. 2001. *James K. Polk : A clear and unquestionable destiny*. Wilmington, DE: S.R. Books.
- McCormick, Robert R. 1952. *The American empire*. Chicago, IL: The Tribune Company.
- McCoy, Charles A. 1960. *Polk and the presidency*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Merk, Frederick. 1983. *Manifest destiny and mission in American history: A reinterpretation*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Morrison, Chaplain W. 1967. *Democratic politics and sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso controversy*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Polk, James K. 1929. *Polk: The diary of a president, 1845 to 1849*, ed. Allan Nevins. London: Longmans, Green and Company.
- Polk, William R. 2000. *Polk's folly*. New York, NY: Double Day.
- Watson, Samuel J. 1997. "The Uncertain Road to Manifest Destiny: Army Officers and the Course of American Territorial Expansionism, 1815-1846." In *Manifest destiny and empire : American Antebellum expansionism*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Zinn, Howard. 1995. *A people's history of the United States, 1492-present*. New York: Harper Perennial.

*David Fotouhi is a third-year student majoring in Political Science and History in the College of Arts and Science and a native of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*