

Handout Week Four: *Before the Storm* Mick Chantler, Instructor

James K. Polk and the Conquest of Mexico

Both Bill Clinton and Joe Montana were known as “The Comeback Kid,” but they had nothing on our 11th president James K. Polk. Early in 1844 it appeared that his political career was over. Before the Democratic National Convention, Polk felt that the best he could hope for was the V.P. slot. But front-runner Martin Van Buren wanted a stronger running mate. Polk was perceived to be a weak candidate for three different reasons: In the 1840 election, while Governor of Tennessee, he had failed to deliver his state to the Democrat Van Buren. Secondly, he had just been defeated in his gubernatorial re-election bid, *for the second time*. Lastly, the leaders of both parties had come out in opposition to the annexation of Texas, while Polk had publicly asserted his approval of that imperial project.

But Polk had what the other Democratic contenders did not have: widespread public backing for the addition of the Lone Star Republic as the 28th state. Polk skillfully cashed in on that sentiment and parlayed that support into winning first the Democratic nomination, and then the general election in the fall, besting the Whig Henry Clay in a close race. He thus became the first “dark horse” to win the White House. Congress quickly annexed Texas, and the stage was set for a bitter showdown with Mexico, which had never recognized the legality of Texan independence. Mexico regarded the annexation as a defiant act of war, and the two nations would soon be spilling each other’s blood.

Polk was a firm adherent of the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny,” the belief that the United States had a right and a duty to seize all of the western lands stretching to the Pacific. Indeed, many political leaders at the time felt that America should take most, if not all, of the entire continent of North America! But above all Polk wanted the Pacific coast, and would achieve this goal by settling the disputed Oregon boundary with England, and then initiating war with Mexico. If the war was morally questionable, in practical terms it was a smashing success. America’s smaller but more efficient army never lost a battle, and at the end of the day the Mexicans were forced to cede vast portions of their country to the Gringos. Yes,

America paid Mexico a sizable indemnity of \$15,000,000 for the lands we took, but the whole business was essentially a shake-down.

The Mexican War was every bit as controversial as the Vietnam conflict. Millions of Americans saw “Jimmy Polk’s War” as an unjustified land grab. Ulysses S. Grant, who saw considerable action in the war, said it was an immoral act of aggression, and confessed that if he had had the moral courage to do so, he would have resigned his officer’s commission. Young congressman Abraham Lincoln bitterly denounced the attack against Mexico, and demanded that the President provide a clear rationale for the invasion, or be considered as guilty as Cain. Congressional Whigs hammered away at Polk over the war, and the President responded by accusing his critics as “traitors.” In January of 1847 the Whig dominated House voted by a margin of 85-81 to censure Polk for having “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally” started the war.

The fight over the legitimacy of the Mexican War took a toll on the President. He left office after just one term, reeling psychologically from the bitter attacks against his policies, and suffering physically from the endless wrangling. He died within three months of leaving office. Although he had accomplished much during his four years in power, “Young Hickory” (as he was called in 1844) left office an old and broken man.