

The Young Hickory

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“By the theory of our Government majorities rule. It is a right to be exercised in subordination to the Constitution. One great object of the Constitution was to restrain majorities from oppressing minorities or encroaching upon their just rights. Minorities have a right to appeal to the Constitution as a shield against such oppression. All citizens are entitled to equal rights and equal protection. No union exists between church and state, and perfect freedom of opinion is guaranteed to all sects and creeds”.

These words, delivered from the Capitol’s East Portico, were spoken by James Knox Polk the 11th President of the United States in his inaugural address on a rainy March 4, 1845. And yet, these lofty words, enshrined in our Constitution, must have rung somewhat hollow to those pure of heart for they did not apply to a significant segment of the population, including slaves and Native Americans. Be that as it may the pomp and splendor of the inauguration, including the 28 cannon salute, were somewhat incongruous with the diminutive appearance and the halting cadence of the newly sworn in President dubbed the “Young Hickory” in deference to his mentor, the “Old Hickory”, Andrew Jackson. The assembled dignitaries, shielded from the rain by a sea of umbrellas, did not expect much from this “dark horse” President. After all, he won the nomination of the Democratic Party as a compromise care taker candidate and the general election after promising to serve only one term. How wrong they were. They did not realize the ambition, resolve and tenacity of the man convinced in his own and the land he was about to lead destined greatness.

Toward the end of his address Polk hinted as to his dream that will define his Presidency in history when he said“...nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert the right of the United States to that portion of territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains”.

Polk was a descendant of Scottish immigrants who came to this country in the 18th century seeking not religious liberty but rather economic fortunes, mostly by speculating in land. Polk’s father Sam was a plantation and slave owner in the Duck River County south of Nashville. James, the eldest of 10 children, was a

sickly lad who suffered from kidney stones for which he underwent surgery that involved slicing through his prostate, an operation that probably left him sterile, perhaps even impotent. After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Polk read law under Felix Grundy a consummate political busy body and a brand name in both Kentucky, where he was the State's Chief Justice, and Tennessee where he also served as a senator. In time Grundy helped the young lawyer secure a position as the recorder of the Tennessee Senate where he learned the ins and outs of legislative craft and maneuvering. According to historians Andrew Jackson facilitated Polk's courtship with Sarah Childress, a descendant of John Knox the Scottish reformer and founder of the Presbyterian Church. Jackson remained a mentor and Polk's confidant, a huge advantage in Polk's political career as he transitioned to an elected political life as US congressman, Governor of Tennessee and eventually as the Presidential candidate. The fondness Jackson felt for his protégé and his wife is perhaps best illustrated by his parting words to Sarah Polk at the end of his Presidency: ...“the scepter shall come back to Tennessee before very long and your own fair self shall be the queen”.

After serving in the Congress for 10 years Polk was elected Speaker of the House in 1835. Sensing that his political ambitions would be better served if he returned to his home state he left Washington and ran for Governor of Tennessee in 1839. He won that race only to lose the governorship in the re-elections of 1841 and again in 1843 to a historically forgotten Whig James C Jones. Polk's failure to hang on to the governor's mansion was mainly due to the panic of 1837 when under the Democrats' watch a land boom went bust as the banks shut down the spigot drying out the mortgage frenzy, which caused the land prices to plummet. Another victim of the economic recession of 1837 was Jackson's successor in the White House President Van Buren, a New York Democrat, who failed in his bid to be re-elected in 1841 losing to the Whig William Henry Harrison.

Permit me to digress for a moment and say a few words about the Democratic and Whig Parties that dominated the political arena leading up to the Presidential election of 1844. The Democrats favored lower tariffs as a protection of the *southern* States' agricultural exports; they promoted Texas annexation and called for a smaller, less intrusive government thus leaving greater latitude to the states to adjudicate the local issues such as slavery. The Whigs, on the other hand, were in favor of higher tariffs as a means of protecting burgeoning industries in the

northern States; they were against territorial expansion fearing dilution of the federal government power and the spread of slavery into the newly acquired territories and they advocated a big and over-reaching government, including a National Bank. On the matter of slavery the Whigs were solidly in the abolitionist camp. The Democrats were divided. The northern Democrats, under the leadership of Martin Van Buren, were abolitionist while the overwhelming majority of southern Democrats, led by Andrew Jackson, had embraced slavery as the bedrock of economic survival.

The Whig convention in Baltimore on May 1, 1844 was an open and shut deal. Henry Clay of Kentucky, one of the founders of the Whig Party and the instigator of the infamous “crooked bargain” that helped elect John Quincy Adams President in 1824 by the US House of Representatives, got the nod by acclamation.

The Democratic Party Convention, also held in Baltimore less than a month later, was a completely different matter. The former President Van Buren was considered favorite *providing* the Convention adhered to the *simple* majority of votes cast. The anti-Van Buren forces, however, resented the “Red Fox’s” opposition to Texas annexation, which they considered as a betrayal of the Democratic Party in general and of Andrew Jackson in particular. In order to thwart Van Buren’s chances they managed to change the Convention rules to require a *two thirds* majority of votes cast. Clearly, this complicated the nomination process as in addition to Van Buren there were five other candidates, all of whom clamored and jostled for the nomination. Alas, after 8 ballots neither candidate received the two thirds majority. Almost imperceptibly the name of James Polk began to be promoted by his Tennessee delegate friends first as a Vice Presidential candidate and as the Convention seemed irretrievably locked ultimately as the candidate for the top spot. Indeed, on the 9th ballot Polk’s candidacy took off as an avalanche in part supported by the still enormously popular Old Hickory and in part due to the fact that he passed what the historians call “Jeffersonian test” of being “capable, honest and faithful to the Constitution”. In order to placate the northern states the Convention nominated for VP George Dallas a former Mayor of Philadelphia.

Polk did not attend the Convention. Before he wrote the acceptance letter Polk was

advised by his supporters to agree to a single term only, as this would raise his credibility as a public servant, rather than as an office seeker eager for the prestige and spoils proffered by the office.

Before facing Clay in the general election, Polk had to contend with the incumbent President Tyler, a defector from the Democratic Party and an opportunist Whig, who ascended to the Presidency after the death of President Harrison. Tyler threatened to launch a third party bid because he was miffed being passed over by both the Whigs and the Democrats. Fortunately, Andrew Jackson convinced Tyler not to run as this would have surely siphoned votes away from Polk and in favor of the much despised Clay.

With 138 elector votes necessary to win the Presidency, the final tally of the Presidential election in November, 1844 was 170 votes for Polk and 105 for Clay. Polk also won the vote plurality, albeit barely so with 49% to Clay's 48%. The remaining 3% of the votes went to the Liberty Party candidate James Birney whose anti-slavery platform took votes away from Clay.

The historians are still mulling over whether Polk was a dark horse candidate who ran a lucky streak or a brilliant strategist who instinctively knew how to harness the political forces swirling around him. He was surely adept at utilizing long nurtured friendships with low political operatives such as his law partner Aaron Brown and fellow Tennesseans Cave Johnson and Gideon Pillow who promoted Polk's name at the Convention, as he was close to the elite at the zenith of his Party. It is indeed remarkable that a two time gubernatorial loser, considered by most as politically vanquished, resurrected his career with a big splash.

At the dawn of 1845 United States was a much smaller country, some 50% smaller compared to today, with its western borders abutting the Rocky Mountains and the Republic of Texas. At the same time America was also a country on the move; the economy was beginning to grow at close to 4%, Samuel Morse's telegraph began to enhance communications and the steam powered trains transported people and goods over an ever expanding net of rails. "America is a country of the future" declared Ralph Waldo Emerson who added "it is a country of beginnings, of projects and vast designs and expectations". These and similar grandiose ideas permeating the consciousness of the young nation were summed up by John

O'Sullivan the New York editor of the *Democratic Review* with the catch phrase *Manifest Destiny*. It was by a stroke of luck that these ideas resonated with the ambitions of the man whose election to the Presidency changed United States' face for posterity and advanced America's role on the global stage.

While the timeline of events unfolding during Polk's presidency may have partially overlapped, for clarity sake I am going to describe them separately. One of the first foreign entanglements facing Polk was the "Oregon Question". Since a treaty between United States and Great Britain in 1818, the Oregon Territory, comprising the present states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho, and parts of Montana and Wyoming, a vast and valuable tract of land, was administered jointly between the two countries. Previous administrations tried to negotiate, admittedly unsuccessfully so, a favorable deal with Great Britain in the attempt to wrest away the control over these territories. Meanwhile, the legendary covered wagon migrations from 1842 to 1844 populated the Oregon territory with US citizens. True to his inaugural assertion that United States has a "clear and unquestionable title to the country of Oregon" Polk increased the rhetoric, to the point of threatening war with Britain. In his pursuit to gain control over the Oregon territory Polk enjoyed the support by the majority of US Senate, with some of the Senators demanding that US should in fact exert control over the entire territory up to the border of Russian Alaska at the 54th parallel; thus the slogan "54, 40 or Fight". After tough negotiations, conducted on behalf of United States by the Secretary of State James Buchanan and for Great Britain by the foreign minister Earl of Aberdeen, the final treaty was completed and ratified by the US Senate in June of 1846. The Treaty established United States jurisdiction over the Oregon territory up to the 49th parallel where it is still today with the exception of the Vancouver Island that was ceded to Britain. This was a significant and timely victory for Polk who was embarking on a vicious war with Mexico and who most certainly tried to avoid warfare on both the northern and southern borders.

What about California and Polk's dream of extending the United States to the Pacific? In 1845, a mere three years before the discovery of gold, a sparsely populated California was an integral part of a sprawling Mexico that reached up to the Oregon Territory. It was inhabited by Native American Tribes and by some four to five thousand Europeans, most of them descendants of the early Spanish settlers who had established a series of missions along the so called Old Spanish

Trail, including one in San Francisco in 1776, the same year when the 13 British colonies across the Continent declared their independence. To be sure, the United States had a Consul in Monterey, the capital of California Alta as it was known at the time, and had dispatched explorers to scout for passable routes to California over the Rockies and Sierra Nevada, the most notable among them John Fremont.

In Oregon the United States had at least a token measure of legitimate claim having administered the territory jointly with Britain and of protecting the US settlers. In California though, the US had no such legal standing of discovery or the patriotic duty of protecting a handful of US citizens. Nevertheless, Polk realized that California being far away from the Mexican heartland and poorly defended was ready for the taking. And so, in the pursuit of his dream, Polk resolutely dispatched Colonel Stephen Kearney with 1600 troops known as the “Army of the West” with the explicit order to occupy the territories that today comprise the states of New Mexico, Arizona and California and establish US civil governance. Kearney left Fort Leavenworth in June of 1846 along the Santa Fe Trail, described by some as 540 miles of “heat, dust and privation”. He reached the Santa Fe Plaza and raised the Stars and Stripes in front of the iconic Governors’ Palace on August 18 without firing a single shot. After leaving a detachment in Santa Fe, the by now to a Brigadier General promoted Kearney and his troops continued on to California. Initially they encountered no resistance. However, as they reached the Indian village of San Pasqual, a short distance from San Diego, the Kearney forces came upon a Mexican battalion that offered fierce resistance. Kearney was wounded, but nevertheless entered San Diego in December of 1846.

In order to bolster Kearney’s mission and to protect California from Britain’s meddling and aspirations Polk directed the US Pacific Navy Squadron, ordinarily moored in Lima, Peru, under the command of Commodore John Sloat, to sail north and occupy Monterey. The US naval forces landed in Monterey on July 7, 1846 and proclaimed US sovereignty. Simultaneously Sloat’s top lieutenant Commander John Montgomery seized San Francisco.

Unrelated to, but coinciding with these events a rag-tag band of US settlers under the leadership of the explorer John Fremont insurrected a few weeks earlier with the initial goal in mind of establishing a new and independent state, the Bear Flag Republic. They occupied Sonoma on June 14, 1846 and continued on to Monterey

only to encounter there the US naval forces by now under the command of Commodore Robert Stockton who was left in charge by Sloat. Jointly Fremont and Stockton proceeded south and took possession of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, again encountering minimal resistance. The Mexican governor of California Jose Maria Castro packed his bags and unceremoniously departed. Meanwhile, Kearney and his men started to ride north toward Los Angeles. And that was it; California was now under the US jurisdiction, lock, stock and barrel. As wars go Polk's conquest of New Mexico and California was but a glorified skirmish.

With the Oregon Question successfully resolved and out of the way and with California under US control, Polk could now focus on the ever increasing belligerent relationship with Mexico in the wake of the Republic of Texas joining the Union. Let us for a moment recall the history of the Lone Star State. After Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821 it claimed the sparsely populated Texas territory that also included New Mexico and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. In the desire to populate the territory Mexico encouraged US immigrants to settle into Texas. In doing so Mexico in fact opened a flood gate. It did not take long for the US immigrants to become a conspicuous majority eager on taking over and declaring independence. The short tempered, vainglorious Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, hell bent to teach Americans a lesson, marched into Texas with his army and besieged American rebels at Alamo in late February of 1836. It was precisely during the siege that Texas declared independence on March 2. Four days later Santa Anna and his troops stormed the Alamo. The Americans, led by Colonel William Barret Travis, fought valiantly but were overwhelmed by the disproportionately larger and more brutal force and perished to the last man. Among the some 200 fallen Americans was Polk's friend, former Tennessee Congressman Dave Crocket. Santa Anna did not stop there. Within three weeks he ordered the execution of over 400 American prisoners held at a garrison at Goliad. Bristling with anger in the wake of these atrocities the American rebels re-grouped under another Tennessee expatriate Sam Huston. Spurred on by the battle cry "Remember the Alamo" the Americans crushed the by now somewhat complacent Santa Anna's army at San Jacinto on April 21, less than 2 months after the disaster at Alamo. Huston, who was elected President of the independent Texas Republic in October of the same year, realized that it would be difficult for Texas to maintain independence with Mexico breathing down its

neck. With this in mind Houston and the Texas legislature were in favor of Texas being annexed by the United States. With his Presidency in the last year of the second term the aging Jackson, as much as he coveted Texas, procrastinated out of fear of a bloody and costly war with Mexico. His anti-annexation successor Van Buren did not help the cause of annexation either. Finally, some 9 years after Texas declared independence the US Congress, after numerous competing resolutions offered by the House and the Senate, brought a joint resolution on March 1, 1845 authorizing the President to accept Texas into the Union. The sitting President Tyler, an ardent proponent of annexation, grabbed his pen and hurriedly signed the executive order of annexation less than 24 hours before Polk's inauguration.

As he stepped into the Presidency, Polk was confident that Mexico would not take the news of Texas joining United States lying down. Indeed, Mexico drew the red line and promised war. In order to protect the newly acquired State Polk dispatched Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to Texas with 4000 troops. Taylor was a rare Whig who did not share his Party's non-expansionist sentiment. He was also a no nonsense military leader who was averse to pomp and ceremony and was known to his troops as the "Old Rough and Ready". Polk did not have to wait long to justify a war with Mexico. In April of 1846 a Mexican army detachment crossed Rio Grande into Texas where it ambushed and killed an American patrol. Taylor notified Washington that hostilities had begun. With the feverish pro war sentiment in the country and in spite of a protracted debate in the Congress as to the articles of war Polk succeeded in convincing the Congress to acquiesce to his declaration of war. Considering the distances between the Commander in Chief and his generals in the field, requiring weeks for dispatches to reach their destination, prosecuting the war was a tactical nightmare.

The war strategy conceived by Polk consisted of a 2 front attack. First, Polk directed Zachary Taylor to advance with his troops to the south. After winning battles at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma a few miles north of Rio Grande Taylor crossed the river and continued to be victorious in successive battles leading to the capture of Monterey a strategically important regional city in north-east Mexico where he encamped in compliance with Polk's explicit orders.

The second prong of attack came from the east when Polk ordered the wizened General Winfield Scott, nick-named “Old Fuss and Feathers” because of his proclivity for pomp and ceremony, with 12000 men to cross the Gulf in a navy armada and place the military port of Vera Cruz under siege and proceed from there to Mexico City. Scott accomplished the task after hard fought battles at places with such unfamiliar names, though well known to military historians, as Cero Gordo, Contreras and Pedregal along the same route taken by Cortes in 1519. The bloodiest battle of the war, however, was at Chapultepec, a Mexican fortress and military academy on a rocky outcrop to the west of Mexico City. In spite of the valiant stand by Mexican cadets, commemorated by Mexico to this day, Scott’s troops prevailed and unfurled the Stars and Stripes over the vanquished Mexican capital on September 14, 1847.

By the end of two years of warfare Mexico sued for peace that was signed at Guadalupe – Hidalgo just north of Mexico City on February 2, 1848. The peace accord was preceded by a volatile debate in the US Congress, in particular in regard to the extension of slavery into the newly acquired territories. Worth mentioning was the proposal by a young and obscure Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot who proposed a resolution, known today as the Wilmot Proviso that stipulated barring slavery from lands acquired from Mexico through a peace treaty. In order to placate both the southern pro slavery and the northern anti-slavery states Polk favored the Wilmot proviso for the newly acquired territories north of the Missouri compromise line, the 36th parallel, giving the territories south of that line a choice on the question of slavery.

Considering that there was no unanimous acceptance of the peace treaty in the Senate, with some of the Democrats wanting a bigger chunk of Mexico and with the others opposing any territorial acquisition, Polk was fortunate that the peace treaty squeaked through to ratification on March 10, 1848 with only 4 votes clearing the required two third majority. The treaty included a payment of 15 million dollars to Mexico as restitution for the lost territories. At the end of the war United States doubled its size by gaining territories that today comprise the states of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. And so, the President’s dream of extending the United States to the Pacific became a quantum leap reality. The treaty established the border between the US and Mexico that it is today, save for an additional swath of land, known as

the Gadsden Purchase, comprising the southern most parts of New Mexico and Arizona that were purchased from Mexico for 10 million dollars in 1854 under Franklin Pierce Presidency. United States occupied Mexico City till June 19, 1848, when the Stars and Stripes were lowered and the Mexican eagle raised once again, albeit as a symbol of sovereignty over a much truncated Mexico.

On the domestic front Polk kept his word and rescinded the high tariffs of the previous administration. He kept in place, though, protective tariffs for a select number of industries in order to appease northern Democrats. Polk also established an independent treasury that continued to operate until the passage of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. And so, Polk's ambitions and goals that he had set before him as he stepped into the White House were realized in a short period of time during a single term presidency. This in and of itself was a remarkable achievement.

As President, Polk doggedly pursued his agenda always utterly convinced in the infallibility of his judgment. This character trait allowed him to brush aside without hesitation or self-doubt hurdles placed in his way and insults thrown at him. With a proclivity to micromanage and unwilling to delegate Polk shared his initiatives with his Cabinet, more to seek consent than to ask for advice. Polk's day in and day out hold on the levers of government kept him in Washington throughout his Presidency. The Mexican war was a physically and emotionally taxing endeavor on Polk who toward the end of his presidency frequently ailed. A continuous stream of office seekers and an assortment of other supplicants who, much to Sarah's dismay had free entry to the White House also contributed to Polk's exasperation and exhaustion. Moreover, during the war Polk had to contend with a number of obstacles and intrigues directed at him not only by his Whig opponents who lambasted him daily in their official newspaper *The Intelligencer*, but also from within the ranks of his own Democratic Party. The Democratic Party mouthpiece, the *Washington Globe* whose publisher Francis Blair was a supporter of Polk's nemesis the former President Van Buren, also featured editorials and cartoons that were scathingly critical of Polk's war initiatives. Perhaps the most notable intrigue Polk had to unravel was when his best friend Gideon Pillow, described by some as "a man of vanity, conceit and want of truth", who held a commission as a brigadier general under Scott, falsely embellished his own role and deprecated Scott's leadership in prosecuting the war. He even had the temerity

to accuse his superior of offering bribe to Santa Ana as an inducement toward ending the war. Scott, who was held in high esteem, Duke of Wellington called him “the greatest living soldier”, was naturally outraged and ordered Pillow court-martialed. Polk, who never warmed up to Scott, stood by his friend and downgraded Scott’s order to a court of inquiry. Scott was recalled and faced a court of inquiry himself.

The social life during Polk’s Presidency was influenced by Sarah’s strict Presbyterian faith. She banned music and dancing during social events in the White House and all social events on Saturdays, the day for prayer. The White House entertainment consisted, therefore, mostly of quiet candle light dinners and theme oriented discussions. Sarah was variously described as “endowed by regal stateliness and yet very affable and perfectly self-possessed”. Before moving into the White House Sarah Polk famously said that she would “neither keep house nor make butter”. Indeed, she was known to be actively involved in her husband’s work counseling the President and helping him write his speeches.

True to his word not to run for re-election Polk returned to Nashville where he intended to resume his law practice. Unfortunately, his post-presidency life was cut short when he fell ill with cholera to which he succumbed at the age of 53 only four months after stepping down from the political arena in Washington. In his will he stipulated that his slaves be freed after the death of his wife. As it turned out, Sarah lived to a ripe age of 88 only to witness the freedom for her slaves in the wake of the emancipation proclamation of 1863 and the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865. James and Sarah Polk had no children.

Who was James Polk and how should we judge his legacy? Was he a repugnant slave holder who paid only lip service to the sacred words of the Constitution, which he used liberally in his inaugural speech, while embracing the vile institution of slavery? Was he a statesman who used the carrot of diplomacy as deftly as the stick of the United States military might, or was he a partisan politician who knew how to navigate the corridors of power? Was he an imperialist who waged an unjust war of conquest of other nations’ lands or was he an American patriot whose legacy is the grand country we live in today that extends “from sea to shiny sea”? To be sure, as the Mexican war dragged on and the number of casualties increased the initial pro war public sentiment gradually

cooled off. It is estimated that twelve thousand Americans perished during the war albeit mostly from diseases such as cholera and dysentery. A number of prominent Americans at the time, including the young Congressman Abraham Lincoln, the poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell and the naturalist Henry David Thoreau opposed the “Polk War”, as it was called in the press, on the grounds that it was overstated and unjust. This may be true, at least in part, as far as claiming California is concerned, but not in regard to Texas since Polk acted in the national interest after Mexico initiated hostilities. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, not one of Polk’s detractors who consider his territorial acquisitions as an egregious travesty of international justice has yet to suggest rectifying the said injustice by reversing the United States borders to the *status quo ante bellum*.

As for slavery, surely the most despicable sin against humanity, Polk deserves our unqualified condemnation. From a historical perspective though, Polk should be judged against the backdrop of the times he lived in. To that end it should be noted that 41 of the 57 signatories of the Declaration of Independence and 25 of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, among them Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and George Washington, owned slaves. It has also been suggested that Polk’s Presidency placed the regional division between the abolitionist North and the pro slavery South in sharper focus threatening the preservation of the Union. This incendiary focus flickered unresolved under the subsequent less than mediocre administrations of Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and the hapless James Buchanan only to burst into flames and be extinguished in the name of humanity under the leadership genius of Abraham Lincoln.

You may justifiably ask how come that a brain surgeon and far less than an amateur historian, oh yes, and an immigrant to boot, dares to pass judgment on one of the holders of the highest office in the land. You are probably right. Nevertheless, I shall take the liberty of concluding that Polk’s Presidency was probably one of the most influential in determining the course of US history.

Thank you.

Notes

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