

MET HIS EVERY GOAL?

**JAMES K. POLK
AND THE LEGENDS OF MANIFEST DESTINY**

Tom Chaffin

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There are few in this day, even of those who condemn
the methods of Polk, that would be willing to see his
work undone.

—George Pierce Garrison, 1906

In four short years he met his every goal.

—from song “James K. Polk” by recording
artists *They Might Be Giants*

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TRACES OF THE DARK HORSE

“I took the chair in the Senate at 12 o’clock. The President’s Message was at once announced, and it’s reading begun. It was insufferably long, and some of its topics, a dissertation on the American system and one on the Veto Power especially, were almost ludicrous from their being misplaced & prolix. Still the tableau of national prosperity & progress is very striking.”

Vice President George M. Dallas, Dec. 5, 1848

James K. Polk was in life, and remains in historical memory, an austere figure. He never possessed the leading-man allure of the likes of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, the Roosevelts, Kennedy, and Reagan. He’s never been auditioned for Mount Rushmore. But what Polk accomplished during his single-term presidency (1845–49) was, for good or ill, astonishing: Negotiating with Great Britain, he won for the United States today’s Pacific Northwest. And waging war against Mexico, he secured U.S. title to Texas and obtained California and most of today’s American Southwest. Put another way, Polk gave his nation its modern coast-to-coast breadth, thus rendering it truly a continental nation-state. And that status, as a continental nation-state has shaped—and to this day, shapes—much of America’s role as a world power. Journalist Robert D. Kaplan, a

scholar of the ways in which geography shapes world history, accords to America's continental breadth a determinative role in shaping much of its modern history.

It is geography that has helped sustain America's prosperity and which may be ultimately responsible for America's pan-humanistic altruism. . . . The militarism and pragmatism of continental Europe through the mid-twentieth century, to which the Americans always felt superior, was the result of geography, not character. Competing states and empires adjoined one another on a crowded continent. European nations could never withdraw across an ocean in the event of a military miscalculation. . . . It wasn't only two oceans that gave Americans the luxury of their idealism, it was also that these two oceans gave America direct access to the two principal arteries of politics and commerce in the world: Europe across the Atlantic and East Asia across the Pacific, with the riches of the American continent lying between them.¹

Arguably, more than any other individual in American history, James K. Polk bears responsibility for shaping the boundaries of the continental United States—and thus creating the geographical circumstances that enabled its later emergence as a world power. By now, those American boundaries have become so familiar, so accepted, so enshrined on maps, that it's difficult to imagine a time when they were still in flux, subject to fierce debates, and lacking the universal acceptance they now enjoy.

Even so, in their day, President Polk's territorial initiatives triggered corrosive exchanges. When he began his presidency, the vast Oregon Country—reaching from today's state of Oregon north into today's British Columbia—had been, since 1818, under “joint occupation” by the United States and the United Kingdom.² Texas, at the time Polk assumed office, was still claimed by Mexico, as was Mexico's departments of California—called Alta California by Mexican officials—and New Mexico, the latter a vaguely defined realm that included all of today's state of New Mexico and much of the rest of the Lower 48's Southwest.³ In four years, Polk, through negotiations with the United Kingdom, acquired sole title to the southern half of the Oregon Country; and through war with Mexico, he secured U.S. title to Texas, California, and the vast province of New Mexico.

An irony, however, generally unremarked upon, then and now, attended those acquisitions and the waning of debates over Polk's attainment of them. Over the coming years, as the new boundaries found their way onto maps, controversies over how they came to be and where they ran evaporated like water in the Death Valley sink.

Thirteen years after Polk's actions, the United States fought a civil war over how to fill the new lands and, more broadly, over slavery's future throughout the nation. But during Polk's day and since, no American politician, liberal or conservative, with serious hopes of winning an election, has suggested returning California and New Mexico to Mexico or the southern portion of the Oregon Country—modern America's Pacific Northwest—to the United Kingdom. As historian George Pierce Garrison observed in

1906, half a century after Polk left the presidency, “There are few in this day, even of those who condemn the methods of Polk, that would be willing to see his work undone.”³⁴

Then again, while debates over the breadth of Polk’s acquisitions died long ago, disputes that surrounded other aspects of his presidency never entirely disappeared; perhaps, due to recent tribulations, they have even gained renewed force. In legacy if not in name, Polk still weighs upon us. By the terms of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which concluded the Mexican War, California and other western realms became U.S. territory; and Mexican citizens living in the annexed lands who chose to remain within those realms were guaranteed the full rights of U.S. citizenship. Against that background, the response of public officials, in 1998, to the sesquicentennial of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo underscored the still combustible properties of the treaty’s—and by implication Polk’s—legacies.

Public officials on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line routinely, and often boisterously, mark anniversaries associated with the American Civil War. But as 1998 approached, officials in California, New Mexico, and other western climes that had entered the Union as part of the 1848 Mexican Cession deemed the treaty—and by implication Polk’s legacy—too divisive for public celebration. For the most part, they let the anniversary pass without fanfare.

In March 1998, weeks after that sesquicentennial, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Frank del Olmo noted the silence, official and otherwise, that had attended the treaty’s anniversary. He also described the pact’s often troublesome