James Knox Polk Essay, Research Paper

James Knox Polk, (1795-1849), 11th President of the United States, he was one of the hardest-working presidents in American history, Polk was unusually successful in accomplishing in a single four-year term his ambitious goals in both domestic and foreign policy. The vigor with which he pushed the annexation of Texas, the settlement of the territorial dispute with Britain over Oregon, and the conquest of the Southwest through war with Mexico extended the territory of the United States to the Pacific and greatly strengthened presidential power.

Early Life

Polk was born on a farm in Mecklenburg county, N. C., on Nov. 2, 1795, the oldest of the ten children of Samuel and Jane Knox Polk. The Polks had moved from Pennsylvania a generation earlier, among the first pioneer settlers in that part of North Carolina. James’ great-uncle Thomas Polk was the most prominent leader in the community. His maternal grandfather, James Knox, was a farmer and blacksmith who had distinguished himself in the American Army during the Revolutionary War.

Through Uncle Thomas Polk, Polk’s father had benefited from a vast land speculation by which political insiders in North Carolina obtained claims on most of the good lands in what became the state of Tennessee. In 1806, Polk’s family moved to some of these lands on the Tennessee frontier, settling near the new town of Columbia in what later became Maury county.

James Polk was not a promising youth, being too sickly for frontier occupations and too poorly educated for a professional career. When he was 16, however, the celebrated Kentucky surgeon Dr. Ephraim McDowell operated on him successfully for gallstone. Returning health brought a rush of energy and ambition. A year at a nearby academy and another year at a more renowned one at Murfreesboro prepared him for the University of North Carolina, from which he graduated at the head of his class in 1818.

Entry into Politics

The Tennessee to which Polk returned was in the middle of the economic boom that followed the War of 1812, and opportunities seemed bright for ambitious young men. Polk went to Nashville to read law with the prominent criminal lawyer Felix Grundy. While he was there the Panic of 1819 plunged the state into unprecedented economic distress. As people cried out for relief from the hard times, a new style of politics developed, with Grundy emerging as the prototype of the politician who rises to power by championing, or seeming to champion, the cause of the distressed. So Polk learned politics as well as law from the best teacher he could have found.

In 1819, Grundy helped Polk secure the clerkship of the state Senate, which he held until his election to the lower house of the legislature in 1823. Meanwhile, having been admitted to the bar in 1820, he had been practicing law in Columbia. On Jan. 1, 1824, he married Sarah Childress, the daughter of a prominent family in Murfreesboro, where the legislature met. They had no children.

As a member of the legislature Polk took sides against the previously dominant faction of Tennessee politicians with whom his family had been allied. Supporting the policies of the popular reforming governor William Carroll, he emerged despite his youth as the legislative leader of the opponents of the land speculators and the bankers. But he broke with Carroll to support the presidential ambitions of Tennessee’s even more popular military hero, Gen. Andrew Jackson, a longtime friend of the Polk family. This was easier because Jackson, too, had come to question the land speculations and banking activities of his former political associates.

Member of Congress

In 1825, Polk entered the U.S. House of Represenatives. He held his seat in Congress for 14 years with only occasional challenges. Jackson had gotten more votes in 1824 than the other three candidates in the presidential election, but he had not won a majority, and the House of Representatives had passed over him to choose John Quincy Adams as president. Polk went to Washington with the paramount purpose of helping Jackson win the presidency in 1828. Increasingly trusted by Jackson himself, the young congressman played a large part in the four-year campaign that finally installed Jackson in the White House in 1829.

During Jackson’s first term his prot?g? Polk became a prominent administration spokesman in the House against internal-improvement projects and for tariff reduction. Polk’s Jeffersonian ideology of states’ rights and limited government made him originally sympathetic to the doctrine of nullification that John C. Calhoun developed to oppose high protective tariffs. But when Jackson broke with Calhoun, Polk pulled back in time to retain the president’s confidence.

Polk’s chance for greater prominence came in 1832 when Jackson vetoed the bill rechartering the Second Bank of the United States. As chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and chief administration leader in the House, Polk beat back the desperate efforts of the supporters of the Bank to reverse administration policy and secure recharter. His reward was election as speaker of the House in 1835, just as Congress entered one of the stormiest periods of its history. Polk’s skill and composure enabled Congress to ride out the furious debates whipped up by the abolition question and by an inflamed partisanship.

Meanwhile many of Jackson’s former supporters in Tennessee, led by Congressman John Bell, were breaking away from Jackson’s Democratic party. They were supporting Tennessee’s favorite son Hugh Lawson White, a Whig, for president in 1836 against Jackson’s choice, Vice President Martin Van Buren. Polk’s efforts to organize the state for Jackson’s candidate failed to keep Tennessee in the Democratic column, although Van Buren did win the presidency.

In 1839, Polk gave up the speakership to run for governor in an effort to bring Old Hickory’s state back into the Democratic fold. After a strenuous campaign, he eked out a narrow majority. As a reward he sought the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 1840, but was turned down by the national convention. In 1841 and again in 1843 he was narrowly defeated for a second term as governor.

Presidential Candidate

Despite these successive defeats, Polk was a strong contender for the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 1844. He was one of the few political leaders trusted by both the pro-Van Buren and anti-Van Buren factions in the bitter battle for control of the party. A letter by Van Buren opposing the immediate annexation of Texas enabled the anti-Van Buren delegates to block his presidential nomination. The deadlocked national convention turned to Polk on the ninth ballot. Thus Polk became the first “dark horse” presidential nominee in U. S. history.

Texas was the great issue in the campaign of 1844. Henry Clay, the Whig candidate, opposed annexation, while Polk and the Democrats demanded immediate annexation. Where Clay lost votes by his awkward efforts to straddle the Texas issue, Polk astutely adopted a sufficiently conciliatory position on the tariff issue to keep his party together. An antislavery candidate drew enough votes away from Clay in New York to give Polk that state by a small majority, and with it the election by a razor-thin margin. Polk received 1,339,368 popular votes to 1,300,687 for Clay, and he won 170 electoral votes to 105 for Clay.

The Presidency

The “dark horse” then proceeded to become one of the strongest and most successful presidents of the 19th century. In the domestic sphere, Polk drove Congress into legislating all the major aims of the Democratic Party–restoring the independent treasury system, sharply checking federal appropriations for internal improvements, and reducing the tariff substantially.

The Oregon Crisis

Polk’s biggest problems, however, were diplomatic and military. Both in the campaign and in his inaugural address he endorsed the Democratic assertion of the U. S. claim against Britain to the whole of the Oregon country. Though Polk was ready to compromise, he seized on a British misstep to adopt an aggressive stance that eventually persuaded Britain to avoid war. Britain fell back from its insistence on a Columbia River boundary and accepted a compromise boundary along the 49th parallel, which the United States had long been willing to accept.

War with Mexico

The Oregon crisis was especially ominous because it coincided with a threat of war with Mexico. Mexicans were incensed by the U. S. annexation of Texas, which they considered a rebellious province of Mexico. Polk, who hoped to force Mexico to cede California to the United States, sent an army to guard the Texas-Mexican border, which he claimed to be the Rio Grande, more than 100 miles beyond the traditional boundary. At the same time he threatened the Mexicans with war unless they paid some large and ill-founded claims by U. S. citizens against the Mexican government, suggesting that Mexico could satisfy the claims by ceding New Mexico and California to the United States. When the Mexicans refused to submit to this browbeating, Polk ordered his army to the Rio Grande. After the U. S. soldiers trained their guns on the Mexican town of Matamoras, a skirmish soon occurred between Mexican and U. S. troops. Polk claimed that American blood had been shed, and at his urging, Congress declared war.

Polk supervised every detail of the military campaigns against Mexico. He got along badly with his field commanders, Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, but he shares with them the credit for the brilliant showing of the U. S. armies. When the Mexicans were finally beaten into submission, Polk resisted demands for annexing all Mexico and hastened to accept a treaty giving the United States all the territory he had originally wanted. California was the most valuable acquisition, and in December 1848, Polk announced that gold had been discovered there.

Political Attitudes

Throughout his career Polk displayed a dogged devotion to old-fashioned Jeffersonian principles, but he was not an imaginative statesman and could not inspire strong devotion or–given his pronounced streak of deviousness–even trust. To an impressive degree his political and administrative skill got him what he wanted in the areas of domestic, diplomatic, and military policy. Yet as leader of the Democratic party he did little to halt the factional infighting that paved the way for the Whig triumph of 1848 and the sectional crisis of 1849-1850. During the latter part of his term he did struggle manfully to resolve the dangerously divisive dispute over slavery in the territories. But his insensitivity to the moral dimensions of the slavery question made it impossible for him to understand the antislavery impulse, and it is doubtful whether even a political genius could have settled the question.

Death

Probably no president ever worked harder at his job than Polk, and by the end of his term he was near collapse. Settling into a quiet retirement in Nashville, he fell ill only three months after leaving office and died there on June 15, 1849.