James Polk Essay, Research Paper

James Polk: Young Hickory and Dark-Horse 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 a blacksmith who had distinguished himself in the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War. Through his great-uncle Thomas Polk, Polk’s father had benefitted from vast land speculations by which political insiders in North Carolina obtained claims on most of the good lands in what became the state of Tennessee.[1] 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, at this time, developed severe gallstones that were surgically removed in a risky procedure then. Without the benefit of modern technology, sterilization, or anesthesia, the celebrated Kentucky surgeon Dr. Ephraim McDowell operated on him successfully removing the gallstones. He returned healthy that brought a rush of energy and ambition.[2] This rush entices Polk to enrolled at a nearby Presbyterian academy for a year in Columbia and another year at a more renowned educational institution at Murfreesboro. At the age of twenty, he successfully passed the entrance requirements for the second-year class of the University of North Carolina. He was “correct, punctual, and industrious,” and as a graduating senior in 1818 he was the Latin salutatorian of his class–the preeminent scholar in both the classics and mathematics. After graduation he returned to Tennessee and began to practice law in Nashville. His interest in politics, which had fascinated him even as a young boy, was encouraged by his association with the prominent criminal lawyer, Felix Grundy. The Panic of 1819 plunged the state into unprecedented economic distress while Polk was in Nashville. 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. Polk began to learned politics as well as law, like an apprentice, from Grundy.[3] Because he was a confirmed Democrat, an unfailing supporter of Andrew Jackson, and his style of political oratory became so popular characterized as the “Napoleon of the stump,” his political career was assured. Grundy, in 1819, helped Polk secure the clerkship in the state Senate. Meanwhile, having been admitted to the bar in 1820, he had been practicing law in Nashville and Columbia. Polk attained his first political post in 1823, winning election to the Tennessee House of Representatives.[4] His wife furthered his rapid rise to political power, Sara Childress Polk, whom he married Jan. 1, 1824, while serving in the state house of representatives from 1823-1825.(Smith) They had no children. The social prominence of her family and her personal charm were distinct assets for a politically ambitious lawyer. As an official hostess she won the admiration and esteem of the leading figures of the day, and for twenty-five years she was her husband’s close companion in state and national politics. 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. Nevertheless, 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.(Smith) This was easier because Jackson, too, had come to question the land speculations and banking activities of his former political associates. In 1825, Polk entered the U.S. House of Representatives. He held his seat in Congress for fourteen years with only occasional challenges. Jackson recieved more votes than any of the three candidates in the 1824 Presidential Election, but he did not win majority electoral votes, allowing the House of Representatives to choose John Quincy Adams as president.[5] Polk went to Washington with the paramount purpose of helping Jackson win the 1828 presidency. By Jackson increasely trusting Polk, the young congressman played a large part in the four-year campaign that finally installed Jackson in the White House in 1829 as President of the United States.[6] During Jackson’s first term his prot g , “Young Hickory” 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, however, for greater prominence came in 1832.[7] 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 the speaker of the House in 1835.[8] 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 former Jackson’s 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. Polk, in 1839, gave up the speakership to run for governor trying 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 of Tennessee. Polk’s nomination as the Democratic candidate for president in 1844 was unsought by him, instead ventured into the Democratic vice-presidential nomination, for the party had more prominent sons in Martin Van Buren, Lewis Cass, and James Buchanan.[9] 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 with 233 votes.[10] Thus, Polk became the first “dark horse” presidential nominee in U. S. history.

It was thought that Polk, as a party man from what was then the West, and a former member of the House of Representatives, would cause legislative and executive cooperation and understanding in the functioning of the national government. While the speaker of the House he had decided many procedural questions and had usually been sustained by majorities composed of the leaders of both parties.[11] His party feeling was intense, but his integrity was unquestioned; he knew the rights and privileges of the House, and he also knew its responsibilities. The 1844 campaign centered upon the annexation of Texas and the re-occupation of Oregon. Conflict over the issue of slavery continued to strain the politics of the nation and directly affected the 1844 election. A national feeling of “Manifest Destiny,” the belief that the United States should span the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, also spurred political debate. The territory now known as Texas was part of a disputed boundary between the United States and Mexico in 1844. The issue of annexing Texas raised not only the question of war with Mexico, but also the issue of whether Texas would be a free state or slave state. Both the United States and Great Britain claimed the Oregon Territory. Polk’s campaign slogan of “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!” refers to the latitude coordinates of the disputed territory.(Bergeron, 168) Polk endorsed both the annexation of Texas and American control of the entire Oregon Territory. Polk also promised if elected not to seek a second term. A third candidate, James G. Birney, ran in the 1844 election extensively as an abolitionist. Birney’s presence in the election captured votes that Henry Clay needed in the state of New York. Henry Clay was the Whig candidate who opposed the annexation. In the election, Polk received 1,339,368 popular votes and 170 electoral votes to 1,300,687 and 105 for Clay and the rest for Birney.(Bergeron, 179) James Polk becomes the eleventh president of the United States in 1844. The “dark horse” then proceeded to become one of the strongest and most successful presidents of the 19th century. In office he displayed remarkable skill in the selection and control of his official advisors, and in his formal relations with Congress his legislative experience served him well. 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.(Morrel, 210) Polk’s biggest problems, however, were diplomatic policies and the military.[12] 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 sent his Secretary of State, James Buchanan, to seize on a British misstep to adopt an aggressive stance that eventually persuaded Britain to avoid war.(Jones, 140) 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. However, the Oregon crisis was especially ominous because it coincided with a threat of war with Mexico. The U. S. annexation of Texas incensed the Mexicans, which they considered a rebellious province of Mexico. President Polk sent John Slidell on a secret mission to Mexico City for negotiation on the following: dispute with the Texas borders, settle the U.S. claims against Mexico, and purchase New Mexico and California for up to $30,000,000.(Jones, 152-53) Mexican officials, aware before Slidell’s intention of dismembering their country, refused to receive him. 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. military.(Winders, 174) When the Mexicans were finally beaten into submission, the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico ended the Mexican War in 1848. It was signed at Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo, which is a northern part of Mexico City. The treaty drew the boundary between the United States and Mexico at the Rio Grande and the Gila River; for a payment of $15,000,000 the United States received more than 525,000 square miles (1,360,000 square km) of land (now Arizona, California, western Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah) from Mexico and in return agreed to settle the more than $3,000,000 in claims made by U.S. citizens against Mexico.(Jones, 159-61) In summary of James K. Polk’s presidency, the United States attained the desire of Manifest Destiny. The nation now controlled the land between the two oceans. To an impressive degree, his political and administrative skill got him what he wanted in the areas of domestic, diplomatic, and military policy. The states of Texas, Iowa, and Wisconsin were admitted to the Union during Polk’s term of office. It was also under Polk’s presidency that the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland was established. The issue of slavery, especially in the newly acquired lands, continued to haunt the country, and Polk’s administration did little to soothe the turmoil. 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.