

“To Supervise the Whole Operations of the Government”:
The War Leadership of James K. Polk

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Abstract

Although U.S. President James Knox Polk (1845-1849), in his capacity as commander in chief, led in many instances imprudently and inefficiently, he was not only the first president to take his country to new lands, but to bring the powers of the executive branch to a whole new level in the Mexican War, setting a precedent that would eventually lead to the modern presidential war making powers. Polk's invaluable diary conveys his work ethic, relationship with his military commanders, character flaws, and deficiencies as a wartime president. It demonstrates how his work regimen as well as his narrow mind proved detrimental, if not fatal, to his health. It reveals his obstinacy and his tendency to micromanage. Polk's naiveté in assuming that the war would be short is explored, too. The troubled relationship between him and Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott is rendered in the broader context of the ideological difference between the Democratic Party and the Whigs, many of whom were career army officers, concerning a professional standing army.

“To Supervise the Whole Operations of the Government”:
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According to the Constitution of the United States, “The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several States, when called into the service of the United States.”¹ However, it does not specify the boundaries of this capacity, except to state that only Congress has the power to declare war. James Madison, the first U.S. President whose administration had to wage a major war, largely deferred to Congress. For President James Knox Polk in the Mexican War (1846-1848), it was a far different story.

While some aspects of his leadership might have been inefficient and imprudent, he was the first president to significantly expand the power of the chief executive, as commander in chief, to wage war. This expansion can be seen in how the war began. The characteristics of Polk that imperfectly nurtured it were partisanship, lack of relaxation, naiveté, obstinacy, and micromanagement.

It is the war’s beginning where Polk’s influence is perhaps most evident. Congress, let alone the Supreme Court, was in no way involved in ordering General Zachary Taylor on 15 June 1845 to take a force of Regulars to Texas, only the executive branch—specifically the War Department—was. The subsequent orders that eventually had Taylor move his men to the eastern banks of the Rio Grande on the disputed Nueces Strip all came from Secretary of War William Marcy, as directed by the president. Polk initially just wanted to intimidate Mexico into

¹ Constitution of the United States of America, Article II, Section 2, quoted in Ronald C. White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 437.

negotiating, but when that approach did not work, he deliberately sought to provoke war. Indeed, even before the shooting started, Polk had already decided to declare war on Mexico, citing three reasons: Mexico had (a) rebuffed John Slidell, the man Polk dispatched to settle affairs between the two countries, (b) failed to pay debts owed to citizens of the United States, and (c) refused to recognize the Nueces Strip as a part of Texas. Thus, he ordered Taylor all the way to the banks of the Rio Grande. Ultimately, the Mexicans took the bait, sending cavalry over the Rio Grande on 24 April 1846 and attacking a squadron of U.S. dragoons the following day. Whereas Madison had requested that Congress declare war on Great Britain before any shots were fired, Polk on 11 May essentially presented the legislative branch with a *fait accompli*. He just needed Congress to recognize that fact and enable him to continue hostilities until the United States emerged victorious. Congress complied in both respects, thanks largely to Polk's dubious claim that "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil."² Few legislators dared to risk being perceived as unpatriotic, especially when the declaration was incorporated as a preamble to a bill appropriating \$10 million to Taylor's Army of Occupation, so most voted aye in spite of any misgivings they had. Most who opposed the war, Whigs predominantly, considered voting against supporting the troops to be going too far in their opposition. They did not want to make the same mistake the Federalists made during the War of 1812. The manner in which hostilities commenced represented the first little step in the expansion of presidential war-making powers—an evolution that would eventually lead to the United States' undeclared wars of the twentieth century.

² Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 205.

Congressional Whigs' criticism of Polk's use of his office to provoke war without the prior involvement of Congress echo the controversy over presidential war-making powers during the Vietnam War that resulted in the War Powers Act of 1973. At a public dinner in Philadelphia on 2 December 1846, Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, a Whig, declared, "No power but Congress can declare war, but what is the value of this constitutional provision, if the President of his own authority may make such military movements as must bring on war?"³ Ironically, Representative Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, a Whig member of the Thirtieth Congress (1847-1848), was even Herndon dated 15 February 1848: "Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation, whenever *he* shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, *whenever he may choose to say* he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure."⁴ In fact, such language sounds just like the Copperhead's in the North during the American Civil War: Whig Representative Columbus Delano of Ohio called the conflict a "presidential war—a war commenced by the President in an unconstitutional manner and by illegal means."⁵

The relationship between politics and the military in wartime has always been strained. Many a soldier does not like having a statesman looking over his shoulder. Unlike Lincoln in the American Civil War, Polk asserted the civilian dominance over the military right from the beginning of the Mexican War. It did not help that Polk, a Democrat, was highly partisan, and that two of the Regular Army's most senior officers, Taylor and Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, were of Whig sympathies. In fact, Whigs dominated the Regular officer corps.

³ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, The Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 763.

⁴ Borneman, 288.

⁵ Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 256.

Polk had promised to serve just one term as president, and he was determined to keep it. However, he was also equally determined to ensure, within his powers as president, that whoever occupied the White House next would not be a Whig elected off the laurels of military triumphs against the Mexicans. After all, it had happened in 1840, when William Henry Harrison, a hero of the War of 1812, had won the presidential election of that year.⁶

Thus, Polk chose to undermine Scott and Taylor, doing his utmost to ensure that neither one of them achieved too much glory. When Taylor started being lauded by the press and public for his consecutive victories of 1846—Palo Alto (8 May), Resaca de la Palma (9 May), and Monterey (20-24 September)—Polk siphoned off most of his forces to go to Scott, who had yet to gain any glory in this war—precisely the reason why he chose him to command the forces designated to land at Veracruz. All of the generals of volunteers he appointed to be their subordinates were Democrats, like Franklin Pierce and Gideon J. Pillow.⁷ Moreover, the majority of them had formerly held political office. Indeed, he even tried to push a bill through Congress reviving the rank of lieutenant general.⁸ His nominee for that rank was Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, a fellow Democrat and administration proponent. As a lieutenant general, Benton would have been general in chief of the U.S. Army, outranking both Scott and Taylor. As sufficient members of Congress deplored the idea of one Polk's cronies attaining that rank, the bill did not pass, so Polk was stuck with his Whig generals.

There was more than partisanship at work in this strained relationship. Behind the party politics was a fundamental ideological differences between the Democratic and Whig Parties

⁶ True, the Battles of Horseshoe Bend and New Orleans helped Polk's political mentor, Andrew Jackson, get into the White House, but even before those battles, he was already a powerful force in Tennessee politics, and had served for a time in both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

⁷ Generals of volunteers only held their rank for the duration of a war.

⁸ Scott's rank of lieutenant general was merely by brevet, or honorary.

regarding the United States Army. Most career officers were Whigs because the Whig Party, while not favoring a large peacetime army, advocated for greater funding to go to it and were staunch defenders of keeping the United States Military Academy at West Point operating. The internal improvements so fundamental to Whiggery, the kinds Polk vetoed in a bill, would heavily involve the army's Corps of Engineers. In contrast, Democrats perceived the mere existence of a professional standing army to be a threat to the country's free institutions and desired that West Point be closed. They believed that the United States needed only state militias and volunteers for waging war—an overestimation, a myth really, that had been fostered by the American Revolution and the Battle of New Orleans. Besides, the Regular Army had to do the dirty work of their expansionist rhetoric, and what they experienced on the ground—the unforgiving Florida Everglades in fighting the Seminoles, and the unattractively “dreary, desolate, dry, and barren” Nueces Strip in the case of the Mexican War—dampened much of whatever enthusiasm they had held for Manifest Destiny: Taylor thought the annexation of Texas “injudicious in policy and wicked in fact,” while an officer serving in his Army of Occupation, Lieutenant Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, wrote in his diary, “We have not one particle of right to be here.”⁹

Consequently, there was an air of distrust in Polk's dealings with his Whig generals. Politics seemingly colored Polk's assessments of their generalship, as confided in his diary. Despite Taylor's victories, Polk believed the general to be “wholly incompetent for so large a command.”¹⁰ “General Taylor is a hard fighter,” the president later conceded, “but has none of

⁹ Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 99, 101.

¹⁰ James K. Polk, *Polk: the Diary of a President, 1845-1849, Covering the Mexican War, the Acquisition of Oregon, and the Conquest of California and the Southwest* (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1929), 183.

the other qualities of a great general.”¹¹ Of Scott, he wrote in the first days of the war, “His bitter hostility towards the administration is such that I could not trust him.”¹² Polk even imagined intrigue against him where there was none:

I have good reason to believe that General Taylor’s camp has been converted into a political arena, and that great and palpable injustice has been done to many officers of high merit who happen to be Democrats. General Scott, since he assumed command, has commenced the same proscriptive and tyrannical course, and I stated to the Cabinet that I was resolved at any hazard to check it.¹³

When he learned that Nicholas Philip Trist, the chief clerk of the State Department whom he had sent to Mexico as a peace commissioner, received his recall letter but refused to comply, he wrote in his diary, “He is acting, no doubt, upon General Scott’s advice. He has become the perfect tool of Scott.”¹⁴ In this instance, at least, he was right. Overall, however, he extremely overestimated the degree of intrigue against him. To reiterate, his suspicions belonged mostly to the realm of the imagination.

Similar sentiments were reciprocated, as Taylor’s correspondence with his son-in-law, Robert C. Wood, attest:

There is, I hear from high authority, an intrigue going on against me, the object of which is to deprive me of the command; my only sin for this is the want of discretion on the part of certain politicians, in connecting my name as a proper candidate for the next presidential election, which I very much regretted.¹⁵

Taylor also expressed “outrage” to Wood about Polk’s decision to transfer 80 percent of his troops to Scott, suspecting that the president anticipated “that I would at once leave the country,

¹¹ Ibid., 208-209.

¹² Ibid., 100.

¹³ Ibid., 198.

¹⁴ Ibid., 293.

¹⁵ David A. Clary, *Eagles and Empire: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle for a Continent* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2009), 222.

in disgust & return to the U. states which... would have been freely used by them to my disadvantage”—political disadvantage, that is.¹⁶ Admittedly, Polk would not have minded his departure from Mexico at all, as it promised to keep Taylor out of the White House.

Needless to say, the environment produced was by Polk not conducive to collaboration. Polk at times appeared to regard the politics of his generals more than their competency. Worse, he did not even recognize his own partisanship: “I had never suffered politics to mingle with the conduct of the war,” he informed his cabinet during its session of 14 November 1846.¹⁷ “These officers are all Whigs and violent partisans,” he railed in his diary not even a month into the war, “and not having the success of my administration at heart seem disposed to throw every obstacle in the way of my prosecuting the Mexican War successfully.”¹⁸ Still, the fact that he was a major agent in this bitter working environment and based his decisions as commander in chief largely on partisanship, not to mention the number of conflicts between him and his Whig generals, shows just how far Polk inefficiently extended the powers of the executive branch.

Sun Tzu counsels, in addition to knowing one’s enemy, to know oneself. Polk obviously knew neither. His claim of being nonpartisan in war-making speaks for itself. He was also under the delusion that the Mexican War would be short. As Benton noted sarcastically, Polk desired “a small war, just large enough to require a treaty of peace and not large enough to make military reputations dangerous for the presidency.”¹⁹ When Scott informed Polk about the complexities involved in mobilizing 20,000 volunteers on the evening of 14 May 1846, the day after the United States officially declared a state of war with Mexico, he was dismissive: “General Scott did not impress me favourably as a military man. He has had experience in his profession, but I

¹⁶ Greenberg, 143.

¹⁷ Clary, 213.

¹⁸ Polk, 100.

¹⁹ Howe, 750.

thought was rather scientific and visionary in his views.”²⁰ True, many a leader throughout history has held the same naïve expectation, but that fact does not make it any less of an error. This flaw in his judgment, moreover, was merely one on a list of many—more than other war leaders like Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Abraham Lincoln. Fortunately for proponents of the war, Polk continued to press on after his delusions had been dispelled.

Polk, socially reserved as he was, also did not know at least some of his subordinates. He was a poor judge of character. In choosing Nicholas Trist as peace commissioner, Polk naively expected him to be completely pliant. Trist did not fit that description. He held his conscience in the highest esteem. “Had he been at all capable of attaining insight into character,” Trist commented subsequently, Polk would have “obtained at least a glimpse into mine. But it remained a sealed book for him.”²¹ His failure to open it resulted in a treaty he privately deemed unsatisfactory. In running any organization, including a branch of the federal government, the person in charge should know very well whomever he or she entrusts with important tasks, like ending a war. It was one thing that Polk micromanaged Trist from Washington City, but the fact that he chose a man who was willing to act independently exacerbated an already wanting style of presidential leadership.

Polk did not even make much effort to get to know the voting public. He seemed to have hardly cared about public opinion. Then as now, newspapers helped readers gain a better appreciation of the public’s sentiments. There were papers in the antebellum United States that affiliated themselves with both the Whig and Democratic Parties. However, Polk admitted that he allowed himself “but little opportunity to read newspapers, and could at no time do more than

²⁰ Polk, 93.

²¹ Greenberg, 175.

glance hastily over them.”²² Had he bothered to read them, he would have noticed the increase in criticism in how the war was being waged, and even the war itself, from those soldiers and embedded journalists, Whigs and Democrats alike, on the ground—persons that the Polk Administration would have found hard to discredit. He never specifically responded to any of the vehement attacks on his policies, except to restate his rationale, particularly in his annual messages, for entering the war in the first place: Mexico, he claimed, had shed “the blood of our citizens upon our own soil.”²³ He even failed to respond to reports of atrocities committed by volunteers; doing so might have provided some damage control to the war’s, if not the nation’s, tarnished image. He indulged in the illusion of his war’s popularity until the reality of its growing unpopularity—fostered by tales of atrocities committed by U.S. volunteers, the inhospitable nature of the land, and the perceived racial inferiority of the Mexicans—threatened to prevent him from continuing the war, as his diary entry for 21 February 1848 indicates:

A majority of one branch of Congress is opposed to my administration; they have falsely charged that the war was brought on and is continued by me with a view to the conquest of Mexico; and if I were now to reject a treaty made upon my own terms, as authorized in April last, with the unanimous approbation of the Cabinet, the probability is that Congress would not grant either men or money to prosecute the war. Should this be the result, the army now in Mexico would be constantly wasting and diminishing in numbers, and I might at last be compelled to withdraw them, and thus lose the two Provinces of New Mexico and Upper California, which were ceded to the United States by this treaty.²⁴

In other words, the men that the voters had elected influenced Polk, not the voters themselves.

Polk lacked the ability to properly take the pulse of public opinion. Doing so might have enabled him to make his expanded executive power more effective. If he had wanted to make the conquest of Mexico slightly easier, he could have addressed the public’s concern about the

²² Polk, 33.

²³ Howe, 796.

²⁴ Polk, 306-307.

atrocities, since they steeled Mexican resistance and strengthen the antiwar movement at home. The less atrocities, the lesser number of people who would have turned against that war, and the greater amount of support retained might have enabled Polk to prosecute the war until the border of the United States with Mexico reached all the way down to the twenty-sixth parallel, as he desired by the beginning of 1848. With that boundary, Polk would have gained for his country the majority of Baja California. Polk wanted more land, not to expand any roles of the chief executive. The changes he wrought on the presidency, to him, were necessary to achieve his dream of Manifest Destiny.²⁵ If he had wanted to be more successful as commander in chief, Polk should have done more to address the criticisms leveled on his war.

Perhaps the most famous characteristic of Polk's leadership was his micromanagement. "Many matters of minor importance and of detail remain on my table to be attended to," he observed in his diary.

The public have no idea of the constant accumulation of business requiring the President's attention. No President who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure. If he entrusts the details and smaller matters to subordinates constant errors will occur. I prefer to supervise the whole operations of the government rather than entrust the public business to subordinates, and this makes my duties very great.²⁶

To be sure, stress has always been a part of the presidency, and Polk had plenty of it. Nevertheless, to essentially take on the various roles of cabinet members, in addition to the presidency, is not necessary. War leaders like FDR and Lincoln delegated their authority, and they encountered as many errors as Polk. Lincoln had the incompetence of his initial secretary of war, Simon Cameron. Polk had the failure of Treasury Secretary Robert J. Walker to adequately

²⁵ In July 1845, the New York *Democratic Review* coined the term when it opined that the annexation of Texas by the United States was a part of "the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." See Howe, 703.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 360-361.

record the war's financial matters, and keep \$1.1 million dollars of \$2 million meant for the army from allegedly being used by private bankers for their own purposes. "It is proper to say what I presume you are not ignorant of," Secretary of War Marcy informed a politician seeking a commission, "that the selections are not made by the War Department, but by the President himself."²⁷ Even when Polk appeared to delegate to Marcy, he largely spoke through him, as a communication of 2 June 1846 indicates:

I hand you the enclosed paragraph to be inserted in your instructions to Col. Kearney, which has been prepared at your request. I think it proper that you should insert in your letter also, that the rank of Brigadier by Brevet, will be conferred upon him, as soon as he commence his movement towards California, & that it will be sent round to him by sea, to the care of our squadron. I forget whether you advised him, in your draft, that arms & munitions of War including ordnance would be sent round by sea. If you have not, it would be well to insert such a paragraph.²⁸

Polk, ever the perfectionist, was essentially writing Marcy's message for him.

What really fostered the president's use of greater presidential power than any of his predecessors was his decisive nature. That being said, there is a fine line between being decisive and just being obdurate. Polk constantly alternated between the two. He especially displayed his inflexibility in the peace negotiations that he sent Trist to oversee. He did not know when to make concessions of his own. Hence, he gave Trist no room to maneuver, so Polk's explanation for ordering him home was that Mr. Trist

had exceeded his instructions and had suggested terms to the Mexican commissioners which I could not have approved if they had agreed to them. I can never approve a treaty or submit one to the Senate, which would dismember the State of Texas, and Mr. Trist's suggestion, if agreed to, would have done this by depriving that State of the country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. Mr. Trist in other respects had in his conferences departed from his instruction and the simple duty with which

²⁷ Clary, 129.

²⁸ Wayne Cutler, ed., *Correspondence of James K. Polk*, vol. 10, July-December 1845 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 190-191.

he was charged, which was to submit and enforce the ultimatum of his government. He had no right to depart from his instructions, and I disapprove his conduct in doing so.²⁹

Like Marcy, Trist was merely Polk's mouthpiece.

This micromanagement made it difficult for Polk to relax, and even leaders with presidential responsibilities need to relax from time to time. Polk, however, hardly ever did so. He narrowly focused on politics, achieving Manifest Destiny and satiating his personal ambition. In all his four years as president (1845-1849) he accumulated only less than six weeks away from home, the White House, and never indulged in an hour's break during much of the Mexican War. Although the event took place a few months before the outbreak of war, it is illustrative of Polk's ascetic lifestyle. On the evening of 6 February 1846, Polk was dragged down from his office by Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft and "Mrs. Judge Catron" to see "Herr Alexander, the juggler or performer of tricks of sleight of hand":

I went down, and found some forty or fifty ladies and gentlemen, before whom Mr. Alexander exhibited his art greatly to their wonder and amusement, but as I think not much to their edification or profit. It was, however, innocent in itself, but I thought the time unprofitably spent.

Polk was more concerned with "public questions which bear on my mind than the tricks of the juggler."³⁰ If he had been more sociable, he probably would have gotten along with fellow politicians, subordinates, bureaucrats, and plain citizens better—people whose talents and support might have helped him to more easily attain his political objectives. Wars are made by human beings, and human beings place huge emphasis on mannerisms. Personalities factor hugely in people's judgments to the point that they become the sole deciding factor in supporting

²⁹ Polk, 270-271.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

or opposing, for example, certain pieces of legislation.³¹ As it happened, he was virtually the only driving force behind the increase in executive power. Even with the support he had, he was a political loner. Polk's manner of conducting politics might have satisfied him, but it was not the most convenient way to increase the scope of presidential power.

Moreover, the stress that his work ethic caused might have made him the president who aged the most while in office. He began his presidency at forty-nine years old with dark brown hair, and finished it with nearly all white four years later. Simultaneously, of course, his crows feet and other wrinkles abounded on his countenance. His micromanagement and inability to give himself an occasional break, exacerbated by the small White House staff at that time, weakened his body's ability to resist any disease, almost certainly contributing to his death from probably cholera on 15 June 1849, only three months and a few days after he had left office, at the age of fifty-three. This increased vulnerability possibly resulted in the chills and fever that left Polk confined to his bed for nearly a week in October 1847 and therefore unable to perform his duties. Perhaps if he had taken sufficient breaks so as to lessen the harm stress and strain did to his immune system, he would have been able to work that week instead of suffering in bed. Polk's perfectionism and unrelaxing work habits were his own worst enemies, not only to his administration, but to his health as well. Those character traits likely impeded his ability to run his war for about a week. Expansion of executive power does not happen at all when the president is absent. A break in the process of increasing the role of the commander in chief does not make the process smooth, and anything that happens smoothly is efficient.

³¹ In 1941, U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Catlett Marshall discovered that congressmen were more willing to listen to him than his boss, President Roosevelt, regarding an extension of the draft. "You put the case very well," one of them told him, "but I will be damned if I am going along with Mr. Roosevelt." Marshall angrily replied, "You are going to let plain hatred of the president dictate to you to do something that you realize is very harmful to the interest of the country." See Maury Klein, *A Call to Arms: Mobilizing America for World War II* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 213.

Therefore, Polk expanded presidential war making powers, but not as efficiently or as prudently as, say, Lincoln, who actually expanded them way further than he. He apparently was subconsciously prejudiced politically. Scott and Taylor might have been Whigs, but they excelled in their profession—war. Although Polk did not realize it, their competency meant less to Polk than their political affiliation. Ideally, working relationships should be as amicable as practical, but the kinds Polk helped to foster did not even approach amicability. Even then, it is questionable that he could have made much progress in collaborating with others. He lacked charisma and a broad range of interests, caring only about politics and his personal advancement in that profession. What might seem a nice diversion to some, Polk usually saw only a needless distraction from his important work. However, his breaks would have been few had he taken any. There could have been more if he had not been such a perfectionist who hardly trusted anybody to do his bidding. His obsession for detail and commitment to work not only caused him to age significantly but to weaken his immune system. Thus, for all intents and purposes, he died of overwork—and most people at the time accepted that explanation. How he implemented it might have been better, but it is undeniable that James Knox Polk made the powers of the commander in chief go the furthest it had ever gone, beginning the journey to the modern commander in chief—the president who makes war without any declaration of hostilities from Congress, only financial support. The problem was that, in the case of the Polk administration, the increase in scope of the powers invested in the commander in chief was lacking in technique.

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